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Weaponized Social Media

How the Online Far-Right Reaches the Youth

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Preface

The title of this work is 'Weaponized Social Media: How the far right reaches the youth'. It proved to be as unconventional as it sounds. This thesis serves as a conclusion to my journey in the Bachelor's degree secondary school teacher for history and English at PXL University College.

I would like to express my gratitude towards my mentor, Sarah Awouters, who has been nothing but encouraging throughout this entire process. I would like to thank her for her guidance and support. She was always quick to respond to my questions, offering feedback and double-checking my drafts despite the subject matter not being the most digestible. Whenever I felt lost, miss Awouters would offer direction and ensure I was back on track in no time.

While writing out my exploratory research, I relied heavily on my external partner Eric Pompen, professor at PXL Journalism. He pointed me in the right direction on trustworthy and recent information. Whenever a relevant article would come out, he would immediately send them my way. He had offered me so many different sources, I rarely needed to look further. Regardless, even if I messaged him late at night, he was always ready for a phone call. I would like to thank him for always being ready to help despite a busy schedule.

I offer my thanks to Campus de Helix in Maasmechelen and Atlascollege Economie & Organisatie in Genk for allowing me to run my survey within their school walls. Elke Coenen, a teacher at Campus de Helix, immediately took it upon her to ensure I had as much response as possible. Thanks to her efforts, I managed to get over 140 answers on my survey within a mere month. I would also like to thank the five individuals that were willing to answer all my questions. They divulged information that isn't always easy to talk about. Their experiences made this work more humane.

My eternal gratitude goes to Ciar, who made the time to proofread my entire thesis. With their input, it finally felt like this work was truly coming together and something to be proud of.

As cliché as it sounds, I have to thank my parents for their endless patience with me. On New Year's Eve, I was attempting to chase a deadline and my mother made me a cup of coffee at 1:00 am. I would also like to thank my partner, Miranda, who has listened to my endless ramblings on this topic with the patience of a saint.

I'd like to address you, the reader: I hope this work can be educational and that you find enjoyment in reading it. Thank you for your attention.

Talia Fernandez

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1   Introduction of the Exploratory Research

1.1   Situation and Target

In this chapter, this author aims to put a face to the problem definition. It will address the reasons and motivations that influenced the selection of the topic. Through this, this author clarifies their point of view. This is critical as this author will likely arrive at different conclusions. The steps made to get these conclusions are the very kernel of this project. It attempts to subvert expectations and actively question.

1.1.1   Research Motive

Our current political climate has an impact on the internet environment. This online environment is accessible to children and teenagers, for better and for worse. I grew up 'extremely online', in a time where this wasn't the norm. I ventured through the dark sides of the internet, oftentimes by accident. Other times, 11-year-old me was deadly curious about a variety of things. I wanted answers to questions no one else could give.

Already active on Tumblr, a blogging platform that caters to any interest, I befriended people from all around the world. These individuals didn't necessarily have ulterior motives, but they became a part of the little echo chamber I created for myself. I found myself on a very specific spot on the spectrum of internet identities. Some would argue I was on the exact opposite side of the far right. Looking back now, I realise I was a lot closer to the far right than some may be comfortable admitting. After all, my worldview was very reactionary: everything was black or white, good or bad. Mistakes or character flaws were unforgivable and everyone who wasn't with me way against me. Luckily, my behaviour was limited to a very niche online space. In real life, the worst people thought of me was that I was quiet and perhaps a little socially awkward. There is a hefty list of things I exposed myself to. Not feeling at home in my classroom, I found comfort in the accepting guise of online strangers. They always understood my struggles. Some of these online strangers ended up lifelong friends. While the internet was oftentimes a minefield, it was also an escape.

I once jokingly told a friend that being active on the internet did "irreparable damage to my psyche". It wasn't entirely a joke. From sexually inappropriate material to horrific gore; nothing is off-limits on the internet. Regardless of everything out there, 11-year-old me had a protective barrier: I had to consciously search for a specific type of content. I could 'turn it off'. My ability to turn off the computer and, eventually, deleting Tumblr grounded me again. You could argue that social media was already big in the early 2010s, but our attitude has shifted since. Today, the option to 'turn off our phones' isn't so simple. Children are raised on the internet. They spend the most important years of their development scouring social media. They are expressing their identity in new ways, especially compared to a decade prior. The 'dark sides of the internet' aren't only explicit footage. It can also consist of publicized opinions on a variety of sensitive topics. This calls into question when children are old enough for politics. My reactionary tendencies as a kid were rooted in this spread of consumable politics. I don't wish to argue that easily accessible political ideas are bad. But, I do want to understand better why they had such a tight grip on me as a young kid.

Today, I recognise myself in a lot of young, 'extremely online' people. As an interning teacher, hearing pupils quote the current viral meme gives me a laugh. It also makes me realise how often we see the same content. Unfortunately, it isn't limited to funny anecdotes. Sometimes I watch pupils echo conspiracy theories I've seen in passing on Facebook not long ago. Other times, pupils use words I've always related to very specific corners of the internet. Hearing a 14-year-old boy use 'feminazi', a term spawned by reactionary far-right politics, doesn't *need*

to be a big deal. Though, it does make me wonder: should I talk to him about it? Should I ask him where he got that word from? Is this a red flag? When should you, as a pedagogue, take action?

This continuous flow of information and stimulus introduces a new type of bogeyman. The creepy stranger with ulterior motives has stepped aside to make room for the faceless echo chamber. Endless drones of anonymous people who have a platform to spread any ideas. The problem arises when these ideas can harm people. The line between ironic, shock-value humour and extremist rhetoric becomes indistinguishable. This thesis aims to define this line. Children rarely understand how malleable their worldview is through the media they consume. As adults, we have a task to fulfil by being aware of these dangers. We should better guide children through the volatile culture on the internet. Yet a lot of adults don't know about these things. Sometimes we don't even realize in which ways we can influence young people either. Or perhaps we know this all too well and that's part of the danger.

1.1.2   Description of the Practice Problem

On March 15th, 2019, Brenton Tarrant entered two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He opened fire, killing a total of 51 people and injuring 41 more (RNZ, 2019). It didn't take long for authorities to discover the 74-page manifesto he had posted on social media. The manifesto is titled "The Great Replacement", a reference to a book of the same title by French author Renaud Camus. His book describes a belief that white Europeans will be replaced by non-Europeans, specifically Muslims. Camus is often cited as one of the central figures in modern-day identitarianism, a far-right ideology that believes European culture must remain exclusive to Europeans only (Kruk, 2020).

Renaud Camus is only one of many expressing anti-immigration rhetoric. Geert Wilders, Dutch party leader of the 'Partij Voor de Vrijheid' (PVV, Party For the Freedom), tweeted in 2019: "We are being replaced by a culture of hatred and violence. #StopIslam" (Wilders, 2019). A year prior, Camus showed up at a PVV demonstration in Rotterdam (Kruk, 2020). The theory appears in the group chats of the Belgian right-wing youth movement, 'Schild & Vrienden' (Shield & Friends). The members consistently express fear over the supposed loss of Western identity. Some of them dedicate themselves to physical training. They are always prepared, in case a war erupts against the non-Flemish (VRT, 2018). During the 'Unite the Right'-rally in Charlottesville, 2018, white supremacist demonstrators chanted "Jews will not replace us!", demonstrating the spread of the replacement theory beyond Europe. On the second day of these protests, a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi drove his car into counterdemonstrators. He killed one and injured 19 (Myre, 2017).

Extreme right figures and their ideologies have become prominent in Western society again. These new populist movements seek to provoke, unlike the traditional right. We know what far right groups do once established, but less well documented is the journey towards upholding these ideologies. An individual isn't instantly converted, but rather nudged towards extremism until they freefall. The research in question makes a clear distinction between radicalism and extremism: radicalism consists of (sometimes violent) ideas that strive for societal change; extremism is when those ideas turn into violent actions (Expoo, 2020). The two terms are typically applied to conversations revolving around religion. This work will explore what these terms mean within the context of political radicalisation.

This study discusses our current political climate and its effect on the young generation. The author describes the new transnational, provocative far-right and its circulation in the online world. The far-right have become masters of promoting on the internet, and this work studies

their promotional tactics. An important facet to the new populist right-wing ideology is that they are not a monolith. The ideology has a variety of branches and movements with different everchanging goals. They do, however, hold on to similar core ideas. This makes the topic difficult to study systematically. Not all of these groups are defined as violent, though the line between radicalism and extremism is often blurred. Radical discourse can become a breeding ground for extremist ideas. A lot of far-right presence online is also anonymous, which adds a challenge to this research.

