



# Mainstream media use in far-right online ecosystems

Mario Peucker, Thomas J. Fisher and Jacob Davey

## Acknowledgement of Country

This report written on unceded Country.

We acknowledge and recognise the Traditional Owners of the Kulin Nation lands and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

## The Project

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# Executive summary

The media does not enjoy a high level of trust among Australians, as many people question the commitment of mainstream media to objective and non-partisan reporting. While this mistrust is widespread, it manifests in particularly antagonistic ways within far-right milieus, where mainstream media is often seen through a conspiratorial lens as the ‘enemy of the people’ who actively conspire against the wellbeing of ‘ordinary’ or ‘white’ people. This almost unanimously hostile perception, however, does not stop people within far-right online spaces from posting mainstream media outputs to convey ideological messages in their online communities.

## Context

This research report presents key findings from an analysis of far-right online communities on Facebook and the alt-tech fringe platform Gab, which has been described as a ‘right-leaning echo-chamber’ (Lima et al. 2018:1). The study was conducted by researchers at the Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities at Victoria University (VU), in collaboration with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), within the research stream ‘Dynamics of Violent Extremism’ at the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).

## What we did

The research combines quantitative and qualitative methods. We analysed around 11,000 Facebook posts and 45,000 Gab posts by Australian-based accounts and users who meet our working definition of far right (see section 2). This quantitative analysis offers insights into the prevalence of mainstream media sources in their far-right online messaging and which outlets are particularly frequently shared. In addition, we conducted a qualitative multimodal in-depth analysis of a quasi-random sample of 224 Facebook and 298 Gab posts that contained an outbound link to a URL domain associated with a mainstream media outlet. This qualitative analysis allowed us to identify how mainstream media are (re)framed and (mis)appropriated within these far-right online space to deliver certain ideological messages.



## Key findings

### All mainstream media outlets, regardless of their political leaning, can be co-opted for ideological messaging

- ≥ While some Facebook and Gab users do not post any links to mainstream media sources, a majority of almost 60 per cent of all outbound links on the analysed accounts share content from **mainstream media outlets**. The vast majority of the remaining links are content from hyper-partisan fringe (media/new) websites, located either in Australia or overseas.
- ≥ Far-right users share outputs from mainstream media outlets **across the political spectrum**, but some outlets were significantly more popular than others. In the Facebook dataset, the Daily Mail ranks highest with 430 posts sharing one of its articles, followed by ABC (337) Sky News (318) and 7News (206). In the Gab dataset, the most frequently shared URL domain in our Gab sample was Sky News (3,131 posts), followed by the Daily Mail (1,851), News.com.au (675) and the ABC (604).
- ≥ Most of the shared mainstream media outputs were neutral news reports, but users also posted links to partisan media content (e.g. editorials, opinion pieces), predominantly from more right-leaning or centre-right media outlets. Partisan content from Sky News was particularly prominent. **Partisan media content** was almost always shared in an affirmative way, using it – without much reframing – to articulate ideological messages that are prominent with these far-right online communities.
- ≥ When users share **neutral news articles** (which they do frequently), they often post additional commentary which reframes the media output to convey an ideological message. All mainstream media outlets, regardless of their political leaning, can be co-opted for ideological messaging, as the post delivers a message that is positively (affirmatively) or negatively aligned with the media output itself.
- ≥ Balanced news reporting that presents ‘both sides’ of a story **can be used for ideological**

**messaging** by selectively amplifying one perspective. Even critical news reporting (often from more left-leaning outlets) for example, about alleged government wrongdoing or overreach, can be co-opted to legitimise and support more fundamental ideological anti-government narratives with the far right.

- ≥ Neutral news articles are frequently shared without additional post content (especially on Gab, but also on Facebook), but can still convey an ideological message. The message is not made explicit in the post but is nevertheless clearly heard and understood within these far-right online environments. We refer to this mainstream media posting pattern as **contextual messaging**. Contextual messaging typically uses neutral news reports on issues that are politically charged within the far-right online community (e.g. multiculturalism, immigration, climate change or allegations of government overreach).

### Far-right fringe narratives are not as disconnected from the broader public and political discourse as they may seem.

- ≥ A small but not insignificant proportion of analysed posts (almost one in ten in the Gab sample, 3.6 per cent in the Facebook sample) shared mainstream media content to articulate their **opposition to mainstream media** or to a certain media outlet. Here, media outputs from left-leaning or centrist outlets are more prone to be shared with the explicit intention to claim media bias or make conspiratorial accusations about the media’s alleged hidden agenda against the Australian people. Content from right-leaning mainstream media was sometimes posted to praise the respective media source whilst accusing other (more left-leaning) outlets of being ideologically biased.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that, regardless of the political tendency of the various media outlets, **far-right fringe narratives are not as disconnected** from the broader public and political discourse as they may seem. It is often difficult to draw a clear line between the narratives in ideological far-right messaging and mainstream voices in the media and the public debate more broadly.

# 1. Introduction

There are good reasons why freedom of the press is considered a key indicator for the health of a liberal democracy, given the central role news media play within democratic processes. As a 'fourth estate', media is tasked with providing neutral and balanced information for public deliberation, holding those in power to account, 'keeping government honest and watching out for the interests of people' (Whitten-Woodring and James 2012:114).

However, people's trust in the media is low in many democratic societies – in Australia, it is even lower than levels of trust in the government. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2022), only 43 per cent have trust in the media (down from an exceptional high of 51 per cent in 2021) compared to 51 per cent who trust the government. Similarly, another recent study found that only 43 per cent of Australians survey respondents 'trust most news most of the time' (Park et al. 2021:75). The Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) survey pinpoints one of the reasons for these low trust levels among Australians: almost six out of ten respondents are of the view that 'the media is not doing well at being objective and non-partisan', and over two-thirds think that most news organisations are 'more concerned with supporting an ideology or political position than with informing the public.' The 2022 Edelman survey found that 65 per cent believe journalists and reporters are 'purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations.'

While media mistrust is common across the political spectrum in liberal democratic societies, it usually takes on a particularly antagonistic form in far-right milieus. Here, mainstream media is not only viewed critically, but often with hateful hostility, labelled as 'traitors', 'fake news' and 'enemy of the people' (Fawzi 2019; Freelon et al. 2020; Haller and Holt 2019; Knops and De Cleen 2018). In far-right spaces, both online and offline, the media is frequently depicted in conspiratorial terms as a key player in an alleged plot by secretive global elites against 'ordinary' or 'white' people. The following post in the 'Australia' subgroup on the alt-tech online platform Gab is a typical example.

In June 2020, a Gab user shared an article from The Guardian reporting about tackling right-wing extremism in Australia, with the following post text:

🗨️ Silence anyone who loves Australia and dares to actually like white people and want the Australian nation (people) to continue existing! The corporate media are the enemy, they are traitors, they are collaborators, they are the number 1 barrier in the road to genuine and effective change.

Such aggressively antagonistic perspectives and conspiratorial accusations are, however, only one facet of an often complex and ambiguous relationship between the far right and mainstream media. Their hateful sentiment does not mean that the far right is shunning the media. To the contrary, many far-right actors frequently share media outputs as part of their online messaging, as emerging research in Australia and overseas has shown (Peucker et al. 2018; Lee 2015).

