

# **‘Fake news’ and Facebook: the growth of right-wing political groups in Australia**

## **Abstract**

Right-wing political groups are on the rise in Australia. This paper examines the role that Web 2.0 technologies and the social networking site Facebook have played in this growth. Facebook’s structure of networked communities facilitates the broad dissemination of sensationalist content, including misinformation and ‘fake news’, creating an effective and relatively unrestricted platform from which right-wing political groups can amplify their message and grow their member base. This paper uses examples of recent activity on Facebook by Australia’s right-wing groups to demonstrate how the social networking site is being used to grow and strengthen the right-wing community across the country.

## **Introduction**

Right-wing politics has been present in Australia since the early 1900s (Campion, 2019). Over the past 15 years, however, there has been a significant rise in the number and effectiveness of right-wing political groups across the country (Aly, 2015, as cited in Dean et al., 2016). The majority of these groups have developed an online presence, most notably on the social networking site, Facebook (Dean et al., 2016). Right-wing ideology traditionally relies on the “perception (or construction) of a threat that imperils [that community’s] way of life” (Campion, 2019, para. 4). The activities of right-wing groups, which are centred around fighting this perceived threat, destabilise the political environment by distracting from real issues, increase tension and division by encouraging racial, religious and sexual discrimination, and normalise extreme behaviour which can result in violence (Lewis et al., 2019). Social media has become an important tool in this alleged battle, with right-wing political groups in Australia creating and sharing sensationalist content aimed at maximising engagement and stimulating intense debate. The mobility and weak cooperation enabled by Web 2.0 technologies and social networking sites create an effective way for attention-grabbing content to be broadly shared and enable these groups to amplify their message. The structure of Facebook groups, in particular, allows for the effective dissemination of sensationalist content throughout the networked community and encourages confirmation bias, which further strengthens and amplifies ties between community members. This paper argues that the weak

cooperation enabled by Facebook facilitates the dissemination of sensationalist content, including misinformation and ‘fake news’, which has played a key role in growing and strengthening right-wing communities in Australia.

### **The perfect conditions for growth**

The right-wing community in Australia has embraced Facebook. Research undertaken by Dean et al. (2016) detailed the strong online presence of the most popular right-wing political groups in Australia in 2016. As at 27 January 2016, the eight major groups identified as a part of this research all maintained active Facebook accounts. Although several of the groups identified by Dean et al. (2016) are no longer present on Facebook (or are not present under the same name), new groups with similar agendas have emerged in their place. Of the groups that remain, membership has significantly increased since 2016. In particular, the Australian Liberty Alliance has grown from 21,788 members on 27 January 2016 (Dean et al., 2016) to 87,714 members on 7 April 2020 (Australian Liberty Alliance, n.d.) – an increase of 400% in just over four years. This aligns with the trend identified by Wroe and Koslowski (2019), who reported that dozens of Australian right-wing political groups have emerged on Facebook since 2015. These statistics demonstrate the important role Facebook plays for the right-wing community in Australia.

The growth of these right-wing groups can also be attributed in no small part to the technologies and characteristics associated with Web 2.0, particularly mobility and weak ties. Web 2.0 technologies, which enable people to communicate with each other from a distance, have also facilitated a shift towards ‘networked individualism’ (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). According to Hampton and Wellman (2018), individuals are increasingly involved with various loose knit communities instead of remaining within one geographically static environment. This mobility means that communities have moved from being “bounded, densely knit local groups to multiple, partial, often far-flung social networks” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, as cited in Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 643). According to Aguiton and Cardon (2007), these networked communities rely on the propagation of weak ties to strengthen and grow. In Australia, right-wing political groups on Facebook – which range from small informal groups of several hundred people, to well-organised communities with tens of thousands of members – share weak ties through the “specific and limited context” (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 80) of their views on multiculturalism, immigration and religion (Tran, 2017). Facebook provides an easily accessible space where members of this loose knit community can come together to share and discuss ideas.