Further, this author outlines the impact the new far-right has on a young demographic. This demographic encompasses Generation Z: a generation living in this problematic online environment and constantly in touch with politicized content. Even funny pictures can get a specific message across in a way a long-winded write-up cannot. These images, 'memes', are quick and straight to the point but are an important tool during a normalisation process. This research aims to build an understanding of how teenagers can fall victim to thinly-veiled online radicalisation. The research will focus on the far-right side of the political spectrum. Leftist attempts at visibility on the internet are less successful as of now; though in recent years, with the rise of 'dirtbag leftism', the tides could be changing. This could be a separate study and will be excluded in this thesis.

1.1.3   Research Organisation

The online spread of the new far-right populism is a recent affair. Many of the acquired sources are a direct reflection of this. Authors tend to be careful as the world is ever-changing on the issue at hand. Vetting sources and reading published research critically is a goal within this project. It is key that research remains professional and neutral. To achieve these results, this study partnered with the educational bachelor program 'Journalism', under PXL Media & Tourism.

The department PXL Media & Tourism is in Hasselt, Vildersstraat 5. The bachelor program 'Journalism' has Mark Coenen as head of the department. The professor of the department, Eric Pompen, is the external partner of this research. With a professional career in journalism, he is dedicated to thorough and ethical research. Eric Pompen plays a part in fact-checking, source research, contact referral, and media etiquette.

1.1.4   Research Target

According to 2018 British research, age 12 is when most children own a smartphone. About 83% of children between the age of 12 to 15 have a smartphone. 99% of this demographic are online at least 20 hours a week (Ofcom, 2018). Belgian research by Apestaartjaren shows similar results in 2020: 86% of 12-year-olds have a smartphone. This percentage racks up to 98% by the time they hit 18 (Apestaartjaren, 2020). We can assume age 12 is the age where children start becoming immersed in their internet usage. At age 18 they hit a peak that remains constant until at least 30 years old. Only then do weekly hours on the internet start dwindling. Within the age bracket of 12 to 18 is where children and teenagers are the most susceptible to online media. The literature study discusses the underlying psychological influences.

The research of extremist right-wing visibility on the internet focuses on countries influenced by the Enlightenment. The United States of America is part of this category. These nations tend to pivot themselves as beacons of democracy, a stance professor Ico Maly holds in his book 'New Right'. It may be why they're more hesitant to limit the supposed freedom of speech. Other countries may have a similar rise in populism, but societal and cultural differences draw a different trajectory. Its intricacies deserve a separate thesis.

1.1.5 Research Question with Sub-Questions

This thesis has an all-encompassing research question. Alongside this research question, four sub-questions were formed. These will serve as building blocks within the literature study itself. To substantiate the booked progress, there are a set of practical sub-questions. Finally, the design question will help to construct a product within the research. The answer to the research question will be formed in a step-by-step manner.

Research question

How can far right media influence children between age 12 to 18?

Sub-questions	How has social media evolved in the daily lives of children between age 12 to 18?
	How do we define the addressed new far-right?
	What presence does the new far-right have on social media?
	How can children between age 12 to 18 experience political radicalisation on the internet?

| Practical sub-questions | What role does social media play in the daily environment of children between age 12 to 18? |

| Design questions | How do we sort radicalised children aged 12 to 18 within the radicalisation process? |

1.2   Planning

Planning 2020

	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Source research 1: Collect and research material that encompasses the topic on an overarching scale. Decide on a research question alongside a section of sub-questions.	X	X				
Source research 2: Collect and research material that targets the research question and sub-questions more specifically.			X			
Literature review: Write out the literature review by looking to answer the research question and the sub-questions.				X	X	X

Planning 2021

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Practical research: Conduct practical research through surveys and interviews with professionals.	X	X				
Practical research 2: Process the numerical and professional evidence.	X	X	X			
Design research: Conceptualize a product and consider the set of goals it aims to achieve.			X	X		
Design research 2: Create the product and put it to the test. Report on the product and its results.				X	X	
Concluding research: Write out the newly collected information. Write out the preface, introduction, and conclusion.						X
Concluding research 2: Present and defend the thesis.						X

1.3   Collect and Analysis

This author will use testimonials from a variety of corners. They consulted with experts through the means of sourced materials and direct questions. Afterwards, this author interviewed individuals with direct experiences to the far right. The main research question is listed alongside a set of sub-questions. The literature study intends to find an answer to each of these questions. It is necessary to represent the accurate numbers on modern-day social media usage. This author will conduct surveys in several high schools to achieve this. The survey will underline in what ways children aged 12 to 18 interact with social media platforms. This includes their attitude towards these platforms and how they apply critical thinking.

2   Theoretical Research – Literature Study

2.1   Modern Internet

According to the 2020 research by 'Apestaartjaren', a media initiative, 87% of 11- to 13-year-olds own a smartphone. By the time they turn 16, this percentage goes up to 97% (Apestaartjaren, 2020). There have been a myriad of works underlying the development of our internet usage in the past decade. Since 2015, we stopped picking the television as our most indispensable device - the honour now belongs to smartphones. 47% of Flemish people pick smartphones. The television dropped down to 3rd place (behind computers) with only 10% of the vote (see Table 1) (Imec, 2019).

Table 1. Summary of answers to the question "What is your most indispensable device?", adapted from Digimeter Rapport 2019 by Imec.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Smartphone	26%	35%	39%	45%	47%
Computer	28%	25%	25%	29%	28%
TV	29%	17%	13%	5%	10%
Tablet	6%	6%	6%	6%	8%
Other	11%	18%	18%	15%	7%

Daily browsing is a new reality and we are more connected than ever. Nowadays, parents hear less about verbal fights on the playground and more about screenshots from a group chat. Parents must develop their media literacy to guide their children, which is proving to be a difficult challenge for many. While the developmental tasks of teenagers (going to school, making friends, cultivating talents and qualities, and so on) haven't changed, their everyday living environment has. We underestimate what teenagers can do with the internet, but we overestimate their judgment (Lammertyn et al., 2017).

The 1990s marked the beginning of the modern internet thanks to the linking of millions of computers with each other. Today, the internet connects with all kinds of devices. From phones to TVs to lamps and cars, 100% of all Flemish families have at least one smart device at home. 75% have more than 3 of these (Imec, 2019). Never before have humans been able to exchange and process information this easily. Through this, people have developed completely new behaviour to cope with these changes. This new behaviour can be defined by a set of characteristics, as listed by Wim Veen in his book 'Homo Zappiens':

1. Technology is like a second skin: While technology used to be unimaginable and undiscovered territory, it is now part of our routine. A smartphone is capable of many things, to the point that its original functions, calling others, is no longer its primary function. People use it for emailing the most (Imec, 2019).

2. The visual aspect has the upper hand: Children receive about 8000 visual stimuli a day. It is only natural they will reach for something that can replicate their new standards. Only 29% of teenagers listen to the radio daily compared to 77% among the 65+ age bracket (Imec, 2019).

3. <u>Multiple identities</u>: As explored in later chapters, the search for identity is the most important aspect of adolescence. On the internet, teenagers can create profiles across multiple platforms where they get in touch with different people and environments.

4. <u>Communication is always reciprocated:</u> We define mass communication as the process of creating, sending, receiving, and analysing messages to large audiences. There is very little feedback between the sender and the receiver. The internet, however, encourages a certain sense of autonomy. A person picks when and where they'll engage with certain media. In certain ways, one can also ensure they'll be able to receive feedback (Veen, 2009).

5. <u>Prolonging information:</u> A new habit is the act of switching between television and smartphone and then to the computer. Our attention span becomes prolonged and gives off a false sense of comfort. In reality, our brains are working harder than usual because of excessive stimuli. It thins our focus. German psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer believes this has negative consequences for children. Their memory skills don't get the proper training they need. "Digital media allows for shallow processing," he states in his 2012 work 'Digital Dementia', "Shallow processing means superficial memorisation, thus forgetting quicker." However, knowledge from different channels will be memorised more effectively. For example, by listening and reading and discussing." (Veen, 2009).

Naturally, parents and educators are wondering how to teach this new generation. Dr Bruce D. Perry of the Baylor College of Medicine concluded the following: "Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures" (Prensky, 2001). While our brains have physically changed, the important developments are in our thinking patterns. The current generation multi-tasks and prefers visuals when learning about new things. To identify this new generation living on the internet, American author Marc Prensky coined the term 'digital native'. A digital native is an individual that has never lived without digital technology. This generation will naturally find the best way to utilise the internet (Prensky, 2001). It is the digital natives that may not agree with this notion. An average of 69% of European children and teenagers, aged 9 to 17, say that their parents are their biggest source of knowledge when it comes down to the internet. Next in line are their teachers with 64%. Only 44% said that their friends know the most (EU Kids Online Report, 2020). Being an expert with technology doesn't mean you know how to navigate online social interactions. As computer scientist Jeroen Baert puts it, the digital native is digitally naive (Baert, 2017).

