

## Investigating Reclaim Australia and Britain First's Use of Social Media: Developing a New Model of Imagined Political Communities Online

Lella Nouri<sup>a1</sup>, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Senior Lecturer of Criminology, Swansea University, <sup>b</sup>Professor of Applied Linguistics, Swansea University

### **Abstract**

Against a backdrop of widespread concern regarding the extreme right's increasing use of social media and using a combination of quantitative and qualitative linguistic techniques, this paper reports the results of the first systematic analysis of how two extreme right groups (Britain First and Reclaim Australia) construct themselves as sui generis 'imagined political communities' on social media (Facebook and Twitter). Analysis of a circa 5-million-word dataset reveals that both groups strategically mobilise a number of topical news events (relative to their country) and systematically denigrate ('other') immigrants and Muslims. It also reveals that Reclaim Australia favours more aggressive stances than Britain First towards targeted out-groups. The relative salience and interrelations between the features that form these groups' imagined political communities differ significantly from those proposed by pre-digital era notions of imagined political communities. Thus, this study proposes a new model of social—media based imagined political communities for extreme right groups in which developing boundaries against perceived threats posed by othered groups (Muslims and immigrants) emerges as the main pillar.

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### **1. Introduction**

The removal of the extreme right group Britain First from Facebook in March 2018 sparked debate about the group's social media presence. This was not surprising, given that the group had at the time reached 1.8 million followers and had over 2 million likes, making it -

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author Contact: Dr Lella Nouri, Hillary Rodham School of Law, Swansea University, Singleton Park Campus, Sketty, Swansea, SA2 8PP. Email – [l.m.nouri@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.nouri@swansea.ac.uk) Twitter - @ctproject\_lemma

according to the anti-racism / fascism advocacy group Hope Not Hate - the second most liked Facebook page within the politics and society category in the UK, after the royal family (Hope Not Hate, 2018). “The extreme right thrives on social networks” (The Guardian, 2018) was the headline of an opinion piece published in the British news outlet The Guardian in May 2017, at which time, data collection for this study had just concluded. “Extremists are thriving on social media” (Luckert, 2018) was the slightly reworded version of the same issue that The Huffington Post published around the same time. Following US President Donald Trump’s retweeting of posts from a British extreme right group in November 2017, UK Prime Minister Theresa May was quick to point out that he had been “wrong” to do so (BBC, 2018) – highlighting governmental concern about extreme right groups’ usage of social media. A 2016 report by the UK Home Affairs Select Committee, titled Hate and Abuse on Social Media, unambiguously stated in relation to extreme right groups’ use of social media that “[n]etworks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the vehicle of choice in spreading propaganda and they have become the recruiting platforms for terrorism” (Home Affairs Committee, 2016). And, following the conviction of the leaders of the extreme right group Britain First, Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, on counts of hate crime, the group’s Facebook account was removed in March 2018 (The Guardian, 2018).

The above examples illustrate widespread concern regarding the extreme right’s use of social media. Data are continuously generated and interpreted by governments, law enforcement and academia about the volume and spread of extremist groups’ use of the internet in general and social media networks in particular. Similarly, considerable research effort is directed towards understanding why extreme right groups favour and thrive in social media (see, e.g., Burgess & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016). This is welcome and provides a sound basis on which to examine, as this paper does, extreme right groups’ social media discourse.

Specifically, our aim is to analyse systematically the textual means – or discourse *modus operandi* – via which two extreme right groups identified as saliently using social media – Britain First and Reclaim Australia – advance their goals on two platforms: Facebook

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and Twitter. This aim is informed by methodological and knowledge-based needs in the fields of Political and Terrorism Studies. Methodologically, placing language in use – i.e., discourse – on centre-stage is justified by the fact that, like other forms of extremism, extreme right ideologies are a social (discursive, we would argue) construction, rather than an objective, essentialist reality (Jackson, Breen-Smyth & Gunning, 2016; Jackson, 2012; Jarvis, 2016). The discursive tools for communicating these ideologies are as important as the ideologies themselves (De Vreese, Esser, Carsten & Stanyer, 2018). Yet, systematic analysis of the discursive means by which extremist ideologies (jihadism, populism, right wing extremism etc.) are articulated and disseminated, including via social media, is significantly under-developed in Political and Terrorism Studies (see Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2017 for a critique).

As for knowledge-based needs, there are three gaps that this study contributes to fill. Firstly, research into extreme right groups (such as Britain First and Reclaim Australia) is underdeveloped when compared with academic study of other forms of extremism, especially jihadism (Conway, 2017). Secondly, our knowledge of extreme right groups often derives from either general studies about the ‘extreme right’ (Albright, 2018; Belew, 2018; Kimmel, 2018) or studies about individual groups (Belew, 2018). Comparative studies of two, as we do here, or more groups are much scarcer, which constitutes an important limitation of our current understanding of extreme right groups (Conway, 2017). Thirdly, understanding of extremism *online* (especially by extreme right groups) is also comparatively limited. Pre-2010 work tended to focus on these groups’ use of digital platforms such as websites and blogs (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Bowman-Grieve, 2009a; Bowman-Grieve, 2009b; Bowman-Grieve, 2010). More recently, their use of social media platforms has started to receive much needed attention along with that of right-wing populism in general (Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Scrivens, Davies & Frank, 2017; Posch, Bleier & Strohmaier, 2017; Forchtner & Kolvraa, 2017; Govil & Baishya, 2018; Beiner, 2018). Our work contributes to further current understanding in this area in terms of groups examined, platform usages and methodological approach.