## **United against a common threat**

A community with weak ties is strong when it moves towards a common goal. Facebook groups are tailored to bring communities with weak ties together by creating a place where users can connect over shared interests (Facebook, n.d.). These loose knit communities are strengthened by ‘weak cooperation’, which Aguiton and Cardon (2007) describe as the cooperative opportunity to share and magnify content that is only discovered once the production of individual content is made public. Facebook enables weak cooperation through its accessible interface that allows individual users to quickly and easily create and share posts. As discussed by Granovetter (1973), while the process of weak cooperation does not require large amounts of individual effort in itself, the collective result of these “small-scale [interactions] become translated into large-scale patterns” (p. 1360). It is here that loose knit online communities find their strength, as they multiply and magnify content with very little effort. The efficacy of this structure was demonstrated recently when a Facebook post making false claims about refugee entitlements under Australia’s immigration policy was shared more than 49,000 times (AFP Australia, 2019). The post, which incorrectly asserted that “people who cross the Australian border “illegally” are eligible to receive a job, a driver’s license, a \$70,000 grant, and numerous other benefits” (AFP Australia, 2019, para. 1), claimed to be based on advice from an Australian barrister. This example illustrates the strength that is created through the cumulative total of individual, ‘granular’ contributions from a community with weak ties (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007). Australian right-wing political groups are using Facebook to harness and grow this collective strength to fight the perceived threat posed by individuals and groups that do not align with their ideology.

## **A new kind of soapbox**

Facebook provides right-wing political groups in Australia with an unprecedented ability to reach a wide and geographically disperse audience. The structure of Facebook groups is particularly effective for disseminating content, as the social networking site creates a web of disparate yet interconnected networked communities (boyd & Ellison, 2007). When content is posted on a group page, members of that group can ‘like’, ‘comment’ or ‘share’ the post. Depending on the privacy settings of the original post, when a user reacts to that post, the post and the user’s response will appear in their own personal Facebook feed and can be seen by other people in line with that person’s privacy settings (Dumais, 2019). The greatest reach occurs when a post is set to ‘global’. However, given the nature of Facebook’s networked communities, a post with the setting of ‘friends of friends’ also has the potential to reach an audience far beyond the poster’s original network.

Many of the right-wing Facebook groups in Australia are publicly accessible and post content using the 'global' setting, which enables their posts to reach the largest possible audience. Using Facebook in this way creates high levels of engagement (Bramble, 2018) which results in the content published by these groups being seen by users that sit outside the pre-existing networked community. This increased reach creates greater opportunities for right-wing political groups to communicate with and convert new members.

### **Sensationalism sells**

The use of sensationalist content, including misinformation and fake news, extends the reach of these groups even further. On Facebook, the most successful posts maximise engagement through highly targeted content that delivers a resonating call-to-action through links, images and videos (Sehl, 2019). Posts that combine these elements with sensationalist material create even more engagement. Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, admits that "one of the biggest issues social networks face is that [...] people will engage disproportionately with more sensationalist and provocative content" (Hutchinson, 2018, para. 4). This position is echoed by Kozinets (2017) whose research revealed that "one of the most effective ways to achieve mass appeal [is] by turning to the extreme" (para. 10). This situation is well-suited to right-wing groups as they tend to pit themselves against a constructed threat (Campion, 2019) and post strong and visible content in response to that perceived danger. Facebook further enables the spread of this type of sensationalist content as its policies do not currently restrict the publication of misinformation or fake news (Hanbury, 2019). Many of the posts made by Australia's right-wing Facebook groups are often controversial or sensationalised and are aimed at provoking a strong emotional response in order to unite and strengthen the community.

The leaders of these right-wing groups have developed an aptitude for profiting from these conditions to grow their community using content they have created or through the coordinated distribution of existing content. In 2017, members of Patriot Blue, an Australian nationalist group, used their smartphones to film as they verbally attacked Sam Dastyari, an Iranian-born non-practising Muslim Labor senator (Hunter & Ham, 2017). According to Haynes and Henderson (2017), experts agreed that the video, which was posted to the Patriot Blue Facebook group soon after the incident, was made for the express purpose of being shared on Facebook. While the video itself received less than 200 likes, the post was highly successful as it sparked significant debate that resulted in nationwide media attention (Haynes & Henderson, 2017). More recently, Australian right-wing groups rolled out of a well-timed campaign across a number of different Facebook pages. The campaign, which