The numbers make this rather clear. According to Sensoa, a Flemish expertise centre for sexual education, one in five teenagers have sent explicit images before. Apestaartjaren contextualises this further: 8% of them have sent these images to people they haven't met in real life. 35% of teenagers state they've had their personal information infracted or distributed. Cyberbullying is a recurring problem: 17% of teenagers, aged 12 to 18, deal with persistent cases (Apestaartjaren, 2020). When it comes to online literacy, neither children or teenagers score very well. 80% of children in primary schools were unable to separate sponsored content from news articles. This number drops once we reach high school, but not by much. About three-quarters were still unable to recognise fabricated news and images (Baert, 2017). This establishes that children aren't as well-versed in internet etiquette as we'd expect.

Digital natives are also called 'Generation Z', or Gen Z for short. The Dutch sociologist Henk Becker introduced the concept of generational thinking. We define a generation as people born in the same period, characterised by certain events. Roughly every fifteen years we witness the birth of a new generation. Each has societal experiences, attitudes, or behaviours typical of their generation. If you are born in an era of decline, you will have a different perspective

compared to someone experiencing economic growth (Lammertyn et al., 2017). Generation Z is roughly defined as anyone born between 1997 and the early 2010s. Unlike the prior generation, the millennials, Gen Z was born during an economic recession. They are the first generation to live in an environment defined by its 24/7 stream of information. A result of this, is the one very specific characteristic Gen Z of rejecting hierarchy. Raised in a world of networks, Gen Z communicates with others as if they're equals. Respect isn't granted, it has to be earned (Ahlers et al., 2019). Gen Z is very online, multi-tasks ineffectively, responds too fast and are thus are more likely to deal with stress (Compernolle, 2018).

The digital natives typically experience constant anxiety. This is a result of their inability to do nothing. Generation 'multi-tasker' gives their brains very little breathing space, the human brain needs quiet moments from time to time to allow it to reset. After this reset, one can process new information (Lammertyn et al., 2017). Media literacy relies on the same processes. If you're unable to keep track of what you're doing, you don't have autonomy in your online presence. The internet will swallow you up (Pardoen, 2012). Knowing that Generation Z is not skilful in online literacy, we discover new threats. A lack of deliberation means more gullibility when consuming content.

The search and development of identity is the number one assignment for a teenager. While millennials found social contact in classes, youth organisations, and so on, Gen Z has the world at its fingertips. Paediatrician Jaan Toelen states that "certainly for the world of teenagers and adolescents, [the digital revolution] has resulted in the erasure of certain barriers and it plays a role in identity development, independence growth, online community building" (Percentiel, vol. 20, nr. 5, 2015). At this point, it is impossible to separate their online lives from their real lives.

2.1.1 Basics of Social Media

French media expert Fred Cavazza defines social media as the following: "Social media refers to a set of services supporting the development of personal or professional conversations and social interactions via the internet." To be considered a social media platform, it must include a system where you can only connect to people by invitation. The nucleus of social media is our ability to connect (Lammertyn et al., 2017).

Every year, Fred Cavazza creates a model that represents our most current social media landscape. He splits up the most commonly used platforms into six sections. When Cavazza began this project in 2008, he started with only four sections. These new additions appeared as professional platforms. Employers and employees alike received a separate space to communicate and collaborate. It took a little over a decade for this shift to take place. Since 2012, the biggest players in the landscape are Facebook, Google, and Twitter (Cavazza, 2012). Cavazza places these in the middle of his model (as seen in Figure 1). By 2020, several platforms have moved to the middle: Facebook-owned WhatsApp, Instagram, and Messenger. YouTube also found its way in. Cavazza divides the platforms as follows:

1. Publishing with blogs, i.e. WordPress, Twitter, Tumblr.
   In the 2017 book 'Help! Mijn kind leeft online' by Lieve Swinnen and Stefaan Lammertyn, they separate blogging between regular blogs and microblogs. Regular weblogs are akin to keeping a day-to-day journal. Microblogs consist of short messages with the ability to "subscribe" to someone to follow their content output. Twitter is the most popular microblog.

2. Sharing with video platforms, i.e. YouTube, Vimeo, Dailymotion.

3. Sending messages, i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Discord.

4. Discussing, i.e. Quora, Reddit, 4chan.

5. Professionally collaborating, i.e. Slack, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts.

6. Professional social media, i.e. LinkedIn, Xing, Bark.

Figure 1. A compilation of the social media landscape by Fred Cavazza, 2020.

To say that social media is popular is an understatement. Our daily mobilisation via the internet and our utilisation of social media applications has overridden the standard way of socialising. According to a 2019 research by Imec, Flanders has a steady increase every year, across all ages, in their utilisation of the 'Big Six[1]'. The surges are due to the older age brackets finally embracing the new normal. For example, in 2017 only 41% of people older than 65 were checking Facebook monthly. In 2019, this percentage went up to 67%. WhatsApp also saw a steep rise in older users. 50% of people older than 65 used the application in 2019; a rise of 14% compared to the results of the year prior.

This doesn't only signal an increase in the diversity of users, but also the intensity. People are spending more time on social media than ever before, with 33% of Flemish people using their apps at least 49 minutes a day. When zooming in on teenagers and young adults, the time spent rises to 76 minutes a day (Imec, 2019). The EU Kids Online report of 2020 has less optimistic numbers: Flemish teenagers aged 12 to 16 spend roughly 231 minutes on social media every day. Across 19 European countries, this would be an average of 210 minutes every day (EU Kids Online, 2020). The most frequent users remain teenagers and young adults.

The current favourite platform for teenagers aged 12 to 18 is YouTube. Facebook has thus lost its favourability in 2018. Teenagers have instead moved to Instagram which is by no means a loss for Facebook since they own Instagram. TikTok is the hot newcomer in the world of social media with 41% of 12 to 13-year-olds using the application. But by the time they turn 18, this drops to 18% (Apestaartjaren, 2020). This isn't a solid number as TikTok has only been available worldwide since 2018. It picked up steam worldwide in early 2020. By the next

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[1] Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Apestaartjaren report, these numbers may shift. Discord also enters the scene, taking the place of communication platforms such as Skype (Apestaartjaren, 2020). It is difficult to distinguish their user base. Users typically don't use their real names or pictures of themselves. There is also no option to add age to a profile. The few statistics out there rely on questionnaires and surveys. These are rather limited.

According to a 2014 report by CLICK (CompuLsIve Computer Use and Knowledge), students between the age of 12 and 17 are more likely to exhibit compulsive internet use. This behaviour goes hand in hand with feelings of isolation, depression, or a lack of confidence (De Rock et al., 2014). The popularity of social media among teenagers is only natural. It facilitates their need for identity, networking, and feedback. Social media encourages teenagers to chase popularity. The more you share and create the more attention you get. The appeal of social media is all about positive feedback. Getting good reactions on a post will encourage a person to post again. Someone who receives bad reactions will be discouraged from posting again. Regardless, the reward (or punishment) is quick and easy. An individual dealing with low self-esteem might receive a short-term boost when reading a positive comment. Our favourite social media applications take advantage of this dopamine rush in a multitude of ways. They incorporate small visual stimuli, such as the red balloon that pops up when you receive a comment on Instagram.

Introverted teenagers will find solace in online spaces, where interactions are simple. These teenagers are much quicker to seek out new people via social media. This heightens the risk of coming across unwanted contacts. Teenagers that have many real-life social contacts will use social media to strengthen existing bonds. Children who spend a lot of time online aren't the only ones feeling lonely. Social media has become normalised to such an extent that children who aren't very online also deal with feelings of isolation (Lammertyn et al., 2017). In conclusion: "Offline behaviour is the best indication of online behaviour." (Lammertyn et al., 2017). Healthy offline relationships carry over to online relationships. However, based on European research, about half of the teenagers claim they find it easier to be themselves online compared to offline. In the online world, no topic or interest is off-limits (Lammertyn et al., 2017).

Politicians and educators alike realise that encouraging the feedback process has good results. Social media thrives on this, too. Engagement bolsters confidence and activates the need to seek thrills. That continuous need to chase that high is where abuse or inappropriate behaviour has the potential to manifest. Sexting, cyberbullying, and inappropriate jokes all rely on the encouragement of a second party. You're missing out on contextual signals, such as reactions from beyond your bubble. These limit your inhibition and heightens boldness (Lammertyn et al., 2017).