Strategic considerations around recruitment and amplifying the reach of their far-right narratives are often at play when sharing mainstream media articles. In a qualitative research study, based on interviews with former right-wing extremists in Germany, Baugut and Neumann (2019), for example, conclude that some far-right groups 'reframe' news articles to convey their ideological message. Any media coverage of the respective far-right group itself is 'regarded as an indicator of an outstanding active commitment to the goals of the movement' (Baugut and Neumann 2019:705). Similarly, a recently leaked internal document of a prominent far-right group in Australia describes 'media baiting' as a key element of their recruitment strategy, highlighting the importance of attracting media attention to increase the group's public visibility and ultimately its recruitment chances.<sup>1</sup>

A 2018 Victoria University study (Peucker et al. 2018) confirmed that sharing mainstream media articles is common in far-right online spaces. Identifying the most commonly shared external sources on 12 Australian far-right Facebook accounts, it found that mainstream media ranked very high on this list (Peucker et al. 2018:33). While tabloid (e.g. Daily Mail) and conservative, right-leaning outlets (e.g. The Australian, Herald Sun) were particularly popular, the far-right accounts also frequently shared articles from more centrist or left-leaning outlets (e.g. ABC, Sydney Morning Herald). What this 2018 study did not address, however, is the question as to *how* Australian

1. Reference can be provided upon request.

far-right actors use mainstream media articles in their online messaging.

Do far-right actors, explicitly or subtly, reframe media reports so that they appear more supportive of their political agendas, and, if so, how? To what extent is the content of media reporting or commentary aligned with far-right narratives so that media outputs lend themselves to being co-opted in support of typically more radical far-right messaging? Are some mainstream media outlets more prone to being used in this way than others, given that studies have found significant differences in how Australian media outlets cover certain news items, including those that resonate with the far right, such as asylum seekers (Lueck et al. 2015), race and multicultural communities (Nolan et al. 2011; All Together Now 2019) or climate change (Bacon 2011; King et al. 2022)? Or do far-right actors share mainstream media content not in an affirmative way to garner support and legitimacy for their messaging, but rather to the contrary, with the intention to discredit the media outlet itself and convey their rejection of, and opposition to, mainstream media?

These are some of the questions this report seeks to shed light on. The study forms part of a larger research project, conducted by Victoria University (VU), together with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), within the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS). The analysis in this report draws on social media data collected in 2020 from 50 far-right pages and groups on Facebook and 40 accounts on the alt-tech platform Gab. The total sample comprises of almost 11,000 Facebook posts (January - July 2020) and over 45,000 posts on Gab (January - September 2020).

After a brief outline of our working definition of the far right (section 2) and the methodology (section 3), this report will present the quantitative findings of our analysis, demonstrating the popularity of mainstream media in comparison to hyper-partisan fringe media in the far-right posting activities on both social media platforms (section 4). Section 5 then discusses key findings from a qualitative multimodule content analysis of a quasi-random sub-sample of the Gab and Facebook dataset, which offers deeper insights into the different strategies used to incorporate mainstream media reporting into far-right messaging online.

## 2. Working definition of the far right

The working definition of the far-right used in this research draws on established conceptualisations of right-wing extremism, put forward scholars such as Cas Mudde (2000; 2019) and Elisabeth Carter, which have also been used in the Australian research context (Peucker et al. 2019). While there is no unanimously agreed definition of the far-right, this working definition is based on Carter's (2018: 157) recent assessment that 'there is actually a high degree of consensus amongst the definitions put forward by different scholars.' Similar to Mudde (2000), Carter (2018) more recent systematic examination of 15 influential and authoritative definitions found that the six attributes were most common: 'strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric' (Carter, 2018:168).

Drawing on Mudde (2019) and Minkenberg (2017), we use the term 'far right' as an umbrella for both radical and extreme right-wing groups, actions, and ideologies. The conceptual difference between right-wing radicalism and extremism is the stance on democracy. The latter is openly anti-democratic, rejecting democratic principles such as popular sovereignty and majority rule (Mudde 2019), while right-wing radicalism 'does not include an explicitly anti-democratic agenda' (Minkenberg 2017:27, emphasis in original) but rejects certain liberal democratic norms.

## 3. Methodology

For our analysis we used two datasets, one from Facebook, the other one from Gab. Both were generated for a larger research study within the CRIS research stream 'Dynamics of Violent Extremism', conducted by VU and ISD in 2020-2021. The general findings of this research program were published in several research reports on online messaging of far-right and far-left groups in Australia (Guerin et al 2020, Guerin et al 2021; Simmons et al 2021).

### 3.1 Facebook dataset<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on previous research and online monitoring experiences, VU provided an initial list of Facebook accounts associated with far-right ideologies in Australia, manually assessed against a working definition of the far right (see Section 2). This seed list was expanded through a ‘snowball’ discovery method, using Facebook’s recommendation algorithms to identify other ideologically aligned Facebook pages and groups. A qualitative assessment of their posting, user profile images and self-description was conducted to ensure all 50 sampled Facebook pages/groups met the working definition and had a geographical focus on Australian in general or, more specifically, the state of Victoria.

Content posted between January to July 2020 was systematically collected. The first data scrap generated a dataset of 10,896 posts,<sup>3</sup> which were used for the analysis of this study. These posts were then examined in different ways using machine learning technology complemented by selected qualitative (manual) content analysis. For this study, our analysis focussed on all posts with an outbound link to an external URL domain.

### 3.2 Gab dataset

The alt-tech platform Gab has become very popular with many in Australia’s far-right milieu over the past few years (Guerin et al. 2021). Emerging research on Gab describes the platform as a ‘right-leaning echo-chamber’ and ‘very politically oriented system that hosts banned users from other social networks, some of them due to possible cases of hate speech and association with extremism’ (Lima et al. 2018:1; see also Cinelli et al. 2021).

The Gab dataset was built in a similar way to the Facebook dataset. Starting with six far-right seed accounts we systematically built a full network of users that followed, or were followed by, these seed accounts. The resulting large user network was then narrowed down to 40 Australian

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2. As the project explore the dynamic interplay between the far right and far left, the original Facebook dataset also included 31 far-left pages and two far-left public groups. For more information, please refer to the full report: Guerin et al. (2020).

3. A subsequent data scrap produced a larger dataset of 12,335 posts on far-right pages and 6,461 posts on far-right groups.

accounts that meet the far-right working definition criteria. All content from these 40 accounts posted between January and September 2020 was collected, which amounted to 45,404 posts.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3 Analysis

We performed a quantitative analysis of the Facebook and Gab datasets to examine the prevalence of mainstream media use and to determine which media outlets were shared. We use the term ‘mainstream’ to refer to any conventional, privately or publicly funded news producing media outlet with trained journalist and professional editorial processes in place.

In addition, we conducted a qualitative multimodal content analysis of a quasi-random sample of 224 Facebook and 298 Gab posts that contained an outbound link to a URL domain associated with a mainstream media outlet. For this sub-sample we used posts that shared content from nine frequently shared (on both platforms) Australian mainstream media outlets with different political leanings (Park et al. 2021) (Table 1). The sampling rationale was guided by three main goals:

1. The post sample with links to these media outlets should reflect the popularity of the respective media source in the full dataset, i.e. Sky News and Daily Mail outputs were shared much more frequently than Herald Sun or SBS outputs, and these quantitative differences should be reflected as best as possible in our sub-sample used for the qualitative analysis.
2. Our post selection ensured that every account that shared content from the respective media outlets at least once will be included in the sub-sample; this acknowledges that different accounts may use mainstream media outputs in different ways. Our subsample seeks to reflect these potential divergences.
3. Apart from these two sampling goals, the selection of posts for the sub-sample was random.