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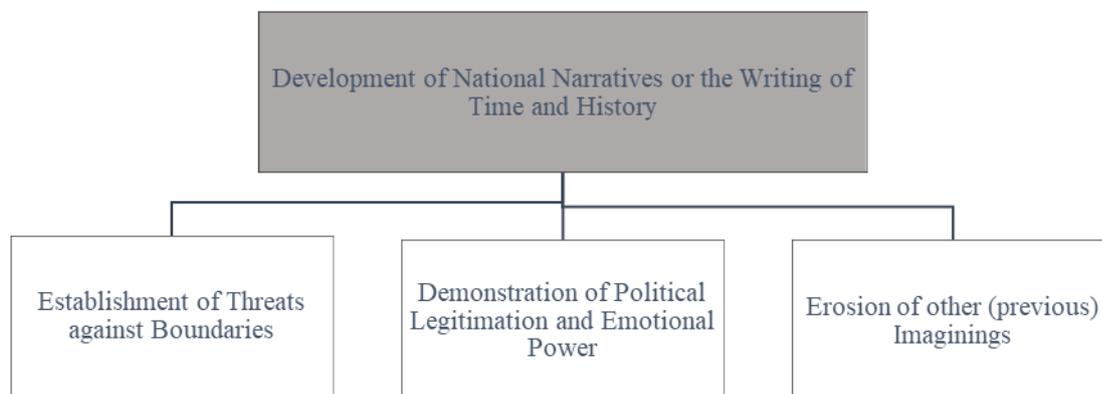
In this paper, then, we examine how two extreme right groups (Britain First and Reclaim Australia) discursively construct their ideology and community on social media by seeking to answer the following research question: what characterises Britain First and Reclaim Australia as social-media based imagined political communities? Given that these groups present themselves as being political (rather than, say, cultural) formations, in Section 2 we critically review the relevant literature on online political communities. In Section 3.1 we proceed to describe our data, which comprise all the Twitter and Facebook posts by these two groups between January and April 2017 (4,761,481 words). This is followed, in Section 3.2, by a description of our methodological approach – one that enables both identification of statistically significant discourse patterns and fine-grained qualitative analysis of these patterns: Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS). Section 4 presents and discusses our results in terms of a series of, comparatively derived, thematic/stylistic domains that the two groups regularly deploy. In Section 5, we use these domains to put forth a model of imagined political communities for extreme right groups on social media. Section 6 concludes by outlining the key differences between our model and previous work on imagined political communities, also suggesting how the model may be employed in further research.

## **2. Of imagined political communities, social media, and extreme right groups**

The notion of political communities is not new to scholarly thinking. For hundreds of years, academics have argued over the definition of what does and does not constitute a nation. In 1983, Benedict Anderson sought to end this debate, theorising that a nation is an “imagined political community” (Anderson, 1983). He described it as “imagined” because those who form it will never know, nor meet, the majority of those whom they share their nation with, yet they share similar thoughts and beliefs. As Anderson noted, even the “the most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation” (2016, P.6). The “political” in Anderson’s concept referred to sovereign nation states because, at the time of the creation of nations as we know them today, people had begun to

lose confidence in both the sacred languages of religion and the ability of monarchs to rule. As for the “community” aspect in Anderson’s concept, this captured his view that those who form imagined political communities are bonded by friendships and common aims – what he referred to as a “horizontal comradeship of equals” (Anderson, 1983).

Albeit not formalised into a theoretical model, but developed over various case studies and historical anecdotes, Anderson (2016) also put forward the ‘actions’ necessary for the creation of imagined political communities. These are schematically represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The creation of imagined political communities (based on Anderson’s theory)**

As Figure 1 shows, Anderson thought of imagined political communities as being first and foremost created through its members’ development of national narratives, embedded in time and history. Subsidiary to developing such narratives were three other ‘actions’: establishing threats against boundaries, demonstrating political legitimation and emotional power, and eroding other (previous) imaginings.

Members' need to establish threats against boundaries relates to Anderson's conceptualisation of imagined political communities as "limited": even the largest nations have boundaries and there is more than just one nation consuming the planet. Here Anderson was primarily concerned with geographical territories, which is not surprising considering the world stage at the time. Establishing threats requires identifying who / what poses them and against what / whom. It is therefore enacted through out-group vis-à-vis in-group discourse positioning acts.

As for the demonstration of political legitimation and emotional power, this is one of the means by which imagined political community members – the in-group/s – assert their identity vis-à-vis the out-group/s. Linked to the notion of threats against boundaries, for Anderson political legitimation came from a process of unification. For example, threats to boundaries, during the time of Anderson's writing brought ethnic identities to the forefront, making people defensive and territorial about what they felt belonged to them – whether this be land, beliefs or culture. Political legitimation came from the states' ability to put the same emphasis on ethnic identities, thus invoking an emotional power. Anderson described this as an "official nationalism" – centrally established and filtered down through a population (Anderson, 1983, P. 8).

Another means to construct imagined political communities, and the final 'action' identified by Anderson, is the erosion of other (previous) imaginings. As an example, Anderson pointed to the decline of colonial empires, which created a power vacuum in which states had the opportunity to convince people of a different, more independent imagination that placed them in a reality far-removed from previous colonialist narratives (Anderson, 1983, P. 155).

The world has changed dramatically since Anderson first began writing about imagined political communities. One crucial aspect of that change concerns the digital revolution, which has altered fundamental aspects of inter-action at personal and collective (community) levels. In this sense, it is important to note that Anderson (1994) already posited

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the importance of communication and technology and the development of long-distance nationalism.

The last three decades have also seen greater cultural diversity as a result of globalisation. Consequently, the concept of a single national identity<sup>2</sup>, underlying Anderson's notion of imagined political communities, has been questioned. Several studies have indeed sought to establish whether Anderson's notion of imagined political communities may be applied to both off-line and online contemporaneous communities. Within the former three studies are worth discussing, which applied Anderson's work to the European Union (Christensen, 2014), an extreme right group in Austria (Zimelis, 2010), and the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate (Furrow, Fleischer & Corman, 2014).

Christensen (2014) applied to the EU Anderson's features of community (comradeship) and political (sovereignty), on the one hand, and the boundary setting and other (previous) imaginings eroding actions, on the other. Her overall conclusion was that the EU qualifies as a weak supranational nation. This is because, Christensen argued, EU citizens have a weak image and understanding of fellow EU members; EU borders are not strongly represented in the minds of EU citizens; there is a lack of comradeship between member states (or a lack of willingness to die for those in another member country); and the EU involves separate national sovereign governments. The last point also led Christensen (2014) to conclude that the EU is a failed imagined political community.