2.2 Political Climate

Pinpointing an exact definition of far-right thinking, by today's standards, is difficult. It is dependent on both cultural and societal change. Certain sentiments have become more normalised than they were a decade prior. Immigration discourse in West Europe has taken many different shapes and forms. Stating Belgium shouldn't allow immigrants into the country met resistance 15 years ago. The new push for diversity and multiculturalism became a 'mainstream' given. While there were individuals that disagreed, these opinions weren't heard on large-scale platforms. Today, critics of immigration are on television and receive positive social media attention. These aren't new views, nor can one state that the Western world became more anti-immigrant at large. Instead, the views that were already there have become more widespread.

Modern media amplifies opinions that have always been present. It offers a platform. This sets the process of normalisation in motion. The Western world hasn't become more anti-immigrant, but anti-immigrant sentiment has become normalised. Ideas that may once have been considered radical are now being pushed by centre-right or moderate individuals. While people may think the world has become 'more racist', Geeraard Peeters, a Belgian freelance journalist, attributes this to a media phenomenon (Peeters, 2018).

Before one can define far-right rhetoric, it is useful to frame the political spectrum. The seating plan of the European Parliament in Brussels is a hemicycle. This model encourages discussion and avoids confrontation. The parties sit in such a way that opposing parties are the furthest removed from each other. As seen in Figure 2, far left-wing parties are the opposite of far right-wing parties. The centre consists of Renew Europe, a nationalist liberal group, and the Christian Democrats. This model is the basis of this thesis when referring to the political spectrum.

Brussels
09.03.2020
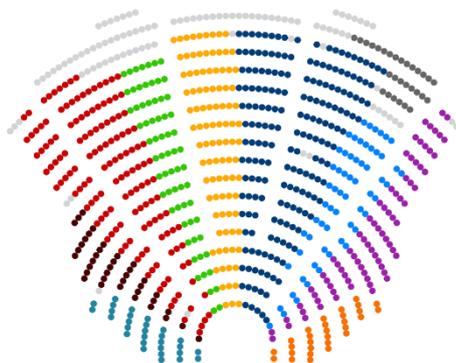
● The Left Group
● Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
● Group of the Greens
● Renew Europe
● Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)
● European Conservatives and Reformists Group
● Identity and Democracy Group

Figure 2. Seating plan of the hemicycle of the European Parliament[2].

The Identity and Democracy Group (ID Group) represents the far right of the hemicycle. The Identity and Democracy Group wish to represent an alternative to the traditional idea of the right. As stated on their website, ID Group wishes to uphold freedom, sovereignty, subsidiarity,

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[2] The blue on the far left of the hemicycle and the orange on the far right were not included in the legend as these represent the Council of the European Union and the European Commission.

and the identity of the European people. This identity is rooted in Greek-Roman and Christian heritage. They reject the idea of a European superstate. ID Group believes that European nations should be sovereign with nationwide autonomy at the highest level. Said sovereign nation should have full control over the regulation of immigration. In the final paragraph of their political declaration, the ID Group rejects any affiliation to authoritarian or totalitarian projects: "[The ID Group] is not interested in reviving disputes related to the past but are instead fully focused on the present and the future of Europe." Regarding Belgian representation, Vlaams Belang party members take up ID Group seats.

2.2.1 Populism

Populism is neither a radical left nor a radical right phenomenon. Mussolini was often dubbed a populist. Both Vlaams Belang and PVDA (Workers' Party of Belgium) are considered populist parties. Even Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are populist figures. To frame the new radical right movement, it is necessary to discuss its relationship with populism. The term encompasses any political stance touted in the name of the people. Political figures often state that their platform serves the will of the supposed 'common' people. This brings legitimacy to their program. Populists battle 'the elite'. In a personal interview conducted for this work, Vlaams Belang's Chris Janssens was asked about his views on the term. He wished to interpret it positively:

> *"It is advocacy for more direct democracy and more direct contact between politics and the people. Against partocracy, for participation. We listen to the people, to the needs and concerns of the people, and we try to tackle the problems that exist. Large parts of the population have the - rightly - feeling that they are not being considered. If populism means proclaiming the voice of the people, then I don't mind being called a populist."*

Social infrastructure plays a big part in legitimizing someone's position as a populist. The populist needs a medium that communicates their messages quickly and accessibly. In the 1930s the television was the strongest medium with which to reach the people. It was Hitler's favourite form of communication. Families sat together in front of their televisions and received the same messages. The internet does not allow this level of monopolising to take place. No one sees the same content because the infrastructure is too fractured. Regardless, PVV party leader Geert Wilders has broadened his reach via mass media platform Twitter. As opposed to the rapid nature of 20th-century television, communication via the internet needs time. While information has never been more accessible, it has also never been more varied. No individual has the same Facebook feed. The anti-Islam sentiment from Wilders met considerably more vitriol a decade ago; now, he's racking up thousands of likes per Tweet. Every populist figure is defined by their current medium and how they steer it. One can conclude that populism is both political and media-influenced (Maly, 2018).

To make good use of their medium the populist needs relatability, which leads to legitimacy. If you want to be the voice of the people, you need to represent exactly who and what these people are. This goes beyond a list of attractive policies. It entails a politician's image, identity, and posture. Socialist democratic US politician Bernie Sanders could fit the bill: he has an immigrant working-class family background and a heavy Brooklyn accent. Belgian figures such as right-wing nationalist Filip Dewinter or socialist Meryame Kitir don't always use standardized, formal Dutch. The dialect legitimises their background, and this is necessary for their outreach to others. The populist wants to reflect their voter base, whether this is consciously exercised or not. This doesn't mean liberal or centrist figures can't be populists: Bill Clinton was considered a centre- or a vox-populist (Maly, 2018). There is strength in using a neutral way of speaking. Liberals represent a centre position and are expected to reach as

many people as possible. By using a uniform language, paired with a set of "popular" policies, they broaden their reach.

A vox-populist knows which policies are popular through entirely targeted means. When Bill Clinton ran for re-election in 1996, he had lost his favourability. Clinton ended up hiring a team of marketers, authors, and researchers to help rehabilitate his image. They set up a variety of polls, in public areas such as shopping malls, and asked people about their political values and interests. Clinton built his platform on the results of these tests. He continued to identify as a liberal but the new platform was considerably more right-leaning. Democrats at large begun acclimating to a conservative platform. Similarly, the UK party 'Labour' was renamed 'New Labour' to separate from socialism. Belgian parties also went through a variety of changes: the socialist party changed to 'sp.a', adding the Dutch word for 'different'. In 2021 they are on course to separate from socialism entirely with the name 'Forward'. The liberal party 'VLD' (Flemish liberals and democrats) became 'Open VLD'. Consciously or not, parties skirted further to the right and promoted this as a normal and organic given (Maly, 2018). As Ico Maly writes: "The centre is now unstable".

It needs to be emphasized that the term populist isn't necessarily negative. As Vlaams Belang's Chris Janssens implied in the aforementioned personal interview, politicians are meant to represent the people. We make a clear divide between centrist-populism, left-populism, and right-populism. Both left and right find a common enemy in the supposed 'elite' of society, though they contextualise this differently. While left-populism wishes to remedy (economical) class differences, right-populism believes the problems are rooted in culture - or a lack thereof.

2.2.2   New Far Right

Following Charlottesville, Donald Trump was asked about the 'alt-right' in a conference on the 15th of August 2017. He responded with hostility: "[...] when you say the alt-right, define alt-right to me. You define it. Go ahead. Define it for me, come on, let's go." Then, Trump moved focus to the "alt-left": "What about the alt-left that came charging at the, as you say, the alt-right? Do they have any semblance of guilt?" When asked if he was placing the alt-right and the alt-left on the same moral plane, Trump said "there is blame on both sides". Donald Trump denied knowing what the alt-right is, but Steve Bannon, notable right-wing commentator, was appointed Donald Trump's chief of strategy in 2016. Before, Steve Bannon was the executive chairman of Breitbart and called it "the platform of the alt-right" (Posner, 2016). Bannon left the White House a mere week after the 'Unite the Right'-rally. Donald Trump defended his chief of strategy in a conference on the 15th of August 2017. "[...] He is a good man. He is not a racist – I can tell you that." Vlaams Belang's Tom Van Grieken expressed his admiration for Steve Bannon as well, stating that "it was an honour to receive [Bannon]" (Van Grieken, 2018) after inviting him as a guest speaker to a Vlaams Belang meeting.