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4. For a more comprehensive analysis of the Gab dataset, see Peucker and Fisher (2022).



Table 1: Mainstream media outlets selected for qualitative analysis

| News media outlet (outbound link)         | Characterisation   | Number of Facebook posts | Number of Gab posts | Total      |
|---|--|--------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Daily Mail                                | conservative, right-leaning                                    | 33                       | 42                  | 75         |
| Sky News                                  | News Corp Australia, right-leaning                             | 25                       | 47                  | 72         |
| News.com.au                               | News Corp Australia; centrist to right-leaning                 | 23                       | 42                  | 65         |
| Australian Broadcasting Cooperation (ABC) | public broadcaster, centrist to left-leaning                   | 30                       | 36                  | 66         |
| The Age                                   | Nine Entertainment, centrist to left-leaning (partial paywall) | 24                       | 30                  | 54         |
| The Australian                            | News Corp Australia; centrist to right-leaning (pay wall)      | 23                       | 28                  | 51         |
| The Guardian                              | left-leaning, progressive                                      | 21                       | 25                  | 46         |
| Herald Sun                                | News Corp Australia, right-leaning (pay wall)                  | 19                       | 24                  | 43         |
| Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)        | public broadcaster; left-leaning                               | 26                       | 24                  | 50         |
| <b>Total</b>                              |  | <b>224</b>               | <b>298</b>          | <b>522</b> |

For each of the 522 posts, we used a coding template to analyse both the post and the shared media output. Two researchers independently analysed the 522 posts and media outputs. The coding template was used to examine:

- for the media output: format (e.g. text, video, audio), type (e.g. news reporting, opinion piece) and presentation (e.g. neutral, partisan/biased);
- for the post: content (e.g. text, hashtags, emojis), its positioning in relation to the shared media output (e.g. approving or rejecting) and thematic and message alignment with the media output.

The result of the two independent coding processes showed a convergence rate of over 90 per cent. Where both coders differed in their assessment, the posts were re-assessed and discussed further to reach a consensus.



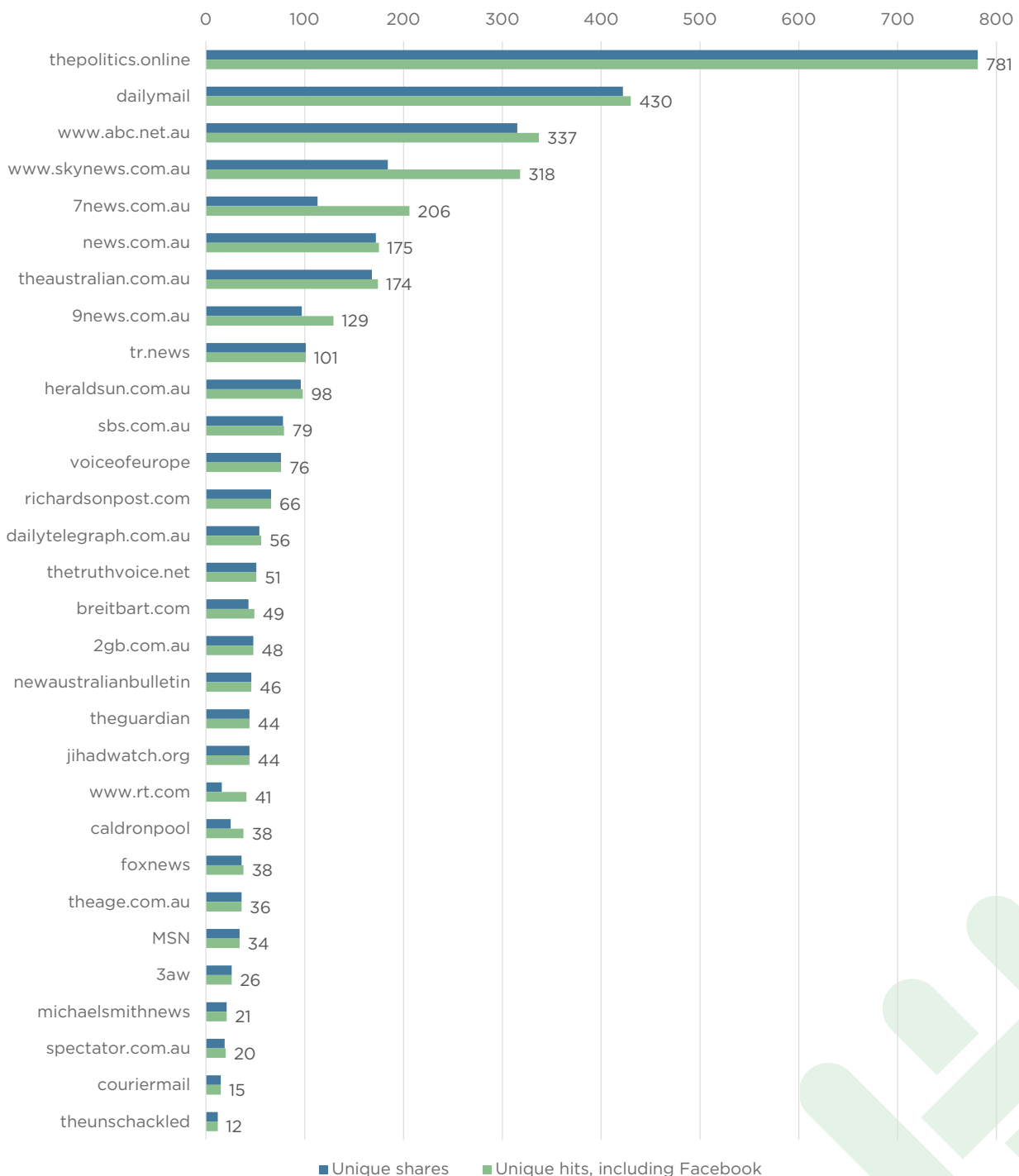
## 4. Quantitative findings

Our quantitative analysis of the entire datasets shows that Australian far-right users on Facebook and Gab demonstrate a high level of interest in news reporting. Almost all of the most frequently shared URL domains on both platforms are associated either with a mainstream media outlet or a fringe media site.

### 4.1 Facebook

On Facebook, an analysis of posts linking to the top 30 most commonly shared URL domains found that a majority (57.86 per cent) shared an output from mainstream media and the remaining 42.14 per cent to hyper-partisan and/or far-right fringe media.

Figure 1: Top 30 URL domains shared on Facebook ('content URL' only)



Note: *Unique hits, including Facebook*, refers to the total number of shares from the respective domain, plus those shared from the respective outlet's Facebook page.