Zimelis' (2010) work on the Austrian Freedom Party examined how imagined political communities can be re-invented by their elites' rhetoric, in this case that of the party's leader Jorg Haider. Zimelis (2010) concluded that Haider's language played a critical part in the creation of his party's consciousness, especially in terms of seeking to create a national 'us' ('real' Austrians) versus 'them' (immigrants) structure. However, and noting Anderson's view, Zimelis (2010) also affirmed the importance of history and culture in the party's efforts to mobilise imagination regarding economic, social and political issues.

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<sup>2</sup> Here, we apply Anderson's conceptualisation of a nation and as such put forward studies which have applied his concept as broadly as from traditional nation states to other grassroots communities.

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Furlow et al's study in 2014 examined the formation of the Caliphate as an imagined political community. Their analysis showed that the Caliphate offered social cohesion for its members around their 'Muslimness', regardless of whether they knew each other or not, and also of their nationality and ethnicity. This vague, generic construction – the authors argued – both enabled diverse audiences to identify with the Caliphate as an imagined political community and made it easier to emphasise the in-group differences with the out-group, as it relied on 'us' versus 'them' structures.

Regarding scholarship that has applied Anderson's theory to online political communities, this has focussed on the actual features of social media that may facilitate their creation (Kavoura, 2014); the possibility (or otherwise) of social media-based imagined political communities developing without physical contact amongst their members (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011); and the potential for social media-based imagined political communities to radicalise jihad diasporic groups living in the West, especially second-generation Muslim women (Comeau, 2016).

The social media features that, according to Kavoura (2014) and Koh (2016), facilitate the formation of imagined political communities include members' use of distinct language and symbols (e.g. 'retweet' and '#' on Twitter), technical affordances to develop friendships with those with similar interests and aims (e.g. 'likes' / 'favourites' clickable options), and the collation of members' data via, for instance, public community discussions and shared information. Although Kavoura's (2014) study concluded that Anderson's concept of imagined political communities befits social media, Koh's (2016) was more sceptical. She argued that being part of a serious political cause, as expected of the members of imagined political communities, requires the creation of stronger ties than those afforded by social media platforms<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This was on account of her examination of slacktivism – or 'feel good activism': the practice of joining in on an online community type interaction (such as 'liking' or 'retweeting') just in the illusion of having a meaningful impact in that community at minimal cost to oneself.

Scepticism regarding the applicability of Anderson's imagined political community notion to social media (in this case Twitter) was also noted by Grudz et al (2011). Their analysis pointed to some aspects that did fit Anderson's model, namely individuals living in a homogeneous time, moving through history together and sharing a collective consciousness. It also identified other aspects that did not, chief amongst which was the importance of "high-centers", that is, of individuals who have a good awareness of the local community and can serve as connectors between different social circles. Another difference came from the fact that Twitter account holders regularly met, talked, provided support and helped each other in person and over Twitter. This led the authors to conclude that Twitter provides both "real" and "imagined" political communities.

Comeau's (2016) study showed that imagined political communities that support jihadi radicalisation processes amongst diaspora Muslims develop because their members lack a strong sense of identity and belonging, rather than because of their having particularly strong ties to a skewed version of Islam. Comeau's (2016) analysis also revealed some of the strategies used in these communities, which resemble how newspapers created imagined communities in Anderson's time (e.g. nationalistic qualities and communicating in many languages). The overall intended aim, Comeau (2016) argued, was to produce a powerful community identity that would become part of the community's collective consciousness - an overall imagined community. Any images/narratives found on social media that contradicted this community would become associated to the out-group, hence reflecting and reinforcing 'us' versus 'them' structures.

The above review indicates that, on balance, Anderson's notion of imagined political community is applicable to contemporary, online contexts beyond nation-states. This is not to say – as the review has also shown – that all of its constitutive features are equally applicable, which is why our study poses the research question: what characterises Britain First and Reclaim Australia as social-media based imagined political communities? Upon answering this question, we seek to overcome methodological issues identified by our review, principally unsystematic application of all of Anderson's features (Zimelis, 2010; Furlow,

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Fleischer & Corman, 2016) and analysis of small data sets on which generalisations are offered (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data

Our study examines a sizeable corpus of social media posts from the extreme right groups Reclaim Australia and Britain First. These two groups were selected because of their geographically distant locations but linguistic and, arguably, cultural similarities within a larger dataset of extreme right groups' social media use content<sup>4</sup>.

Reclaim Australia was formed as a direct response to the Sydney Lindt Café siege in 2014 when an individual claiming to be linked to Daesh (although police investigation later revealed no official links to the group, despite Daesh claiming otherwise in their propaganda magazines) took hostage a number of Australian citizens, resulting in the deaths of three people (BBC, 2014). The group can be described as a grassroots organisation. Founded by Wanda Marsh, John Oliver and Catherine Brennan in early 2015, Reclaim Australia marketed itself as a group of parents worried about the “spread of Islam” across Australia (Cullen & Peters, 2015). The group's ideological manifesto (posted on their now removed website) included topics such as: compulsory singing of the national anthem every week in every school, revoking citizenship for those who do not pledge allegiance to Australia, stopping the perceived spread of Sharia Law, and putting a halt to the perceived Islamisation<sup>5</sup> of Australia (Ali & Khattab, 2017). Offline, Reclaim Australia's main focus has been on holding patriotic street rallies to protest against Islam and Islamic practices in Australia.

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<sup>4</sup> The larger dataset was compiled within a research project that brings together multidisciplinary teams from across three continents to date (Europe, Oceania and the Americas) in order to examine extreme right groups' use of social media. For network details, please contact Dr Lella Nouri [l.m.nouri@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.nouri@swansea.ac.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Islamisation is a term used to describe the process of a society's shift towards Islam (mainly used with a negative connotation).