The 'alt-right' is defined in a variety of ways: an alternative and atheist version of the conservative right, a countermovement fighting against the 'PC culture[3]' or even as modern neofascism for teenagers and young adults. During its rise, it was more of a fringe movement within a variety of identities of the far right. Even though 'alt-right' isn't commonly used anymore, its identity politics still exist. The reason behind the term's retirement lies with the popularity of the beliefs it represents. In an interview conducted for this work, the YouTuber Faraday Speaks argued that the alt-right doesn't truly exist anymore. It would be more apt to call them extremist far right

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[3] "PC" is an acronym for "Politically Correct".

The alt-right of 2016 dissolved into a more commonplace far-right. It was a network of blogs, alternative news websites, and forums, connected through their overlap in demographics (Maly, 2018). There is a corner on the internet for each facet of the extreme far-right. Not every facet unconditionally appeals to each far-right individual, as will be further explained. Ico Maly describes this new far-right movement in 4 aspects:

1. It consists of a set of new intellectual and political identities such as paleoconservatives, race realists, white nationalists, white supremacists, and extremist right internet activists.
2. The internet and its corresponding culture, such as the *trolling* culture, is an intrinsic part.
3. This new far-right speaks of a 'Dark Enlightenment': the neo-reactionary movement consisting of concepts such as red pilling. Individuals reapply theories of old fascist thinkers to fit the context of a technology-steered society. This will be elaborated further in the subchapter "Red Pill".
4. The power of conspiracy theorists and fake news websites is tangible.

The alt-right is a product of its time. It engrosses itself with European civilisation decline, Islamification, upholding Western culture and rejecting the supposed cultural Marxism and anti-egalitarianism. This alt-right phenomenon is often racist (Maly, 2018). It is a representation of the common felt racial anxiety among individuals who self-identify as alt-right or any of its contemporaries. The far-right on its own can be ideologically diverse. Despite these differences, there is always a common thread of white (European) identity, a belief in the importance of white (European) solidarity, and a sense of white (European) victimisation. The 2016 American National Election Survey included 3,038 non-Hispanic white respondents. About 38% expressed strong feelings of white solidarity. 27% felt that whites suffer from discrimination (Hawley, 2018). A 2017 Washington Post-ABC News poll stated that 1 in 6 Americans either support the alt-right or say it is acceptable to hold white supremacist or neo-Nazi views. These numbers may have changed in the past 3 years (Washington Post, 2017).

While none of these are new talking points for the far-right, the alt-right made them entirely online affairs. Alt-right discourse uses internet lingo and irony. They want to make it clear that they're not related to right-wing conservatives, who they dub "*cuck*servatives". The alt-right believes their religious passivity allows them to be cucked[4] by 'the foreign invaders' (Nagle, 2017). They believe that the rise in political correctness endangers their freedom on the internet.

Kathy Sierra, a journalist and game developer, endured a slew of harassment between 2004 and 2007. She expressed a need for stronger content moderation, and this broke the dam. As advocates of free speech, the swarm of internet trolls decided to teach her a lesson. Kathy's private information was leaked and her inbox flooded with rape and death threats. Pleas begging people to lay off were met with even more hatred. In a blog post commemorating the 10th anniversary of this online harassment, Sierra states it was nothing compared to what trolls[5] are capable of today: "[...] I actually got off easy, then. Most of the master trolls weren't active on Twitter in 2007. Today, they, along with their friends, fans, followers, and a zoo of anonymous sock puppet accounts are." (Sierra, 2014).

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[4] A term used to describe the act of a man watching their wife sleep with another man.
[5] An internet term used to describe an individual who intentionally tries to upset other people.

Figure 3. A screenshot of a YouTube playlist titled "Black Creativity in STEM".

Trolls like the ones in Kathy Sierra's stories are almost always linked to the alt-right. However, the only visible characteristic connecting these individuals is their wish to end PC culture. Gamergate is another such controversy: it started as an outcry on platforms such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan about the supposed increasing feminism in the gaming industry. What followed was a mass online harassment campaign targeting women in the industry. One example is the vandalisation of Anita Sarkeesian's Wikipedia page with pornographic content and attempts to hack into her social media accounts. Video game developer Zoe Quinn's inbox filled with rape and death threats by the thousands. Searching either of their names on YouTube still brings up a list of hateful videos. Gamergate found a way of collectivising people from all corners of the internet. It was a consumer revolt consisting of self-proclaimed gamers, anti-feminists, and far-right individuals. It was made up of a lot of young people who were encouraged to organise in chasing the SJWs[6] away from their favourite pastimes (Nagle, 2017). The adults involved had defined views on what was supposedly ruining the gaming industry, and translated these views to a younger audience through online infographics or YouTube videos. The content was promoted as educational or humourous, legitimising their message. The results were tangible: Gamergate effectively politicised people across the internet (Nagle, 2017), especially a very young crowd.

The troll aspect is no longer as common, but it still exists. In February 2021, a YouTube playlist titled "Black creativity in STEM" (see Figure 3) was overwhelmed with a mass dislike campaign started by 4chan's /pol/ board. This unfolded after YouTube algorithms recommended the playlist to a variety of people. Like Gamergate, the crowd felt as if YouTube was forcing a 'liberal' worldview on its users. The campaign was eventually met with a counterprotest on Twitter. People attempted to overwhelm the negative comments and dislikes (see Figure 4). The idea that an elite power wishes to exercise control is not exclusively far-right, but it is an important aspect. The fight against an overarching culture is recurring. Online troll campaigns only serve to embolden it.

Figure 4. A collection of several hate comments the videos received. A few of the comments contain a variation of "N sheeeit[1]". Another comment mentions that the viewer has entered "level 5", referencing the targeted troll campaign. Every video in the playlist represents a "level".

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[6] "SJW" is an acronym for "Social Justice Warriors".

The alt-right would be unheard of if it wasn't for the internet. They are a definitive phenomenon because of how they collectivised on a medium that was the antithesis of unification. While a lot of these actions were planned in the underbelly of the internet, and would go unnoticed by most people, the precedent was set. The far-right had mastered collectivising members and their ideologies. In the meantime, a lot of the alt-right splintered into individual interests but all within the radical right hemisphere. The phenomenon itself lost steam but not because their beliefs became less popular. Quite the contrary, you can't speak of an alternative right when that right became the dominant entity.
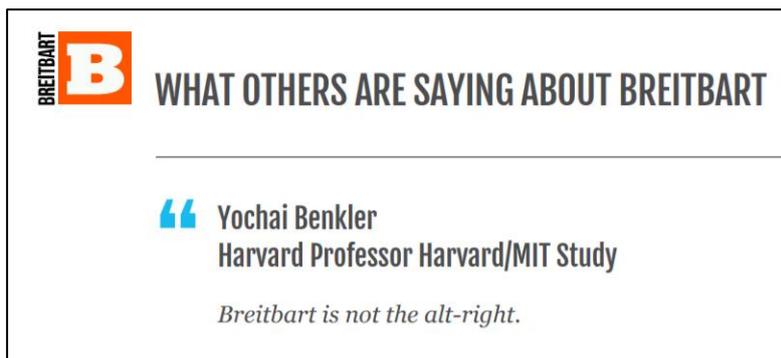
Figure 5. A screenshot of a quote included on Breitbart's 'About Us' page. The quote, by Yochai Benkler, states that "Breitbart is not the alt-right."

Breitbart rejects the term 'alt-right', despite what former executive Steve Bannon stated. The 'About Us' section on the website includes the following quote by Yochai Benkler, a Harvard professor: "Breitbart is not the alt-right." (see Figure 5). It stems from a New York Times interview inquiring Yochai Benkler on his contribution to a 2017 study titled "Partisanship, Propaganda & Disinformation: Online Media & the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election". The study dubs Breitbart a conservative news platform, but: "As described in further detail in the immigration case study, less extreme right-wing media outlets, including Fox News and the Daily Caller, alongside Breitbart, employed anti-immigrant narratives that echoed sentiments from the alt-right and white nationalists but without the explicitly racist and pro-segregation language." (Benkler et al., 2017). While disparaging language isn't used on the platform, the same ideas are being circulated in moderate spaces. This strategy, perfected by the alt-right, becomes key to this new far-right movement.

The new far-right has gone through a set of evolutions in the past two decades. It is important to separate it from the moderate right. Authors Vincent Scheltiens and Bruno Verlaeckt list the characteristics of the far-right in the 2021 book "Extreemrechts: De geschiedenis herhaalt zich niet (op dezelfde manier)" or "Far-right: History doesn't repeat itself (the same way)":

1. First, <u>the far-right has found a way to get young people behind them</u>. Young members trying to cultivate an identity, find easy and fulfilling engagement online. The masterful usage of social media is very distinctive to the far-right movement. In 2019, it was reported that together, all seven Flemish parties spent a total of 2,3 million euros on Facebook ads. 1,2 million euros was spent by Vlaams Belang alone (De Smedt et al., 2019). This online identity profiles itself as a 'social' movement. It is there to serve the people. Whoever isn't included will be the opposing group within the far right's demagogy.