The most frequently shared **fringe media sources** include both Australian sites (e.g. The Unshackled) and blogs as well as international (often US focused) sites, popular within far-right milieu around the world, such as Breitbart, Voice of Europe, or Jihad Watch (Lee 2015; Lima et al 2018).<sup>5</sup> The most often shared URL domain in the Facebook dataset is the far-right and often anti-Muslim fringe news blog The Politics Online (Figure 1), which was shared almost exclusively by one prolifically posting Facebook account.<sup>6</sup>

Table 2 shows the Australian **mainstream media outlets** which far-right Facebook users in our sample shared the most. The Daily Mail ranks highest, with 430 posts sharing one of its articles, followed by ABC (337), Sky News (318), and 7News (206). It is worth noting that a significant proportion of posts that share a Sky News output link directly to the Sky News Facebook page (134) and not to the Sky News website (184). Similarly, 7News articles are often shared from the 7News Facebook page (94), although a majority link to the 7News website (113). For all other media outlets, the vast majority of post share media outputs from the media outlet's news website.

While free-of-charge accessible media sources dominate the top 30 list, the right-leaning, conservative outlets The Australian and Herald Sun, also rank relatively high, despite having their news content behind a paywall.

With the notable exception of the ABC, articles from left-leaning, progressive mainstream media such as SBS or The Guardian (Park et al. 2021) are shared overall less frequently on these far-right Facebook accounts than articles from more centre-right or conservative outlets.

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5. Fringe media sources are defined as media outlets that may produce or report news but do not meet the criteria for mainstream media, including having mainly trained journalists and professional editorial processes.

6. This extensive sharing of far-right and often anti-Islam content from The Politics Online appears to be part of a coordinated covert scheme on Facebook that used existing far-right Facebook accounts (including one in our sample) to push high volumes of posts linked to 'websites masquerading as news sites with generic titles like "The Politics Online"' (Knaus et al. 2019), according to a Guardian investigation in 2019.



Table 2: Australian mainstream media outlets most frequently shared in the Facebook dataset

| URL domain      | Posts (unique shares, including Facebook) | % of all Facebook posts | % of top 30 domain posts |
|-----------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Daily Mail      | 430                                       | 3.95%                   | 11.28%                   |
| ABC             | 337                                       | 3.09%                   | 8.84%                    |
| Sky News        | 318                                       | 2.92%                   | 8.34%                    |
| 7news.com.au    | 206                                       | 1.89%                   | 5.41%                    |
| news.com.au     | 175                                       | 1.61%                   | 4.59%                    |
| The Australian  | 174                                       | 1.60%                   | 4.57%                    |
| 9news.com.au    | 129                                       | 1.18%                   | 3.38%                    |
| Herald Sun      | 98  | 0.90%                   | 2.57%                    |
| SBS             | 79  | 0.73%                   | 2.07%                    |
| Daily Telegraph | 56  | 0.51%                   | 1.47%                    |
| 2GB             | 48  | 0.44%                   | 1.26%                    |
| The Guardian    | 44  | 0.40%                   | 1.15%                    |
| The Age         | 36  | 0.33%                   | 0.94%                    |
| MSN             | 34  | 0.31%                   | 0.89%                    |
| 3AW             | 26  | 0.24%                   | 0.68%                    |
| Courier Mail    | 15  | 0.14%                   | 0.39%                    |

## 4.2 Gab<sup>7</sup>

The findings from our quantitative analysis of the Gab dataset paint a similar picture in many ways. Looking at the top 50 most common external URL domains, which accounted for 13,198 posts (74.1 per cent of all 17,816 posts with an outbound URL link), we found that 59.52 per cent of these posts shared a mainstream media output. Most of the remaining posts contained a link to a hyper-partisan fringe media site or far-right news blog, either based in Australia such as XYZ or The Unshackled, or overseas such as the NWO Report.

7. For a more detail version of the Gab data analysis, see Peucker and Fisher 2022.

Figure 2: Top 50 URL domains shared on Gab ('content URL' only)