Britain First was formed by Jim Dowson, a former member of the British National Party, in 2011 as a product of the decline of the English Defence League party (Collins, 2015). Britain First describes itself as a “patriotic political party and street movement that opposes and fights the many injustices that are routinely inflicted on the British people” (Britain First, N.D.). The group’s leaders state that they are not a racist party, claiming that many ethnic minorities are among their supporters, but they claim that they aim to protect British and Christian morality, and to preserve the ancestral ethnic and cultural heritage of the UK while supporting the indigenous British people as the demographic majority (Brindle & Macmillan, 2017). They campaign against Islamism and the spread of militant Islam in the UK. On their Facebook page (now removed), Britain First leaders claimed not to be against individual Muslims, but specifically against the ideological doctrine and religion of Islam itself.

As the brief description above shows, the two groups have some shared and some idiosyncratic features. This makes them suitable for comparative analysis, which in our study is implemented by analysing discursively the datasets listed in Table 1.

Group	Media Platform	No. of Messages	Size in Words
Britain First	Facebook	206,764	2,539,152
	Twitter	60,994	1,127,598
Reclaim Australia	Facebook	48,890	1,002,836
	Twitter	829	15,375

**Table 1: The Data**

The data comprises all the Britain First and Reclaim Australia Facebook posts and tweets posted between 31st January 2017 and 11th April 2017. As can be seen from Table 1, both groups favoured the use of Facebook over Twitter. However, there is a disparity of usage between them: despite being collected over the same time period, the Reclaim Australia

corpus is almost a third the size of the Britain First one, meaning that Britain First was much more active than Reclaim Australia on social media within this timeframe.

### *3.2 Framework and Procedure*

Our study adopts a Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies approach. As its name indicates, this works at the interface of Corpus Linguistics methods, which are quantitative and software-enabled, and Discourse Studies concepts, which require manual analysis of individual texts. Importantly, CADS typically follows a serendipitous journey of discovery (Partington, 2010), drawing upon relevant non-linguistic disciplines through the entire process. In this study, extant work into the notion of imagined political community and into extreme right groups – including the two selected for analysis – guided research questions generation and software-enabled data searches and interpretation.

As an initial step<sup>6</sup> the data were crawled from Twitter and Facebook<sup>7</sup> and converted into a “corpus”, that is, into “a collection of texts (a ‘body’ of language) stored in an electronic database [...a] large bod[y] of machine-readable text” (Paker, Hardie & McEney, 2006). Making the data machine-readable for Corpus Linguistic software interrogation entailed:

- (1) saving the data as .txt files: one for the Reclaim Australia corpus and another for the Britain First corpus;
- (2) running all the posts in these files through a Part of Speech and lemma tagger;
- (3) converting ‘non-standard’ characters within the posts into their text-standard equivalents. In our case, this meant: translating emojis into their depictions<sup>8</sup> and converting items preceded by # into their plain word equivalents.

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<sup>6</sup> Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Hillary Rodham School of Law at Swansea University and followed all procedures and ethical requirements deemed necessary by the ethical boards.

<sup>7</sup> The texts were collected by Blurrt ([www.blurrt.co.uk](http://www.blurrt.co.uk)), a social media analytics platform that can manage data from both Facebook and Twitter by collecting the messages through their API. Blurrt captured all the messages that were posted by/to said groups.

<sup>8</sup> For example, an emoji depicting a glass of milk would be “translated”, with the assistance of a Python library, into its official short name, i.e. “glass of milk”.

- (4) analysing the two corpora via the Corpus Linguistics software CQPWeb<sup>9</sup>. The analysis entailed the following steps:
- 4.1 calculating distributional information (general quantifications and word frequency lists) for the two corpora;<sup>10</sup>
  - 4.2 calculating keywords, that is, words that were unusually frequent in the Reclaim Australia corpus when compared against the Britain First corpus, and vice-versa;
  - 4.3 conducting a Key Word In Context (KWIC) analysis, that is, examining manually posts containing the selected keywords, thus enabling a qualitative discourse analysis of quantitatively salient lexical items (keywords); and
  - 4.4 classifying the keywords into domains according to thematic and stylistic criteria.

It is important to emphasise that our results (see Section 4) were thus derived from a bottom-up methodological approach that integrated quantitative and qualitative analytic steps. The keywords were initially selected through statistical calculations conducted by the software<sup>11</sup> and then manually analysed. The domains were derived from the manual grouping of the previously identified and examined keywords.

#### 4. Results

Table 2 summarises our findings. The left-hand column lists the three main domains realised in the corpora. The middle (Reclaim Australia) and right hand (Britain First) columns list the sub-domain(s) that were comparatively salient in the respective group. They also list, between brackets and in italics, the keywords<sup>12</sup> comprising that sub-domain.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://cwb.sourceforge.net/cqpweb.php>

<sup>10</sup> Given the different size of the Britain First and Reclaim Australia datasets, frequencies of use were normalised to PMW (Per Million Words) to enable comparisons.

<sup>11</sup> The CQPWeb measure that we used for our analyses is Log Ratio (Hardie 2014), which is an effect-size metric that determines how big is the difference in the use of a word between two corpora.

<sup>12</sup> Original spellings have been preserved throughout the article.

Domain	Reclaim Australia	Britain First
Topical events	Halal Certification ( <i>chocolates, certified, Cadbury, Cadburys</i> )	Online Sexual Abuse of Children ( <i>grooming</i> )
	Vaccination ( <i>vaccinated, vaccination, vaccine, vaccines</i> )	Antifa ( <i>Antifa</i> )
In-out groups	Immigrants and Muslims - Violent Stance ( <i>bullet, bullets, penalty, hang, SHOOT, rope, eradicate, blow</i> )	Immigrants and Muslims - Legal Stance ( <i>arrests, GLOBALSIM, DEMONSTRATION, confront, marches, suspects, militant, behaved, gathering, starve</i> )
	Multiculturalism ( <i>MULTICULTURAL</i> )	
	Heritage ( <i>parents, disrespect, respect, disrespectful</i> )	
	Race ( <i>RACE, discrimination</i> )	
Verbal aggression	Swearing and Derogatory terms ( <i>dickhead, wtf, leftard, wanker, dick, pig, pricks, prick, bugger, shithole, piss, OIGS, dickheads, TURD, crap, fucktards, monkeys, SUCK, butt. Shits, Muzzies, MUZZY, wankers, FUCKING, crooks, cock, mongrels, MORONS, retards, Leftards, ignorant, twat</i> )	

**Table 2:** Thematic /stylistic domains and keywords in the Reclaim Australia and Britain First Corpora

As Table 2 shows Reclaim Australia and Britain First regularly deployed the same thematic domains, which we have termed ‘topical events’ and ‘in-out groups’. However, there

were differences within these domains, as discussed in 4.1. and 4.2. In addition, when compared with Britain First, Reclaim Australia made use of a distinctively aggressive verbal style, characterised by salient use of swearing and derogatory terms (see 4.3). Given space constraints, in the remainder of this results section we provide only one illustrative example per (sub-) domain.