2. <u>The rank and file are physically mobilised.</u> Consider the storming of the US Capitol building or the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville: the partakers were ordinary people, often from humble backgrounds. The car rally on the 27th of September 2020, against Belgium's Vivaldi coalition is a similar example. Despite COVID measures, participants found a way of expressing their dissatisfaction. Spotted among the cars

brandishing the flag of Flanders was a pickup truck with a Parteiadler and the SS slogan: "Wer plündert, wird erschossen", or "Anyone who loots, will be shot" (De Standaard, September 2020).

3. These <u>new far-right talking points have found success in the political centre.</u> Far-right perspectives are normalised and sanitised. This work discusses this further. The 1992 70-point plan of Vlaams Blok, the predecessor of Vlaams Belang, served as an "answer to the immigration problem". Initially, it met aversion. As of today, 26 out of 70 points have either been fully or partially executed (Casteels et al., 2016). Centrist parties take over similar discourse but with socially acceptable wording. It implies that the far-right addresses the correct problems, but with the wrong solutions. Despite the cordon sanitaire[7], Vlaams Belang has finally become a party like any other. Both other political parties and the media play a large role in this normalisation. Dries Van Langenhove, the "Final Boss" of Schild & Vrienden, was still invited to interviews and became a member of parliament (Scheltiens et al., 2021).

The language when expressing racist talking points has changed too. For example, instead wanting an all-white nation, the far-right advocates for a 'separate nation for all the different groups'. This wouldn't be eugenics, but instead maintaining 'human biodiversity'. Vlaams Belang party leader Tom Van Grieken employs this strategy as well. In an interview with 'De Tijd', he stated that: "The Christian, the Flemish and, if you want, even the white should be a dominant factor in our society. Africa should be dominantly black, Europe dominantly white." (D'Hoore et al., 2021). The belief that white people are more intelligent than people of colour is now called 'inherited intelligence'. The theory regained traction with the popularisation of the 1994 "The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life" by Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein.

Language is an effective tool to the far right. The far-right has to move away from their stereotypical image of crude, loud and aggressive bigots. To do so, they clean up their speech. Certain talking points become easier to consume. The far right's penchant for catchy buzzwords remains relevant: words such as feminazi and Islamofascism came from extreme right spaces. The words imply there are also acceptable variations of these groups; that there are feminists who are not excessive or Muslims who have successfully assimilated. In actuality, the words are umbrella terms to generalise and dehumanise existing groups regardless of their individuality. Other examples are the phrases "the gay agenda" or "gender ideology". Again, these phrases take actual human beings out of the equation. Through this tactic, self-explanatory questions, such as equal rights, are now up for debate. Even though these are the same far-right talking points of many years ago, they now sound more humane to consumers.

To gain a clear view of how this far-right presents itself beyond its evolutions, Scheltiens and Verlaeckt sum up nine characteristics of the new far-right throughout their book. These characteristics will make multiple appearances throughout this research:

1. The new far-right consists of <u>extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and racism with an apparent focus on migrants or Islamic refugees.</u> Christian refugees are oftentimes spared.

2. They are <u>anti-Marxist</u>. Marxists are viewed as an elite group actively trying to destroy West-European culture.

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[7] The commitment of Belgian political parties to exclude the far right party from any coalition in government.

3. The new far-right is still just as <u>antisemitic</u> as the "old" far-right.

4. They are <u>homophobic, anti-feminist, and transphobic</u>. Feminists and members of the LGBT+ are supposedly holding men back from being "real men". Yet, when given the chance to criticise Muslims, these groups play lip service to the LGBT+ as they are persecuted in Islamic countries. The enemy of their enemy becomes their friend.

5. The new far-right is <u>against international groups such as the European Union</u>.

6. They consider <u>Europe as a type of promised fatherland</u> that must be protected from foreign cultures. The European norms and values must be upheld.

7. The members of the new far-right are often <u>reactionarily catholic</u>. While not always strict believers, they believe a Catholic Reconquista is necessary to fill empty churches. This isn't because its members are dedicated to religion, but to protect the supposed European identity. Recently, the far-right made strides in atheist spaces as well. They prey on young people with existential questions. While they won't necessarily convert someone to Catholicism, atheism is weaponised against Islam or Judaism.

8. They tend to be <u>neoliberal on socio-economic grounds</u>, though this thesis won't delve into this.

9. There is a near-<u>obsessive fixation on identity</u>.

Physical training and upholding a strong physique are an intrinsic part of the perceived European (Nordic) identity. The German Identitarian movement, 'Identitäre Bewegung', uploaded a video of young members participating in rigorous physical training. This was shocking to the outside world, taking into consideration their belief that they'll have to wage a war for their heritage. The Belgian 'Schild & Vrienden' also organise physical training camps. Physical training is generally harmless: one could argue there is no difference between classes organised by schools or the scouts. Regardless, far-right political leaders are careful when depicting their ties to militarism. Far-right members brandishing weapons are direct reminders of their fascist past (Scheltiens et al., 2021). In response, far-right parties had to establish some distance, or they risk losing electoral votes. When Carrera Neefs, Schild & Vrienden and now ex-Vlaams Belang member, placed a bouquet at the grave of notorious SS man Willem Heubel, chairman Tom Van Grieken condemned the act. Van Grieken stated: "[Neefs] has, perhaps unconsciously, caused a lot of damage to the party." She was removed from Vlaams Belang (Verstraete, 2020).

Dubbing far-right political leaders as fascist is often a muddy affair. Hungary's Viktor Orban or Poland's PiS (Law and Justice) don't necessarily target democracy through means of gerrymandering or thwarting oppositional parties and unions. They do, however, evoke repressive legislation that limits elbow room of LGBT+ rights, women's rights, and ethnic minorities (Scheltiens et al., 2021). If the media begins to question this, they're promptly eliminated. Just in 2019, Hungary's government invoked new restrictions virtually banning journalists from working in the Parliament or the offices of the National Assembly (Szabolcs et al., 2019).

The far-right accuses the elite (liberal or leftist media, Jews and Muslims) of spreading concepts such as diversity or multiculturalism through schools, to kill the European identity. To stop this supposed brainwashing, the far-right creates conspiracy theories and fake news. This happens in a targeted manner with the goal of complicating any type of fact-checking: the well must be poisoned. The far-right calls this a 'culture war', a term popularised at the height of the

Gamergate controversy. Far-right news platforms such as Sceptr and Reactnieuws have adopted the word as well. The culture war is, in the eyes of the far-right, a means to an end. A similar term is 'metapolitics', or the act of having a political dialogue about politics. The late Jan Blommaert, Belgian sociolinguist and linguistic anthropologist, described the metapolitics of the far-right as "politics that attack existing meanings and forms of rationality and gradually replaces them with another''. First, the far-right questions concepts such as equality and human rights. They replace these ideas with an 'alternative truth', which is that these ideologies exist to control the masses. Second, the far-right spreads doubt and distrust to persuade neutral individuals into joining the discourse. Third, avoid being a 'gutmensch': a term previously used by N-VA's Bart De Wever. It describes a naive person who allows themselves to be manipulated by the mainstream (Scheltiens et al., 2021).

The far-right has never gone away. As Groningen professor Léonie de Jonge states: "It is akin to a water reservoir that sometimes overflows" (Vermeersch, 2020). The new right is the same far-right as we've always known, with a lick of fresh paint. It is anti-feminist, anti-Islamic, antisemitic, and anti-LGBT. Author Neil Davidson describes the far right as the following: they push back against the enlightenment, modernity, parliamentary democracy, liberalism, Marxism, and equality thinking. These characteristics mimic the French movement Nouvelle Droite (New Right). The new far-right view themselves as the losers of globalisation: a group of people who were unable to find profit in an assimilated world with open borders and endless economical outreach (Scheltiens et al., 2021). The argument that mass-globalisation, and mass-corporatism, has left many behind is a sound one. Billionaires have never been richer and the poor have never been poorer (De Standaard, 2020). So while frustrations with globalisation are not unfounded, the far-right chooses to blame migrants. This loss of social identity is expressed through active racism. The far-right in Belgium blames Turkic or North-African guest workers for large-scale unemployment. Bart De Wever himself admits: "[...] It is an undeniable fact that an external enemy can play a very tangible and decisive role in identity-building processes." In the 70s, signs with "Interdit aux Nord-Africains" ("North-Africans not allowed") were not uncommon in Belgium.