included a link to a video post, made false claims that police had “refused to arrest Muslims who waved terror flags against Jews in Melbourne” (Knaus & McGowan, 2020, para. 8). Many of these posts were made with ‘global’ privacy settings and the majority of comments made in response to the posts received multiple ‘likes’ from other Facebook members, further extending the audience from that of the original group. Responses to these posts on Facebook (No Sharia Law Ever, 2019) show a community strongly united in their stance against Muslims, and more generally towards restricting Australia’s immigration policies. The publication of sensationalist content such as this serves two main purposes: firstly, to normalise extreme behaviour among the communities who view it (Tran, 2017) and secondly, to find new audiences in an attempt to grow and strengthen the associated networked communities (Kozinets, 2017). The activity and growth of right-wing political groups on Facebook suggests that this approach is successful.

### **Viral popularity**

People are attracted to, and remain members of, these groups because the content and associated discussion resonates with their beliefs, creating an insular culture where ‘confirmation bias’ is enabled and encouraged. Nickerson (1998) defines confirmation bias as “the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs [or] expectations” (p. 175). Facebook’s right-wing groups in Australia are made up of people who share a similar ideology. As such, members of this community are generally receptive to content posted by group leaders or other community members. This is evidenced by the viral post making false claims about refugee entitlements in Australia (AFP Australia, 2019) which demonstrates that members of these groups are unlikely to check the veracity of content posted by other members before sharing with their own networked communities. A lack of regulation around the publication of misinformation and fake news on Facebook (Idris, 2019) means that content does not need to be verified for accuracy before being published. These conditions contribute to the viral popularity of content posted by right-wing groups on Facebook, which stimulates engagement and increases the size and strength of these groups.

### **Conclusion**

Facebook is an effective platform for growing and strengthening the right-wing community in Australia. The social networking site enables members of this community to find each other through the publication of attention-grabbing content. This, coupled with the mobility afforded to users by Web 2.0 technologies, means that people across the country who share similar views are using Facebook as a virtual town hall for sharing and progressing right-wing ideologies. This loose knit community has found strength in the weak cooperation that Facebook facilitates. A lack of

regulation around what can be published on the social networking site means that these groups are creating and sharing sensationalist content, including misinformation and fake news, that has been created to align with the right-wing agenda, maximise engagement and grow the community's member base. This raises significant concerns, as an increasingly strong and vocal right-wing community threatens to destabilise Australia's political environment, increase social division through the discrimination and vilification of minority groups, and normalise extreme and violent behaviour.

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## Response to feedback

Comment	Action
Do a reverse outline to determine the main point for each of your paragraphs and their position/relevance for the main argument.	Done – this resulted in a restructure of the paper.
Create strong topic sentences for each paragraph that clearly indicate how it relates to and supports your main argument and provide evidence in that paragraph that relates to the topic sentence. Conclude your paragraphs with a sentence that clearly indicates how the evidence you have provided relates to your main argument.	I reviewed each paragraph to be sure that the topic for each was clear. I added topic sentences for all paragraphs that did not previously have a topic sentence, and added a conclusion at the end of each paragraph to make the connection between the discussion in the paragraph to my thesis statement.
Rework your intro and conclusion to clearly indicate what is at stake. Tell the reader why this is important – what are the broader implications? The reader needs to know why they should care	Done – the introduction has been reworked to be more clear about what is at stake and why it is important. The conclusion has been rewritten to try to leave the readers with something to think about.
Create provocative headings and subheadings to catch readers attention in the conference.	Done – headings added throughout the paper.
Multiple issues with APA 7 <sup>th</sup> edition referencing	I have double checked and updated the formatting of the citations and reference list.
Issues with using passive voice	I have accepted the proposed changes to create a more active voice, and have edited the paper from top to bottom to pick up any other areas that were too passive/needed to be active.
Theoretical terms need to be explained together with how it is important/related to your argument.	Done – the paragraph this affects was rewritten quite heavily, so only one theoretical term remains. I have explained what this is and the context of it within my argument.
Various edits throughout	On the whole, the suggested edits have been accepted.