#### *4.1 Ideologically mobilising topical events (Thematic Domain 1)*

Both groups used topical events or subjects to ignite discussion, latching them to their ideological views. These events served as ‘small stories’, that is short narratives through the telling of which individuals position themselves in discourse and perform their /others’ identities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In the two corpora, these small stories were typically concerned with news events.

Within the months during which the data was collected, Reclaim Australia focussed on two such events: introduction of halal certification in confectionary products by the brand Cadburys (thematic sub-domain 1.1) and children’s vaccination (thematic sub-domain 1.2). For its part, Britain First focussed on a high profile case of sexual grooming of children (thematic sub-domain 1.3) and street marches by the UK Antifa movement (thematic sub-domain 1.4).

##### Thematic sub- domain 1.1: Halal certification (Reclaim Australia)

The keywords within this sub-domain featured in messages about the (media) controversy in Australia over the introduction of halal certification by the chocolate company Cadburys in some of their products (namely Easter eggs). The messages did not only propose to boycott the company’s products but also put forward the idea that the money gained through the sale of those products was used to finance terrorism, as example (1) illustrates:

- (1) Australians are forced to pay more for everyday food and toiletry products, because of halal certification, a Islamic tax, when only 2 % are Islamic's, no other religion is forced on to Australians, time for Australians to stop buying halal crap, stop the funding of terrorism

Through the use of this topical event (albeit constructed by them) Reclaim Australia strategically promoted its anti-Muslim ideology. Halal certification was used as part of an 'othering' discourse that represented Muslims as terrorists whose first move was to open businesses that provided halal certified products. Whilst ostensibly only promoting a consumer change ('stop buying halal crap' in (1)), this thematic sub-domain explicitly linked the Australian Government trading policy of certifying halal products to 'funding of terrorism'. A false us (anti-halal certification Australians) versus them (Muslims) dichotomy was therefore used to activate not only an othering discourse that targeted Muslims but also a discourse of fear that linked the othered group to a terrorism threat.

#### Thematic sub-domain 1.2: Vaccines (Reclaim Australia)

This comprises a series of keywords from posts that discussed health risks and side effects of vaccines as a result of Australian Government policies (see Noona, 2017). Many of the posts called for the Australian Government to introduce tougher immigration controls because, the groups' arguments went, immigrants spread diseases and threaten indigenous populations. Consider (2):

- (2) I agree all mine got vaccinated nothing wrong with them and it stops other kids getting sicker well i hope all the Muslum kids are vaccinated as well but they'd be allowed to do what they like If the government didn't keep importing unscreened humans from overseas maybe we wouldn't get all theses things back.

As illustrated in (2), Reclaim Australia members asked for the Australian government to keep tabs on (Muslim) immigrants to protect the health of Australian children. By adopting a topical issue in public discourse, this kind of post distorted reality and helped construct the so-called 'problem of Islamisation'. As in other topical events' thematic sub-domains, therefore, the issue of vaccination was ideologically mobilised so as to expose false threats from othered groups and to try to legitimate the in-group's ideology.

### Thematic sub-domain 1.3: Online sexual abuse of children

This thematic sub-domain was linguistically realised via the keyword *grooming*, whose frequency of use was saliently frequent in the Britain First corpus when compared with the Reclaim Australia corpus. As example (3) illustrates, the sub-domain/keyword was used in messages about a series of events that took place in the English towns of Rochdale, Rotherham and Telford, where it was reported that individuals identifying themselves as Muslim were allegedly involved in British female child-rape, grooming gangs (Bird, 2017).

(3) Not a surprise it took many years for Politicians local Authorities Police to face the very wide spread child grooming Muslim gangs so this type of Jihad is also tucked under the carpet!

The thematic sub-domain of child sexual abuse online, similarly to that of halal certification, constructed Muslims as a threat and danger to, in this case, British society. It vilified the Islamic community identity in the UK as paedophiles – arguably one of the worst deviants in society. A false, though emotionally very powerful, boundary-setting dichotomy was thereby created: us (as represented by British female children) and them (Muslim male gangs). Fear was further activated through the collectivisation of the them group (grooming gangs), and the portrayal of their behaviour as a 'type of Jihad' (3). Example (3) is also illustrative of the use of this thematic sub-domain to criticise government inactivity and / or

negligence: ‘Not a surprise it took many years for Politicians local Authorities Police to face ... so this type of Jihad is also tucked under the carpet!’. Britain First thus used the grooming thematic sub-domain both to establish threats from those outside the boundaries of their community (Muslim men) and to seek to legitimate their group by seemingly engaging in political discussion (UK Government criminal justice).

#### Thematic sub-domain 1.4: Antifa

This comprised the keyword *antifa*, which is the name used to describe a number of anti-fascist movements in the UK. This keyword appeared saliently in the Britain First corpus, where antifa groups were depicted negatively in the context of their holding street demonstrations. Moreover, these groups were discursively represented in marked contrast with Britain First: antifa groups were represented as ‘the real fascists’ and as ‘violent’. Britain First members were portrayed as neither. Consider (4), which referred to a march that had taken place at the time in which antifa and Britain First members participated, and which resulted in altercations between the two sides:

- (4) Britain First were not violent. There was no violence from the marchers or organisers. All violence came from Antifa & UAF.