Far-right extremism is also on the rise. Germany's Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer called the rise in right-wing extremism a "brutalisation of society". In 2020 alone, almost 24.000 far-right crimes took place, including a rise in anti-Asian violence. Anti-semitic attacks have increased by almost 16% since last year, with majority taking place online (Connolly, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, rampant conspiracy theories have given the far-right new momentum. Paul Van Tigchelt, spokesperson of the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis, expects a greater rise in right-wing extremism. The pandemic has allowed the far-right to manipulate more individuals dealing with isolation (Nieuwsblad, 2020). Yet, Committee I, a review committee with oversight over Belgium's State Security Service, stated that "there is a lack of quantitative data on the extent of the threat posed by the extreme right in Belgium" (Clerix, 2021). There is a sole focus on direct threats of violence. The research states that terrorist acts are predominantly carried out by supposed 'lone wolves' (Clerix, 2021). But there seems to be little on how people radicalise.

2.2.2.1 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are a key element in the re-popularisation of the new far-right and their supposed culture war. They create conspiracy theories in a systematic manner. This radicalisation technique will be further discussed in the subchapter 'Red Pill'. QAnon, an American conspiracy theory movement that has since spread to Europe, has given rise to a host of new theories to analyse. The QAnon movement began with the belief in the existence of a sex-trafficking ring within the Democratic and Republican parties, but has since grown to become a more large-scale phenomenon encompassing a variety of different theories. This

initial theory has its roots in the underbellies of 4chan. QAnon is a far-right movement but has the potential to appeal to anyone. The term QAnon is no longer being used to describe the conviction in paedophilia theories, but as a catchall term for any of the circulating conspiracies. There are overt far-right ideas, such as the Holocaust denial, but also antivaccine sentiments or the belief that Helen Keller never actually existed.

This thesis will only discuss conspiracy theories bound to the new far-right. Antisemitic conspiracies aren't a new characteristic of the far-right. In fact, they withstood the test of time: these theories are continuously adjusted to fit our current societal landscape. When its antisemitism becomes too clear, they're toned down. Jan-Willem van Prooijen, a social psychologist from Amsterdam, says that conspiracy thinking must meet five conditions:

1. A conspiracy theory makes connections that aren't always logical.
2. There is always an intention behind a conspiracy theory. Things don't just happen by coincidence.
3. There is always an opposing group or coalition.
4. A conspiracy theory is always hostile.
5. A conspiracy is always in secret, taking place behind the scenes (Tokmetzis, 2018).

In her book "The Revolution Will Be Digitized", Heather Brooke states the following: "Technology is breaking down traditional social barriers of status, class, power, wealth and geography, replacing them with an ethos of collaboration and transparency." The internet is the perfect place for conspiracy theories to both shape and spread. Theories such as the 9/11 truth movement were formed in left spaces but eventually reached other ideologies through online forums. Today, a theory discussed in a private Discord server can spread across different platforms, as proven by the ever-developing QAnon. Some theories may form by accident but others have a targeted intent. This work has already discussed the new far-right's disdain for, what they consider, the liberal apparatus of the elite: schools, universities, press, and so on. People who aren't convinced need help convincing. The chapter 'Radicalisation Process' will look into this closer. First, it is necessary to discuss the key conspiracies in isolation.

A term often used by right-wing spear headers is 'cultural Marxism'. It was first coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who argued the importance of a cultural revolution before a worker's revolution could infold. He believed that a revolution could not be successful until people break away from tradition, nationalism, and religion. Now, the new far-right has used the idea as a fearmongering tool. Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian far-right terrorist who killed 77 people - 69 of which were participants of the Workers' Youth League, a left Norwegian youth organisation - wrote 'cultural Marxism' or 'cultural Marxist' a total of 648 times in his manifesto.

Conspiracy theorists believe that a group of Jewish elite wish to destroy European civilisation. To achieve this, they must install a leftist utopia. This supposed elite is the Frankfurt School: a collective of Marxist sociologists during the Weimar Republic who, indeed, studied Gramsci's work among others (Mulder, 2011). Breivik believed they had already succeeded:

> "[...] anti-God, anti-Christian, anti-family, anti-nationalist, anti-patriot, anti-conservative, anti-hereditarian, anti-ethnocentric, anti-masculine, anti-tradition, and anti-morality. [...] These concepts have destroyed every defensive structure of European society which has laid the foundation for the Islamisation of Europe." (Breivik, 2011).

These cultural Marxists are, supposedly, responsible for the decreasing church attendance, higher divorce rates, the advancement of immigration, homosexuality, and the

oversimplification of the media. The new far-right also believes that calling someone 'racist' is a cultural Marxist plot (Tokmetzis, 2018).

However, it wasn't Breivik that brought the conspiracy theory back into the spotlight. Right-wing author Michael Minnicino wrote an article in 1992 titled "New Dark Age: Frankfurt School and 'Political Correctness'". It caused the ideas to spread in radical conservative groups. Minnicino didn't invent the theory, but people begun using 'cultural Marxism' and 'political correctness' interchangeably. Pat Buchanan, a past candidate for the US presidency, helped popularise the conspiracy theory further through his bestselling book "The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Culture and Civilization (2001)" (Tokmetzis, 2018). We can conclude this isn't a new conspiracy theory as its roots are found in old antisemitic ideas. Many of the Frankfurt School's theorists were either Jewish or had Jewish lineage. The idea that a rich, intellectual elite controls our society goes as far back as the Middle Ages. In 2003, the Southern Poverty Law Center wrote in their Intelligence Report that the 'cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory would soon enter the mainstream (Berkowitz, 2008). 8 years later, they turned out to be right.

The term has gained traction beyond the United States. Dries Van Langenhove dubbed a 2018 Tour de France-themed paint job in Carcassonne "cultural Marxism at work" (Van Langenhove, 2018) (See Figure 6). Thierry Baudet, chairman of the Dutch FvD posted an article describing the replacement theory. Baudet writes: "The cultural Marxism, the oikophobic destruction agenda and mass immigration" (Baudet, 2017) (see Figure 7). Another tweet by the German populist right-wing party AfD met criticism upon calling the German liberal party cultural Marxists (AfD, 2020) (see Figure 8).

The idea of 'cultural Marxists' isn't only expressed by far-right party figures. N-VA's Theo Francken called Vlaams Belang "extreme right and racist" during an appearance on the Flemish TV series 'Het Huis'. Regardless, he shares a few similar talking points. In a Facebook post on April 2nd 2021, Theo Francken criticises mayors and representatives who do not invest more in the upkeep of Catholic churches. He dubs this a result of Europe's "oikophobia, self-shame and cultural Marxism" (See Figure 9). This post also showcases reactionary Catholicism.

Figure 6. Right wing politician Dries Van Langenhove Tweets: "Cultural marxism is at work in Carcassonne. We must honor heritage and beauty instead of deconstructing with subsidies."

Figure 8. The German populist right wing party called the German liberal party "cultural Marxists".

Figure 7. Right wing Dutch politician Thierry Baudet Tweets: "The cultural Marxism, the oikophobic destruction agenda and mass immigration" along with a link to a opinion piece from the independent right-leaning news website Opiniez.

Figure 9. Theo Francken posts the following message on Facebook: " Do you know what bothers me immensely? To see our Flemish churches in decline. It gives me the creeps. It shows a lack of respect for our ancestors. And it is typical of the old Europe, which is languishing in oikophobia, self-shame and cultural Marxism. A Europe that has lost its pride and honour, a Europe on its knees, shame of the world."

These conspiracy theories have terrible consequences. March 15th, 2019 was the day Brenton Tarrant entered two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, with an AR-15 style rifle. He killed a total of 51 people and injured 41 more (RNZ, 2019). Tarrant live-streamed the attack, proclaiming "Remember lads, subscribe to PewDiePie", referring to a Swedish YouTuber often brought up in alt-right discourse. Authorities discovered a 74-page manifesto by the shooter himself, titled 'The Great Replacement'. The title is a direct reference to the book of the same title by Renaud Camus. In the book, Camus discusses a theory that white Europeans will soon be replaced by non-Europeans, specifically Muslims from Africa and the Middle East. Renaud Camus himself does not condone the violence perpetrated by Brenton Tarrant. He believes in a non-violent approach and that "nothing points to whether the shooters actually read my book" (Kruk, 2020). Camus also doesn't believe assimilation is possible: "[...] Peoples, civilizations, religions- and especially when these religions are themselves civilizations, types of society,

almost states- cannot and cannot even want to blend into other peoples, other civilizations." (Williams, 2017).