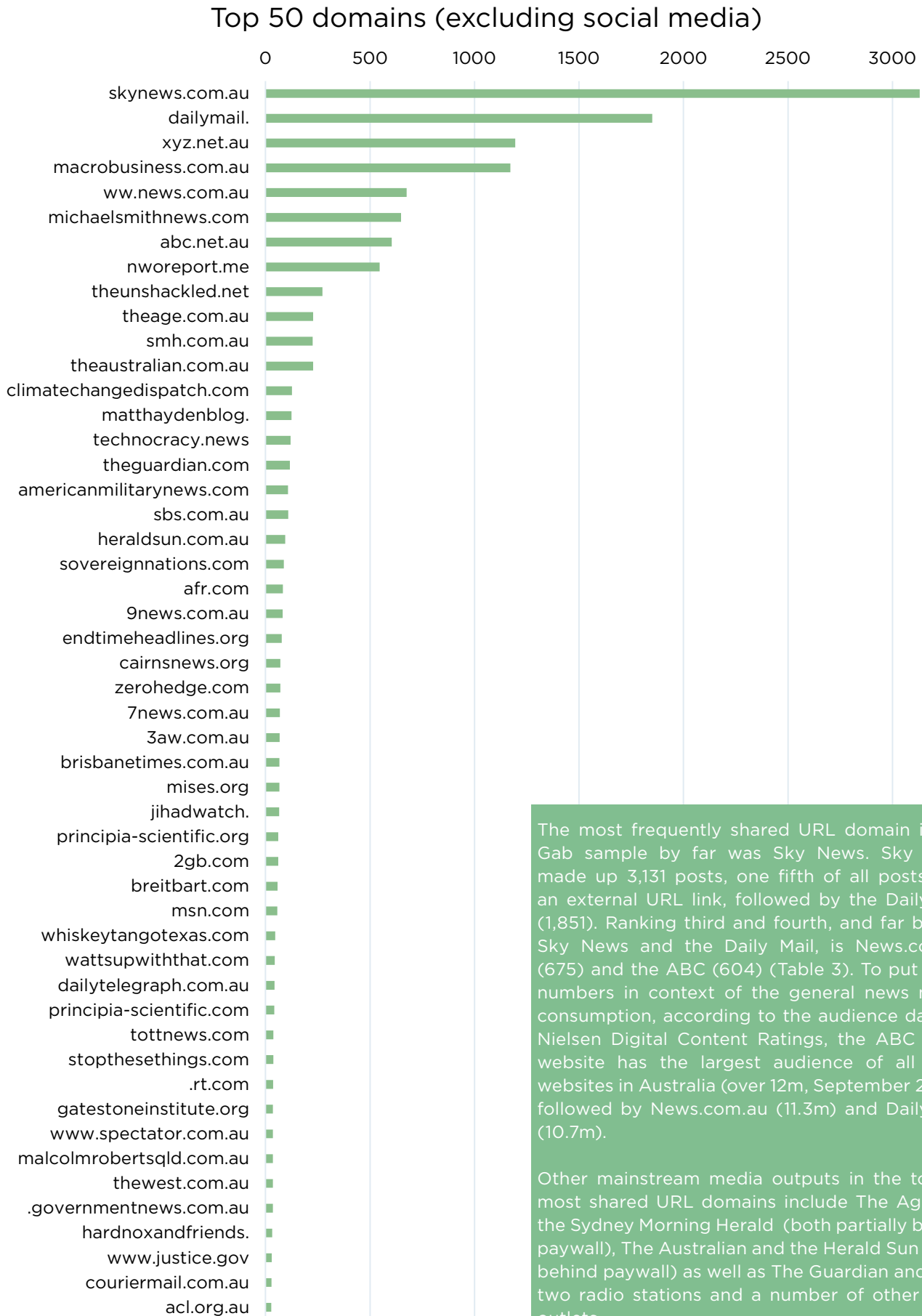



Table 3: Mainstream media among the top 50 domains

| <b>Domain</b>               | <b>Posts</b> | <b>Proportion of all top 50 domain posts (excl. social media)</b> | <b>Proportion of all posts with an URL (excl. social media)</b> |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---|---|
| Sky News                    | 3131         | 23.72%  | 20.33%  |
| Daily Mail                  | 1851         | 14.02%  | 12.02%  |
| News.com.au                 | 675          | 5.11%   | 4.38%   |
| ABC                         | 604          | 4.58%   | 3.92%   |
| The Age                     | 227          | 1.73%   | 1.48%   |
| The Australian              | 226          | 1.71%   | 1.47%   |
| Sydney Morning Herald       | 226          | 1.71%   | 1.47%   |
| The Guardian                | 117          | 0.89%   | 0.76%   |
| SBS                         | 109          | 0.83%   | 0.71%   |
| Herald Sun                  | 94           | 0.71%   | 0.61%   |
| Australian Financial Review | 83           | 0.63%   | 0.54%   |
| 9news                       | 82           | 0.62%   | 0.53%   |
| 7news                       | 69           | 0.52%   | 0.45%   |
| 3AW                         | 68           | 0.52%   | 0.44%   |
| Brisbane Times              | 66           | 0.50%   | 0.43%   |
| 2GB                         | 61           | 0.46%   | 0.40%   |
| MSN                         | 56           | 0.42%   | 0.36%   |
| Daily Telegraph             | 43           | 0.33%   | 0.28%   |
| The West                    | 35           | 0.27%   | 0.23%   |
| Courier Mail                | 29           | 0.22%   | 0.19%   |

On the one hand, our analysis indicates that Gab users engage with, and prolifically share, significant amounts of mainstream media content. Five of the Gab users in our sample, for example, shared a mainstream media link in between one-sixth and one-half of all their posts. On the other hand, our analysis also found signs that Gab users avoided mainstream media: around one half of the Gab users in our sample did not share a single mainstream media output between January and September 2020.

Whether, and to what extent, this was due to their potentially negative stance on mainstream media remains unclear, but some Gab users have articulated their views on mainstream media quite clearly, as the following post by an Australian Gab account illustrates:

 I am now muting anyone who posts trash fake news links news.com.au or daily mail. I come here to get away from that shit. Support alternative media, don't give these fake news fuckers any extra exposure

## 5. Qualitative findings

In this section we present key findings from our qualitative content analysis of the 224 Facebook posts and 298 Gab posts, which all included a URL to one of the nine mainstream media domains (Table 1), in order of frequency across both sub-samples:

- Sky News
- Daily Mail
- News.com.au
- ABC
- The Age
- SBS
- The Australian
- The Guardian
- Herald Sun

### Key takeaways: qualitative findings

- ≥ Far-right and hyper-partisan fringe media outlets (both Australian specific and overseas-based) are very popular and shared frequently by far-right users on Facebook and Gab.
- ≥ The majority (close to 60 per cent) of external URL domains shared on Facebook and Gab, however, are mainstream media outlets.
- ≥ Outputs from the Daily Mail and Sky News are shared particularly often, in particular on Gab, but ABC articles are also frequently posted by far-right accounts, in particular on Facebook.

## 5.1 What media content is being shared?

Most of the shared media outputs are **news articles** (81.3 per cent in the Facebook sample and 70.8 per cent in the Gab sample). The Gab posts more commonly shared **opinion pieces/editorials** (15.8 per cent of all posts) than those on Facebook (5.8 per cent), and **investigative or feature articles** were posted in 9.4 per cent of the cases in the Facebook sample, compared to 13.4 per cent on Gab.

Just under three-quarters of all shared mainstream media outputs were categorised as **'neutral and/or balanced'** reporting (74.1 per cent on Facebook, 73.2 per cent on Gab); here, the analysis did not identify a clear bias in the reporting and this usually also meant that the journalist attempted to include different views and voices in the article. More **partisan and/or one-sided** media content (either as part of biased, one-sided news reporting or in opinion piece) was posted in Gab (22.1 per cent) compared to Facebook (13.4 per cent), while users in our Facebook sample more often shared 'sensationalist' outputs (12.1 per cent compared 4.7 per cent on Gab), predominately from the Daily Mail.

What stands out is the relatively high proportion of **partisan content from Sky News** in both samples. In the Facebook sample, more than half of the shared Sky News outputs were partisan. On Gab, this proportion was even higher, with 29 of all 47 analysed Sky News outputs shared in the posts (61.7 per cent). Moreover, on Gab we also identified an above-average proportion of partisan news by outputs from the Herald Sun (11 out of 24; 45.8 per cent) and The Australian (10 out of 28; 35.7 per cent).

This does not necessarily mean that these outlets are generally more partisan – and partisan/biased outputs are not necessary a sign of 'bad' journalism (e.g. in editorials). But what these findings demonstrate is that partisan articles from these sources appear particularly popular in our sample of far-right posts of mainstream media content.

In almost all analysed posts that shared a link to a mainstream media output, users add their text or other content (e.g. emojis, hashtags) to their post. Only 3 per cent (Gab) and 5 per cent (Facebook) of posts respectively contained nothing else but the media link itself.

Notwithstanding this similarity, there are also **significant differences** between the posting patterns in the two sub-samples. On Gab, two out of three posts only copied and pasted parts of the shared article (often, but not always, the headline) without adding any accompanying text or content. On Facebook this occurred in only 8 per cent of all analysed posts, while in almost half of the posts (48.7 per cent) the users took the time to write their own text, usually as a comment on the shared article, without using any parts of the article's wording. The remainder are those who either paraphrased the article or combined parts of the article with additional post content.

This difference between our Gab and Facebook sample appears to be largely due to the posting behaviour of a handful of Gab users who posted very prolifically. One of them, allegedly the then administrator of the Australian subgroup on Gab, posted on average 55 times per day, often sharing mainstream media articles by copy-and-pasting parts of the article and the media link. This **high-frequency posting activity** seems only feasible through such a time-efficient posting behaviour that does not require creating additional content in the post or possibly even deep engagement with the article itself. Our qualitative analysis, for example, suggests that in some cases Gab users shared a link to media outputs behind a paywall, seemingly without having read the article itself, merely sharing the article's headline and the short text accessible before the paywall without a subscription.

#### Key takeaways: what media content is being shared?

- ≥ Most shared mainstream media content was neutral, balanced news reporting.
- ≥ Shared content from Sky News and, to a lesser extent from The Australian and Herald Sun, was disproportionately more often partisan.