In summary, both Reclaim Australia and Britain First exploited current news events that were likely to resonate with many citizens within their national contexts in order to convey the impression of ideological relevance and in turn increase support for the in-groups.

#### *4.2 In-Out Groups (Thematic Domain 2)*

Comparative analysis of the Reclaim Australia and the Britain First corpora also revealed that both groups discursively invested in constructing in and out groups, as well as stating what the relationship between these should be. Specifically, both groups constructed

themselves as diametrically opposed to other groups, whom they discursively othered. Moreover, and in keeping with extreme right wing ideology, these out-groups comprised primarily of immigrants and Muslims. In comparison to the Reclaim Australia corpus, the Britain First corpus included keywords that signalled a preference for dealing with the issues ‘caused by’ the out-group via legal means (sub-domain 2.1). In contrast, in the case of Reclaim Australia corpus, a clear preference was stated for violent, extra-judicial means (sub-domain 2.2).

#### Thematic sub-domain 2.1: Lawful stance towards Immigrants and Muslims (Britain First)

This thematic sub-domain comprised keywords that conveyed a ‘law observing’ stance towards immigrants and Muslims, as illustrated in example (5):

- (1) why no arrests oh we know why They can’t do as they like in London the police are on their [Muslim immigrants] side and so is the Mayor after all he is one of them and running the joint!

In (5) Britain First used an ironic rhetorical question (‘why no arrests’) about the absence of lawful action towards illegal Muslim-origin immigration in London. The answer was then provided (‘They can’t do’), followed by an explanation: a conspiracy between political authority, in this case Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (of Muslim faith) and Muslims. Through examples such as (5), Britain First sought to demonstrate political legitimacy (as a group with its own political and criminal justice policies) and also to claim emotional power (as a group with the means to expose existing systems as corrupt and on the side of the othered group – in this case the Muslims).

Thematic sub-domain 2.2: Violent stance towards Immigrants and Muslims (Reclaim Australia)

Keywords included in this thematic sub-domain promoted hatred and extreme physical violence towards, primarily, immigrants and Muslims. Consider illustrative example (6):

(2) they [Muslims] are just a waste of time and resources better spent on our homeless children The only way to deradicalise these morons is with a bullet Shoot them.

Promotion of this illegal, violent stance towards the out-group was justified (e.g. ‘the only way to deradicalise’) through denigration of the targeted group (‘these morons’). The posts within this sub-domain also emphasised boundary setting, and the threats posed by the targeted group. In (6), this was realised through ”ideological square” structures (Van Dijk 1998). In these, the negative properties of the out-group are maximised (their being ‘just a waste of time’, their being ‘morons’) and their positive features minimised (in (6) they were silenced, as none was mentioned). In turn, the positive properties of the in-group are maximised. In (6) this was done via reference to its most vulnerable and cherished members: children. Also, the negative properties of the in-group are minimised. In (6) a fault of the in-group (having homeless children) was minimised through the use of a nominal construction (‘homelessness’) rather than a verbal one, which would require specifying who the agent responsible for it was.

Additionally, the Reclaim Australia corpus showed discursive foregrounding of three other aspects of in-group – out group relations, when compared to Britain First: multiculturalism (sub-domain 2.3), race (sub-domain 2.4) and heritage (sub-domain 2.5).

### Thematic sub-domain 2.3: Multiculturalism (Reclaim Australia)

This comprised the keyword *multicultural*, which was used saliently in the Reclaim Australia corpus with an ostensibly positive connotation. Given the anti-immigrant ideology of Reclaim Australia, this was an unexpected result. However, our analysis showed that the keyword *multicultural* was recurrently used to emphasise that Muslims and immigrants did not abide by the norms of Australian multicultural society. This is illustrated in (7):

- (3) Muslims don't believe in multicultural society just themselves, but they will accept free housing and benefits off the Christian west seriously?

In (7) Reclaim Australia described Muslims as wanting the benefits of ‘the Christian west’, specifically ‘free housing and benefits’, without buying into the principles of multiculturalism. This sub-domain further reinforced the notion of lack of respect towards the traditional Australian way of life (sub-domain 2.5). By equating something perceived by many as a positive part of modern day societies, namely multiculturalism, as incompatible with Islam, othering of Muslims was also further reinforced.

### Thematic sub-domain 2.4: Race (Reclaim Australia)

Although racist discourse ran across the Britain First and Reclaim Australia corpora, this sub-domain comprised keywords used saliently by Reclaim Australia that used anti-racism self-positioning to present white Australians as the victims of race discrimination in their own country. As example (8) illustrates, their denial of racism was based on the argument that Muslim and Islam are religion-based, rather than race-based, identities:

- (4) This is why they are overtaking the world because they keep pulling the race card and everyone feels sorry for them. It's not a race, it's a religion. I don't give a toss about
-

anyone 's religion, but don't shove it down my throat, which is what the Muslims are doing.

In (8) religion trumped race in terms of political importance. Race was also believed to be used by Muslims as an excuse ('they keep pulling the race card') towards a more sinister goal: 'overtaking the world'. At Reclaim Australia rallies this is even further evidenced by the inclusion of diverse races from those identifying themselves as Black and Asian and as similarly in opposition to Islam. As in other thematic sub-domains, within 2.4 boundaries were set in the face of threats posed by the out-group. In (8), this was manifested through reference to Muslims imposing their faith on the country: 'don't shove it down my throat, which is what the Muslims are doing.'

#### Thematic sub-domain 2.5: Heritage (Reclaim Australia)

Within this thematic sub-domain, Reclaim Australia members described themselves as sons or daughters of immigrants who, unlike the 'new' immigrants (identified by them as being Muslims), always knew how to behave and to respect the laws, society and culture of Australia. Consider example (9), which illustrates how this thematic sub-domain helped to construct the party's vision of the 'Australian dream': one based on respect for established or traditional ways of life ('never demanded change') even when those ways of life entailed potentially exploitative working conditions ('my Mum scrubbed floors ... and my Dad walked hundreds of miles...'):

- (5) I remember when I was young people from Greece, Italy, and European countries there was never the trouble that we have today. as for people from middle eastern countries as they leave war torn countries and bring to us all of the problems and crime with them it needs to stop My grand parents came from malta and worked hard everyday for the Australian dream, never took handouts never demanded change just
-

the respect of their peers And proud of it as my Mum scrubed floors at local Dr's surgery's and my Dad walked hundreds of miles...

