

## Irish far-right groups flocking to encrypted and unmoderated social media sites, research finds



Twitter and other mainstream sites have begun to act against misinformation and hate messaging on their platforms, creating a space for sites such as Telegram, Signal, and Parler. File Picture: Pexels



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STEVEN HEANEY

Irish far-right groups have been exploiting online loopholes and using encrypted and largely unmoderated social media sites and messaging apps to mobilise and spread messages of hate throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

That's according to research carried out by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), an independent global organisation dedicated to powering solutions to extremism, hate, and disinformation.

The study showed that the number of channels and messages created and sent by Irish users of the encrypted messaging app Telegram has increased rapidly, with just 800 messages sent in 2019 compared with over 60,000 this past January.

### Mainstream sites addressing misinformation

Like other 'alternative' messaging apps and social media sites — such as Signal and Parler — Telegram's popularity has grown exponentially in recent years, particularly as more mainstream sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram [have cracked down](#) on misinformation, disinformation, and extremist content, and [banned prominent far-right figures](#).

Telegram, which applies only limited content moderation policies compared to other platforms, has now become something of the go-to app for those espousing far-right views, so much so that researchers have said it provides them with "a safe space to hate".

The ISD's research, which was carried out in collaboration with Noteworthy, also explored how far-right groups have sought to capitalise on the general public's frustration with Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns.

### Conspiracy theories, falsehoods, and threats

Aside from communicating messages to other users, Irish far-right groups have taken to Telegram to discuss ways to get their hateful messages onto more common platforms and to organise meetings, demonstrations, and protests in the real world.

The majority of the messages seen by researchers relied upon conspiracy theories and outright falsehoods about vaccines and Government policy throughout the pandemic. Worryingly, many also encouraged threats of violence against health officials, politicians and public figures who promoted vaccine use.

"These groups and individuals are highly adept at using online platforms," said one of the ISD's researchers.



*They know the loopholes and how to use them, and they know how to game algorithms and play into biases.*

The research stated that Ireland, given its position as a hub for technology companies, plays a pivotal role in EU-wide discussions on how online information services might be regulated in the coming years.



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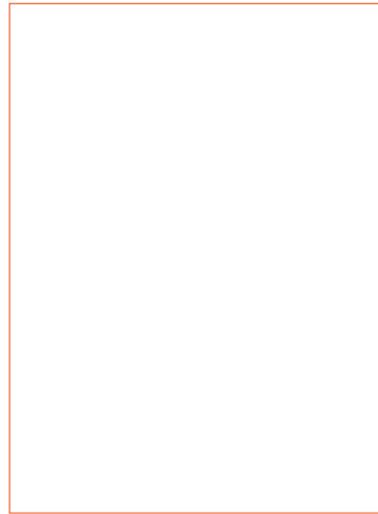


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