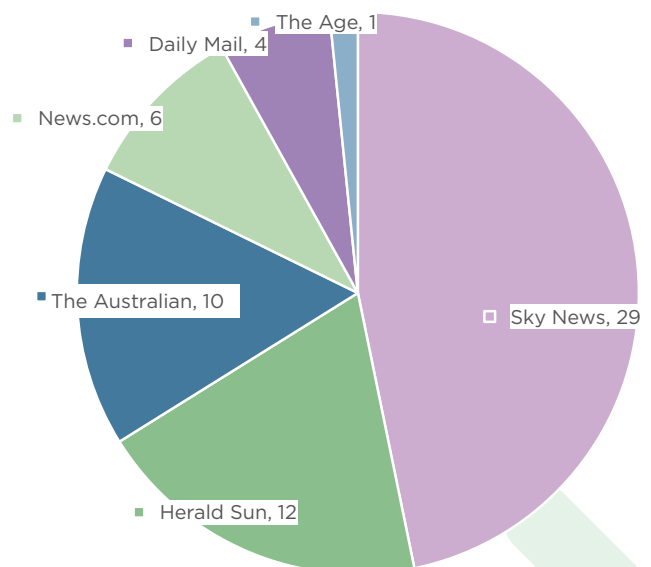
By writing additional post content, or even by simply adding emojis, users often express their stance on the media article's topic or message. In order to convey a certain (ideological) message, the user can either express their agreement with the article or they can reframe or even articulate opposition to the article's message or content. In the following sections we discuss typical ways in which the users in our sample posted mainstream media outputs. We start with an analysis of how *partisan* media content is shared, before we look at the posting patterns in relation to *neutral* media content sharing.

## 5.2 Sharing partisan media outputs

In the Facebook sample we categorised 13.4 per cent of shared media outputs as partisan and/or judgemental (n=30); almost all of them (except for two) were posted *affirmatively* to articulate support and agreement with the article. This means that in these cases the shared mainstream media content resonates in some ways with the worldviews of far-right Facebook users. While the total numbers are small, it is noteworthy that all partisan outputs in our sample from Sky News (13), The Australian (4), the Herald Sun (3) and News.com.au (2) were shared affirmatively. In addition, two partisan The Age and two partisan Daily Mail articles were also shared seemingly approvingly.

In the Gab sample a similar picture emerges. Partisan media articles were almost always shared in a way that suggests the user's approval and agreement, either implicitly by way of sharing or explicitly by adding affirmative content to the post. This posting pattern applied to 62 of the 298 analysed posts – and the vast majority of these posts shared an article from a right-leaning, conservative media source, especially Sky News, The Australian and the Herald Sun (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Partisan media outputs shared affirmatively in the Gab sub-sample



In all these instances, the opinions or viewpoints expressed in these partisan mainstream media outputs appear aligned with the ideological message intentions of the respective Gab or Facebook post. The media content is typically used to convey certain far-right narratives, which



can – purposively or not – help legitimise and mainstream far-right agendas. This does not necessarily imply that these media outlets publish explicit far-right tropes but rather that the partisan media content (or parts of it) appeals to far-right users and offers them an opportunity for ideological messaging, as the following example illustrates.

In September 2020, a Gab user posted a link to a Sky News commentary by Alan Jones about the COVID-19 pandemic, titled “Australians must know the truth - this virus is not a pandemic”: Alan Jones.

The user expressed approval with the media output through the accompanying post text, adding a conspiratorial reference:

“ #AlanJones talks about the non-pandemic #scamdemic and how it is becoming public knowledge’.

Very few posts shared partisan media outputs accompanied by post content that explicitly *rejected* the article’s message and conveyed an ideological position detrimental to the one in the article. Here, we only identified two Facebook posts and three Gab posts, all of them sharing articles from a left-leaning media outlets.

In October 2020, a Gab user posted a feature article from The Guardian about Trump’s ‘extremist rhetoric’ and his ‘refusal to condemn white supremacy’ and more specifically the actions of US far-right groups such as the Proud Boys. The post rejected the article’s critical position on Trump and expressed an ideologically oppositional views of white victimhood, calling the media “anti-white corporate parasites” and making references of alleged “Judeo-supremacy and black-supremacy.” \*

\* Note: The article was deemed partisan not because of its critical reporting on extremism and white supremacy.

A news article on SBS positively reporting the Islamic call for prayer being broadcasted at a large Sydney mosque in hope to ‘bring the community together during the coronavirus pandemic’ was disapprovingly shared by a Facebook user. The user expressed clear Islamophobic views and alluded to allegedly privileged treatment of Islam:

“ ...Complain about the impositions by this predatory ideology and you’ll be bullied and persecuted for blasphemy.

### Key takeaways: partisan media content

- ≥ Most partisan media content shared on Facebook and Gab are from conservative, centre-right media outlets.
- ≥ They are almost always shared affirmatively, which means that mainstream media content is used directly to articulate an ideological message.

## 5.3 Ideological reframing of neutral media outputs

Most of the shared media content are **neutral news outputs**, but our analysis concluded that most of them were posted by far-right Facebook and Gab users with an ideological agenda in mind. We identified two different ways a neutral article can be used for ideological messaging in far-right online spaces:

- 1) Explicit reframing, by adding post content that points to additional layers of meaning and conveys a certain ideological stance
- 2) Implicit reframing, through *contextual messaging* whereby mainstream media outputs are shared without any additional post content but the ideological message is clearly ‘heard’ within the ideological context of the far-right environment.

### Reframing neutral media outputs by adding post content

One way of reframing a neutral media output is by writing text (or adding other content, such as emojis) in the post that **adds different layers**

**of meaning** or perspectives to the news article. This was the most common posting pattern in our Facebook sub-sample. Of all 224 analysed Facebook posts, we found that in 129 cases (57.6 per cent) the user added judgment to the post that sits outside the actual article. Largely overlapping with these 129 cases, in 116 posts (51.8 per cent) our analysis found that a neutral article was shared to **convey a certain political message**. Here, the media articles are typically (mis)appropriated for a specific, usually political purpose connected to far-right or related ideological views.

While this was the most prominent posting and media sharing pattern in the Facebook sub-sample, it was slightly less common on Gab (which is partially due to the posting behaviour of one particularly prolific user). In the Gab sample, 63 posts (23.2 per cent) shared a neutral article and explicitly added judgment that was not in the actual article; in 60 cases, our analysis concluded that the post added a certain message to the shared media output to convey a political message.

Our qualitative analysis identified four typical ways in which the Facebook or Gab user articulates their political agenda by posting a neutral mainstream news article together with accompanying post content.

### 1. The post text rejects the gist or content of the article (negative message alignment).

The article and the post message are *thematically* aligned but the post's content expresses a viewpoint in opposition to the article – a viewpoint that resonates with far-right ideologies or related sentiments that commonly circulate within far-right environments online and offline. Our analysis shows that, while articles from various news outlets can be used in this way, left-leaning, progressive media outlets such as The Guardian or SBS were particularly prone to such negative message alignment reframing.

### 2. The post text articulates support the content of the article (positive message alignment).

Not only *partisan* media outputs (mostly from right-leaning media) are being shared approvingly, as discussed above. In some cases far-right Facebook and Gab users also shared *neutral* articles accompanied with posts content that demonstrates their support for the message of the article. In the Gab sample, for example, we identified several posts that shared mainstream news articles covering alleged corruption or other

forms of wrongdoing by governments and other state institutions. Such critical news reporting – a central journalistic task of the media in liberal democratic societies – seems to resonate with ideological anti-government tropes within far-right environments. By posting these kinds of articles users seem to subtly signal a more fundamental rejection of government or, in some cases, the 'political elite' more broadly.