As example (9) also illustrates, thematic sub-domain 2.5 set this notion of Australian respect in sharp contrast to the work ethic and actions of 'new' immigrants from the Middle East. These were portrayed as 'bring[ing] to us all of the problems and crime with them'.

#### *4.3 Verbal aggression (Stylistic Domain 3)*

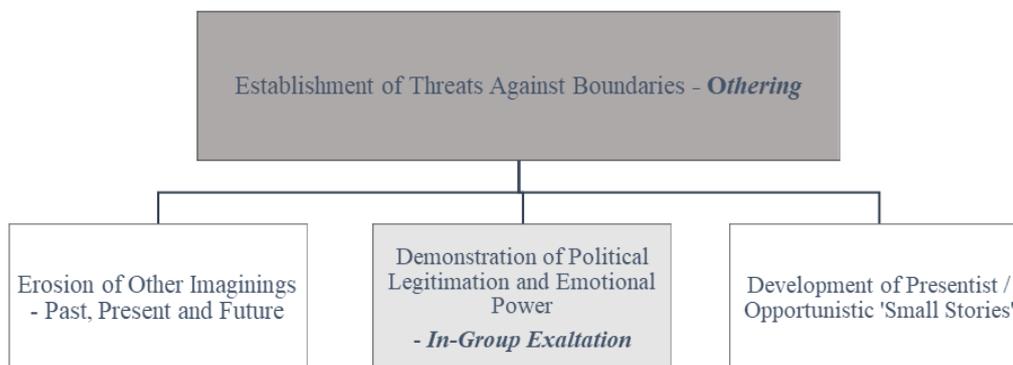
Domains 1 and 2, and their sub-domains, emerged from discursive mobilisation of certain topics – hence being considered thematic (sub-) domains in this study. Additionally, our analysis revealed an important stylistic difference between the Reclaim Australia and Britain First corpora, namely the salient use of verbal aggression towards the out-group by the former group. This was realised via swear words and other derogatory identity labels as example (10) illustrates:

(10) Fit into our community and adapt our values or piss off back to the prehistoric shithole you came from.

The use of swearing and derogatory identity labels served not only to set boundaries (the target was part of a them group, outside of the community's boundary) but also to reinforce in-group cohesion. In (10), this was evident in the explicit emphasis on 'our community' and 'our values', which – albeit unspecified – were heralded in contrast to the features attributed to the them group (immigrants), namely coming from 'a prehistoric shithole' and not being willing to 'fit into' / 'adapt' to 'the values' of the in-group (see also thematic sub-domain 2.4).

## 5. Discussion

Overall, our analysis showed more similarities than differences between Reclaim Australia and Britain First social media discourse. In both cases, and allowing for group-specific thematic and stylistic nuances, the groups engaged in discursive work geared towards establishing their imagined political community. Thus, our analysis revealed that Reclaim Australia and Britain First regularly set boundaries against the threat of the out-group (Muslims and immigrants), sought to legitimate power in their respective nations, attempted to construct some kind of collective identity narrative, and tried to erode other imaginings linked to that narrative. As such, both groups applied the actions in Anderson's theorising of pre-social media imagined political communities. Nevertheless, our analysis also identified a fundamental change in the inter-relations between these actions, which we have graphically represented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 – An empirically-driven model of extreme right groups as social-media based imagined political communities.**

The following observations regarding Figure 2 are in order:

1. The main difference to Figure 1 (Anderson's model) concerns the role of threats and boundary establishment, which in the extreme right social-media based imagined political communities we examined was the ideological and discursive umbrella under which all the other actions were developed. Threats and boundary establishment permeated all the domains in our corpora, and it was discursively realised via language that constructed members of the out-group (the other) not just negatively but as "incompatible strangers", that is, language that "othered" the out-groups (Baumann, 1991).

As to who this out-group was, our results showed the need to problematize the category of 'the other', specifically to de-homogenise it. Granted, Muslims and immigrants were the main target of othering in Britain First and Reclaim Australia, as they were in Zimelis' study (2010). However, sometimes the other within this out-group was Muslim male grooming gangs, other times it comprised 'new immigrants', and so forth. This resonates with Anderson's view that boundaries in imagined political communities are not static – that these communities have finite but changeable borders. Importantly, these borders may be strategically moved to suit extreme right groups' also fluctuating goals.

2. Seeking to demonstrate political legitimation and emotional power was closely linked in the Reclaim Australia and Britain First corpora to these groups' efforts at promoting their own ideology, which they did discursively via exaltation of their actions and beliefs. The two groups followed 'ideological square' discourse structures, linking the action of demonstrating political legitimation and emotional power closely to that of boundary setting. As such, in our model demonstrating political legitimation and emotional power is also particularly important, as signalled by its lighter grey shading and placement directly under boundary setting (see Figure 2). Exaltation of the in-group (see also Furlow et al 2014) was evident in Britain First and Reclaim Australia through the presence of thematic

sub-domains that revolved around their perceived values regarding ‘heritage’, ‘multiculturalism’, and ‘non-violence’. Exaltation of the groups’ values was another means by which the groups sought to assert their ‘community-ness’: the existence of, in Anderson’s words’ (1991), “deep, horizontal comradeship” that positions members as upholders of a nation/community which is worth standing up for.