A Gab user posted a link to the News.com article 'Anti-maskers vandalise Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt's Melbourne office'. The post copied parts of the article and added content that demonstrates the user's disagreement with the article; this includes explicit them-versus-us anti-government sentiments, attacks on the health minister and references to the common conspiratorial trope that the UN controls national governments:

“...A load of BS. This is a typical article turning anyone who does not agree with them into a “terrorist” or “Far Right Extremest” Also a good way to showcase their Survey put out by the Department of Making Shit Up. Besides Greg Hunt is a Globalist Dunderhead who is in bed with the UN and especially WHO...

The Guardian article 'Asio could question children and more easily use more tracking devices under new powers' reported neutrally about a proposed expansion of Australia's intelligence agency's powers. A Gab user shared support for the article with the accompanying text “this needs to be stopped”, expressing support for the article's critical stance on the proposed new powers.

### 3. The post emphasises one particular part or position presented in an article while ignoring other elements (selective alignment).

Many balanced news articles present different perspectives on the particular issue they are reporting about, for example by including voices from representatives of both sides of politics. Such neutral media outputs can easily be reframed by adding post content that highlights only those elements of the article that are more align with their ideological agenda. We also found selective message

alignment where certain elements of a neutral article are re-interpreted through an ideological prism and given a deeper meaning that was not present (or at least not explicit) in the article itself.

A balanced news article on Sky News about the Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews's proposal to extend the state government's emergency powers during the COVID-19 pandemic was shared by a Gab user alongside quotes from the article and the accompanying post text using the conspiratorial term 'plandemic':

“This whole plandemic was never about health, it was always about cementing state power.”

#### 4. The post text conveys a message that is not, or only marginally, related to the thematic content of the article (weak alignment).

Our analysis identified a significant number of posts where the content of a neutral news article was shared, but the content of the post conveyed a message that was not or only marginally related to the content of the media output. In many of these cases, the article is merely used a hook to convey an ideological message not grounded in the article itself.

The Guardian news article 'Australian doctors warn of overwhelmed public health system in event of coronavirus pandemic' (February 2020) was used in a Gab post for anti-immigration messaging. Unrelated to the content of the news article, the post blames "our extremist immigration program" for the pressure on the health system and its insufficient capacity to "properly assist the many people who get sick or need testing", alleging that immigration is the reason why Australians cannot receive adequate medical support.

In all these cases the ideological message of the post sharing a neutral news article is made clear by the added text or other content of the post. But what about those posts that simply share a neutral news report without adding any additional post content, apart from possibly copy-and-pasting parts of the article itself?

#### Key takeaways: neutral news reporting

- ≥ Neutral mainstream media content is frequently shared in far-right online spaces; the media output is usually reframed by additional post content to convey an ideological message.
- ≥ Neutral news reporting from any media outlet, regardless of their political leaning, can be co-opted for ideological messaging.
- ≥ The message conveyed by the post can be positively (affirmatively) or negatively aligned with the media output itself.
- ≥ Balanced news reporting, presenting different perspectives on a certain topic, can be used by selectively amplifying one perspective.
- ≥ Critical news reporting about alleged government wrongdoing can be re-framed as legitimization of more fundamentally ideological anti-government narratives.

#### Reframing neutral outputs through contextual messaging

Our analysis concluded that in many cases where the user **did not add any post content** to a shared media output, these seemingly neutral posts still convey an ideological message. Here, the message is not made explicit – neither through the partisan content of the media article itself (see 5.2) nor through accompanying post content (see 5.3 above). The ideological message is delivered through the contextual environment, as it is heard by the audience within these far-right online spaces. We refer to this posting pattern as *contextual messaging*.

While in our qualitative Facebook sample only 20 posts (8.9 per cent) shared a neutral news article without any additional post content apart from copying parts of the article (in 12 cases), this posting and media sharing pattern was particularly prominent in the Gab sample, with 158 posts following such a pattern (53.0 per cent). Given the prevalence of this posting behaviour on Gab, we conducted an additional analysis to identify whether the shared media content addresses a potentially '**politically charged topic**' and, if that was the case, whether the news article appeared to have been shared with a certain political-ideological message in mind.

We found that 145 of these 158 posts shared a news article that addressed issues we consider politically charged within the Gab ecosystem, such as immigration, climate change, anti-government sentiments, allegations of Chinese influence in Australian institutions, or government overreach in the context of COVID-19 .

We classified 87 of these 145 posts as cases of contextual messaging. Here, our analysis concluded that the Gab users have most likely posted the media article with the intention to **signal a certain political-ideological message** - a message easily deciphered by the Gab audience. This was also confirmed through our selected analysis of the comments in response to these posts, which showed that other Gab users had received the message and often made it more explicit in the comments (note: we did not systemically analyse the comments in response to the 298 posts).

Contextual messaging can be used in different ways to subtly convey an ideological message in the post. The post's message can be **in opposition to the content of the media output**. News articles from more left-leaning media outlet such as The Guardian or SBS were typically used for this negatively aligned contextual messaging. For example, a Gab user posted a SBS article about a local council in Sydney that decided to cover the childcare costs for asylum seeker families: the post only quotes the article's headline *These asylum seeker families are being given free childcare in Sydney*. Although the post did not include any additional content, it appears very likely that it seeks to communicate opposition to and disapproval of the council's support, possibly alluding to allegedly preferential treatment of refugees.

In other cases of contextual messaging, the content of the shared article appeared **positively aligned** with the suspected post intention. One Gab user, for example, shared a link to a neutral news article in The Australian, titled 'Daniel Andrews stands by China-linked staffer Nancy Yang'. The post only added a sentence taken from the first paragraph of the article (which can be accessed without paying subscription fees for The Australian): 'Daniel Andrews says he is "very confident" his MPs' offices have not been infiltrated by Chinese Communist Party operatives.' Here, the Gab user posted a news article with the likely intention to allude to Chinese infiltration of Australia's political system and specifically of the Andrews government, which

has been a common accusation among Australian Gab users.

Not all posts that share neutral articles without adding post content seem to clearly signal a certain political message. In 71 of the 158 Gab posts (sharing neutral articles without addition content) our analysis did not identify a clear and unambiguous message intention. This applies to many posts (n=58) that shared articles reporting on potentially political charged issues such as COVID19 restrictions (e.g. article about latest COVID statistics), while the remaining 13 posts did not even refer to any politically charged topic (e.g. ABC article about increasing wild dog attacks on humans). In some or many of these 58 cases, the Gab user may have simply **shared the media output for non-ideological purposes** within their Gab community.

#### Key takeaways: contextual messaging

- ≥ Neutral mainstream news reporting is often shared without additional post content with the intention to subtly convey a certain ideological viewpoint.
- ≥ Here, the message is not articulated explicitly, but the prevalent ideological context within these far-right online environments ensures that others clearly 'hear' the message.
- ≥ These news reports usually refer to a politically charged issue within the far-right online community, such as multiculturalism, immigration, climate change or allegations of government overreach.

## 5.4 Claims of mainstream media bias

A number of posts in our two sub-samples shared a media article accompanied by post content that **expressed negative sentiments towards mainstream media** or certain outlets, most commonly the national public broadcaster ABC. This type of messaging occurred on both analysed platforms, but it was more common on Gab (9.4 per cent of all analysed posts) than on Facebook (3.6 per cent).

These posts not only rejected the content of the individual article but made broader claims about mainstream media (or certain outlets) being biased and purposively reporting 'fake news'. These claims

were often linked to conspiratorial accusations that the media were part of a hidden agenda against the Australian people.