3. Developing national narratives or the writing of time and history, which was the main feature in Anderson’s model, was subsidiary in our model to boundary-setting. In the absence of evidence on which to support and craft their own historical national identity narratives, Reclaim Australia and Britain First resorted to opportunistic / presentist small stories. These were linked to topical news events relating to varied life domains around which the groups sought to get their members to cohere ideologically: from trading (halal certification) and health (vaccination) to criminal justice (child sexual abuse) and political marches (antifa). The role of these small stories was still important, as evidenced by their collective salience as one of two thematic domains in the corpora. However, their intrinsic weakness in terms of being able to support an overarching, historically-anchored narrative means they cannot occupy a central place, as was the case in Anderson’s model. This was also one of the reasons why the EU was described a failed ‘imagined political community’ in Christensen’s (2014) work.

Erosion of other imaginings also featured across the thematic and stylistic domains in the corpora. Erosion is another term for suppression, which is an othering discourse strategy (Coupland, 1991; Lorenzo-Dus & Macdonald, 2017). In our corpora, the othered group was not altogether suppressed – Muslims and immigrants were explicitly and regularly discussed. However, they were represented through a limited set of negative traits and, in the case of Reclaim Australia, saliently though derogatory labelling. Moreover, erosion of other imaginings was realised by making the case for urgently adopting the in-groups’ cause /

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joining them, in order to change everything and anything – past, present and future – that was not ideologically aligned to them. Through, especially, the small stories sub-domains, the two groups tried to instil a sense of urgency to act in the face of the passivity of those who, without being the ‘other’, were also represented as not being part of their imagined community: governments, law enforcement, corporations etc.

## 6. Conclusion

Adopting a CADS methodology and focusing on two extreme right groups – Britain First and Reclaim Australia – our study has identified recurrent thematic and stylistic domains used by these groups when seeking to construct sui generis imagined political communities on social media, namely: topical events (Reclaim Australia: halal certification, vaccination; Britain First: Online child sexual abuse, Antifa), in-out groups (Reclaim Australia: violent stance towards Muslims and immigrants, multiculturalism, heritage, race; Britain First: legal stance towards Muslims and immigrants), and verbal aggression (Reclaim Australia).

These domains point to similarities – and some differences – between the two groups. Over the time period investigated, Britain First and Reclaim Australia engaged with different popular discourses, strategically activating small stories about topical events. The actual events were different as they related to their own national contexts: UK or Australia. Thus, halal certification and vaccines were key events for Reclaim Australia, whereas for Britain First child sexual abuse online and antifa demonstrations were salient. The two groups also engaged in the othering of out-groups, especially immigrants and Muslims. Upon doing so, they adopted different stances. This was evident in relation to the thematic and stylistic domains used by Reclaim Australia towards these groups, which cumulatively showed that it favoured extreme violence and verbal aggression. In comparison, a lawful (though still hate-driven) stance was favoured by Britain First.

Our analysis has also shown the relevance to social media and extreme right group contexts of Anderson’s classic work on imagined political communities. For Anderson, it was

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print languages (specifically newspapers) that enabled political communities to be imagined. The new-found freedom found after the Second World War in terms of language and narration ensured a diversity of human language unlike that of the past and fundamentally “created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation” (Anderson, 1991, P. 46). Within this newly established media ecology, “print-capitalism ... made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson, 1991, P. 37).

Text-based (“print”) language remains highly relevant, still under capitalism conditions, for the imagining of political communities – only now also through digital platforms. In this respect, it is worth reminding ourselves of the impact on online communication of the notion of echo chambers, developed within the field of Media Studies (Garrett, 2009). These refer to individuals shaping and building the content they see online in a tunnel-vision like manner, that is, reinforcing their own viewpoints and precluding others. Our analysis of social media posts by Britain First and Reclaim Australia has similarly shown how, across multiple posts, individuals formed discourse-enabled communities that engaged with the ideologies put forward by these groups and that contributed to create their own realities with no opposition from the outside.

This absence of counter, or oppositional, discourses within social media based imagined political communities is worth reflecting upon. Anderson notes that in the pre- First World War period communities were formed on the basis of religion or in relation to a broader commitment to dynasties. In contrast, the social media based communities that we have examined were formed on the basis of common interests, or rather, common oppositions to out-groups. Reclaim Australia and Britain First defined themselves primarily by what they disagreed with. Their systematically oppositional, or ‘agonistic’, discourse drew upon shared experiences about topical issues and relevant current affairs (see Adams and Roscigno (2005) for an analysis of oppositional tactics of white supremacists online).

Finally, our study has identified some key changes between Anderson's imagined political communities and those created by extreme right groups online, specifically Reclaim Australia and Britain First. Therefore, we have the first empirically-driven model of extreme right social media based imagined political communities. The building blocks – or 'actions' – for developing imagined political communities in our model are the same as in Anderson's. However, there are important differences regarding the inter-relations between these actions.

First and foremost, threats and boundary establishment has emerged as the overarching action deployed by these groups on social media – it is the discursive and ideological umbrella under which they perform othering of certain groups. Second, political legitimation and emotional power have proven to be paramount to these groups in terms of helping them to construct and promote their ideologies. This they do through 'ideological square' discursive structures that require not only their othering of out-groups but also their exaltation of in-groups. In-group exaltation is often a means to out-group othering, which is why in our model political legitimation and emotional power establishment is placed directly below boundary setting. It is also horizontally framed by the two other actions that further underpin the construction of such polarised structures: small stories development and erosion of other imaginings. Although these two actions featured in our corpora, they were comparatively less salient. Small stories were anchored in topical events and current happenings and thus opportunistically politicised to suit the groups' legitimacy claims and boundary-setting actions. As for erosion of other imaginings, this entailed stressing the urgency of joining the in-group by criticising the passivity of others who, unlike those in the community, did not want to change things. As such it supported polarised in-group versus out-group structures.

All in all, drawing upon a corpus of nearly five million words, our study provides the first systematic comparative analysis of extreme right group social media discourse. Given that the model subsequently developed relies on inductive discourse analysis from two such communities, it needs to be further tested with other groups and other social media platforms. We hope that our work provides further understanding of both their discursive modus operandi and the reasons for their successes and failures moving forward. Should findings be

replicated with additional extreme right groups online, it would be possible to use our revised model of imagined political communities to inform counter-responses.

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