In most cases the shared media outputs were presented as an example that – in the eyes of the Facebook or Gab user – illustrated the media’s biased reporting and their agenda. It was in particular articles from left-leaning news outlets such as The Guardian (‘fake news peddler’) and SBS (‘Marxist media’), and centre-left outlets like the ABC (‘Brainwashed globalist shells’, ‘fake news’) or The Age (‘foul media operation’; ‘disgusting left-wing media’) that were shared in this way.

One Gab user, for example, posted the link to The Guardian news article ‘Coalition urged to tackle far-right extremism after ASIO revelations’ (June 2020), and wrote in the post:

“Silence anyone who loves Australia and dares to actually like white people and want the Australian nation (people) to continue existing!” The corporate media are the enemy, they are traitors, they are collaborators, they are the number 1 barrier in the road to genuine and effective change.

A number of posts made media bias claims in a different way, using an article to make accusations towards certain media outlets whilst **praising the reporting** of others, typically right-leaning outlets, such as Sky News, Herald Sun or The Australian. The media articles shared in this way were typically opinion pieces or editorials that expressed viewpoints that resonate within narratives common within far-right milieus.

A Gab user posted the Sky News commentary by Rowan Dean, Doctors, patients should be free to decide on whether to take hydroxychloroquine, with the accompanying text:

“MSM [mainstream media] pushing #vaccination hard of course. But at least Rowan Dean is vocal about this.

A Gab user shared a The Australian news article about a former Greens politician who reportedly faced child-sex abuse charges. The user claimed the story was only reported in The Australian and alleged other media are affiliated with the Greens:

“you’d think this would be news in every major paper, but seems it’s only being reported in the Australian, I guess telling everyone that your own side are a bunch of pedophiles is bad optics.

In some instances, the posted **media article itself contains allegations of media bias**, and the user shared the article affirmatively to express their negative stance towards (some) media. In these cases, the article’s message is aligned with far-right or related ideological tropes.

A Gab user shared a Herald Sun opinion piece on Victoria’s handling of the COVID-19 health crisis (Rita Panahi: Victoria an international laughing stock thanks to Dan’s shortsighted plan’), which questions the independence of ‘many in the media’. The Gab post only cites parts of the article’s text to convey an anti-media message:

VICTORIA AN INTERNATIONAL LAUGHING STOCK THANKS TO DANIEL ANDREWS

“Daniel Andrews and his cult of devoted followers, many of them in the media, would have you believe that the only experts worth listening to are those advising the government. But they’ve made us the laughing stock of the world”

Some of the analysed posts affirmatively shared partisan opinion pieces that make critical accusations against parts of the Australian media landscape but the post text expresses an anti-media (and anti-establishment) message that goes beyond the claims in the article itself and is worded more aggressively than in the shared article.

A Facebook user shared an opinion piece published in The Australian titled 'Antifa has backing of useful idiots in Australia's left-wing media' (the online headline that appears when sharing the link is: 'Left's useful idiots carry torch for Antifa'). The article accuses 'left-wing commentators' of 'wilful blindness towards, and romanticising of the violent activist group [Antifa]'. The Facebook user shares the link and describe the article as 'worthy of reading.' The post starts with a capitalised:

👤 ANTIFA PROTECTED BY AUSTRALIAN ESTABLISHMENT - IT'S TOO USEFUL

and adds:

👤 '...All sorts of bourgeois rabble, media pimps and political-police agencies have uses for them [Antifa] as agents of intimidation against patriotic and nationalist people. Antifa can always be counted upon to threaten and assault people, damage property, stalk and defame ... Why does the ABC promote Antifa ...? ...Forewarned, forearmed. Promoted by media and puffed up with the attention, Antifa has a second lease of life after defections, drug arrests and financial squabbles and sexual goings-on. Is it a case of game-on??

### Key takeaways: expressing opposition to media

- ≥ Some far-right online accounts (especially on Gab) post mainstream media content to express their opposition to mainstream media (or certain outlets)
- ≥ The media output, usually from left-leaning or centrist outlets, is typically shared as an alleged example of biased reporting or to make conspiratorial accusations about the media's alleged hidden agenda against the Australian people.
- ≥ In some posts mainstream media content from right-leaning outlets are shared to praise the respective media source whilst highlighted the alleged bias of other (more left-leaning) outlets.

## 6. Concluding remarks

This explorative study sheds light on the ambivalent relationships the Australian far right has with mainstream media. Many within far-right milieus may hold unfavourable views of the media - and some express them directly in their online posting. At the same time, however, their online messaging relies to a significant extent on, or is at least facilitated by, mainstream media content sharing. While national and overseas-based hyper-partisan fringe media sources aligned with far-right agendas of anti-egalitarianism and nativism or (ethno-) nationalism are often shared online, our findings indicate that mainstream media are posted even more frequently. In both our samples, close to 60 per cent of all outbound URLs (excluding those that belong to social media sites) lead to mainstream media outlets. This proportion is higher than previous international studies have found on Gab (Lima et al. 2018). More research with larger samples is necessary to examine this further, as our Australian study is based on only a relatively small number of accounts on Facebook and Gab, and individual posting patterns can skew the results.

Our research does not intend to single out any particular news media outlet for the way their outputs have been used by far-right actors for their ideological messaging online. While this analysis does show that, overall, right-leaning media outputs are more frequently shared, it is important to note that articles from any mainstream media outlet - from the more conservative to the more progressive ones - are being posted on far-right online platforms to advance their ideological agenda.

To understand far-right online messaging and what role mainstream media play for propaganda and ideological community-building in far-right online spaces, it is crucial to also look beyond the quantitative findings and explore *how* media reporting is being used to promote divisive ideological narratives.

Our qualitative multimodal analysis of 522 Facebook and Gab posts found that partisan media content from right-leaning media outlets are almost always shared affirmatively by far-right actors to convey their own ideological agenda - possibly in a deliberate attempt to legitimise their far-right narratives by aligning them with

mainstream media content. News reports from centre-left or progressive media outlets were also shared regularly, but this occurred more often in a way that expressed an ideological viewpoint in explicit opposition to the message in the shared article. Our analysis further identified instances where critical, balanced news reporting (also in left-leaning media) on government's alleged wrongdoing has been reframed and misappropriated by far-right actors as alleged proof for their ideological assertions that the government is a corrupt and treasonous enemy of the 'Australian people' and the political system is broken.

Regardless of the political tendency of the various media outlets in Australia, this study highlights that far-right fringe narratives are not as disconnected from the broader public and political discourse as they may seem. It appears sometimes, or often, difficult to draw a clear line between the narratives in ideological far-right messaging and mainstream voices in the media and the public debate more broadly - from bushfires and climate change to issues around foreign investment, COVID-19, immigration or terrorism, to name only a few. Media reporting, and by extension political and public debates, often include arguments and tropes that can be either used directly, or easily reframed, by far-right actors to support and amplify their divisive ideological agenda. The seemingly increasing polarisation of the media landscape (Park et al. 2021: 29) bears the risk of creating more opportunities for the far right to reframe elements of the mainstream discourse and, in doing so, create a sense of legitimacy for their ideological narratives. This constitutes a concrete manifestation of what is often referred to as the mainstreaming of the far right.



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