The El Paso shooter, Patrick Wood Crusius, also wrote manifesto quoting the 'Great Replacement' (Eligon 2019). Both Tarrant and Crusius' manifestos were posted on 8chan, an online message board, right before the crime took place. The document written by Tarrant consists of memes, references to video games, and in-jokes. All are recognisable to anyone who is 'online enough'. While Camus denies any involvement with the far-right, his theory made waves within the ideology. Germany's 'Pegida' and 'Alternative für Deutschland', France's 'Rassemblement national' and 'Génération identitaire', the United Kingdom's 'National Front' and the 'UK Independence Party': all echoed similar beliefs. Populist right-wingers profit off the stumbling blocks of globalisation and modernisation. Ideas considered taboo, shocking, and immoral have now become 'common sense'. In an interview with The New Yorker, Renaud Camus declares he would feel equally sad if Japanese culture or 'African culture' were to disappear because of immigration: "I don't have any genetic conception of races." (Williams, 2017). In a Tweet clarifying this quote, he adds: "The only race I hate is the one knocking on the door." (Camus, 2017) Regardless, the popularisation of the Islamification conspiracy is connected to the cultural Marxism theory. They are textbook far-right rhetoric.

In the 2021 Knack study, the replacement theory was the most popular among Belgians. 15% of the respondents believe that foreigners are being moved to West Europe with the sole purpose of 'outpopulating' Europeans (Casteels, 2021). In 2018 Sam Van Rooy, Filip Dewinter, and Anke Vandermeersch spread a poster of a white, blonde woman with a pregnant belly with the caption: "Newcomers? We make them ourselves." (see Figure 10) Despite the backlash, the posters weren't taken down. 2 years later, Tom Van Grieken captioned a picture with his pregnant wife with the hashtag '#NewcomersWeMakeThemOurselves'. In 2021, Van Grieken tweeted an article stating a third of the Belgian population has foreign origins, writing: "Repopulation. It happens quickly." Van Grieken's partner is Dutch, which underlines the far-right's definition of 'foreign' referring to anyone that isn't white and European. The Tweet met resistance, but Van Grieken doubled down, expressing that he wasn't aware of the term's negative connotations but that "the described problem remains" (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2021). Similarly, the previous VB chairman Filip Dewinter wrote in his book "Eigen volk eerst" ("Our people first") that "our population is slowly but surely being overwhelmed, overrun and Islamized" (Dewinter, 1989).

Figure 10. A poster created by right wing politicians Sam Van Rooy, Filip Dewinter and Anke Vandermeersch showing a white, blonde pregnant woman with the caption: "Newcomers? We make them ourselves."

Walter De Donder, a member of Christian democratic CD&V, expressed his opinion that parts of Antwerp and Brussels are currently being "depopulated" because of migrants. He states migration is a problem that hasn't been addressed by his party (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2019). Normalisation plays a big part in the commodification of this rhetoric. In the name of populist

ideals, liberal parties have begun to echo anti-Islam talking points. This further showcases how the centre is currently skewed to the right. According to the American Pew Research Center, four out of ten Belgians "no longer feel welcomed by their own country because of Muslims" (Pew Research Center, 2019). In 2013, when requested to revise the hijab ban, Open VLD called this idea "turning back time" and that scrapping the ban would threaten the "neutrality" of Ghent. (Saers, 2013) The centre has moved to interpret diversity as assimilation, rather than coexistence. To maintain populist appeal, liberal democrats have been forced accept anti-Islam discourse as reasonable discussion.

A recent example of the normalisation of far-right rhetoric was seen in a 2021 televised debate between France's Le Front National candidate Marine Le Pen and Le République En Marche's Gérald Darmanin, who is from the same party as French president Emmanuel Macron. During the 2017 French presidential elections, Le Pen came in as a close second by promising the de-Islamification of France. Regardless, it was Darmanin that told Le Pen she had "gone a bit soft": "[...] You're prepared to not even legislate on religion, and you say that Islam is not even a problem." Darmanin was trying to get a reaction out of Le Pen, and this was achieved. But, he was also aware of the popularity of anti-Islamic policies among their voter bases. By implying Le Pen hasn't been harsh enough on Muslims, Darmamin tried to sway her voterbase. It serves as fodder to legitimise the anti-Islamist conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories have never been able to spread this fast before, especially among young people: according to the Knack study, one in two of the interviewed 18 to 24-year-olds believed in at least one conspiracy theory (Casteels, 2021). Despite our improving technological literacy, misleading information is still widespread and easily believed by many. The younger generation is digitally naive. The popularisation of infographics on platforms such as Instagram have also played their part: people are quick to share infographics based on their aesthetic appeal rather than the content. Both far-right and QAnon circles have taken the opportunity to spread a variety of content in this way. This will be further discussed in the sub-chapters 'Big Tech vs. The Culture War' and 'Red Pill'.

2.2.2.2 *Fake News*

Conspiracy theories gain traction through the circulation of misleading or fabricated news articles. Between a headline depicting positive news and a headline depicting negative news, people are more inclined to click on the negative headline. Negative Tweets also go viral more quickly than positive ones. 'Us vs. them'-thinking is an important component to this. People tend to develop a worldview that sorts humanity into two camps: the good and the bad. Another critical element is fear. Jeroen Dewulf, professor at UGent, states that this reflex has always been important within our evolution; it helps us stay on guard in dangerous situations (Draulans, 2019). The problem today is that this danger is perceived within society itself, regardless of whether or not it actually exists. Social polarisation has never been stronger yet people still believe that hard work ensures limitless achievements. When these promised achievements do not come to fruition, individuals look for blame in tangible forms: migrants.

Daily social media has the tendency to spiral in negativity and fearmongering. People don't like being stuck in the unknown; they want to take initiative and understand the perceived problems. However, we still want to conserve as much energy as possible. The internet is filled with information that fuel confirmation-bias. With our shorter thinking processes and tendency to multi-task, we rarely read past headlines. It is so easy to find information now that people are less prone to use critical thinking skills. A study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences states that our brains tend to suppress more 'normal' ideas in order to develop something more creative. This leads to bad habits, such as denying facts that don't fit our narratives (Draulans, 2019). All radical politics thrive on fearmongering, but the far-right has mastered this tactic. People prefer when a problem is simple and tangible. When it comes

Figure 11. A "demographic countdown" on the Daily Stormer, tracking the white population of the United States.

down to our emotional processes, we lean to whatever costs us the least amount of energy. When the far-right can present the culprit as a group of people, rather than an overarching system, people are more tempted to accept, because it is easy. Articles shared via social media also add a sense of legitimacy: if it's being shared, it must be real.

Fake news isn't always incorrect information. Websites purposefully write vague, sensational headlines to evoke certain feelings. The use of sensational headlines also doesn't make a website a 'fake news website': a newspaper like Belgium's 'Het Laatste Nieuws' doesn't shy away from misleading wording, but they also report on actual news. A "fake news website", or a junk website, is when its entire concept is dedicated to delivering supposed alternative facts. Examples of these websites are the notorious The Daily Stormer, Reactnieuws, Frontnieuws or JDreport. The Daily Stormer, based in the United States, has run into several issues due to its shocking content. They consistently lose their website hosts, having to move from server to server. As of today, the website is using a Russian host and has a "demographic countdown" on the front page (see Figure 11). A lot of these junk websites survive by being promoted by far-right politicians. On the 17th of May 2020, Thierry Baudet shared a message claiming Muslims had pressured Subway to ban meat that wasn't halal. A few hours later, Baudet deleted the article, but the damage had been done. The fake article, originating from Frontnieuws, mistranslated the original message by Subway, who stated that they had noticed a "strong demand" among customers for halal options (see Figure 12) (Emmery, 2020).

Figure 12. A Frontnieuws headline stating: Subway removes ham and bacon from nearly 200 stores and only offers halal meat following "strongly worded request" from Muslims.

This is only one example of far-right politicians sharing misleading or false information. Youngest Vlaams Belang party member Filip Brusselmans tweeted out a message on the 23rd of January, 2021 calling for witnesses to a fight. The bloodied victim was supposedly a personal friend of Brusselmans. In the same post, Brusselmans claimed the five perpetrators were of North-African descent (see Figure 13). It didn't take long for local police to confirm this event had never taken place, and that the victim received his injures after a fall during a drunken stupor. Later on, Brusselmans admitted that he acquired the pictures from friends of the victim. He said he had "no reason to doubt the validity [of the events]" (Foubert, 2021).

Figure 13. The Facebook post by Filip Brusselmans. Translation: "Last night a 18-year-old boy (and a personal friend of mine) turned out to be the umpteenth victim of senseless violence. Around 11h30 he was on his way home with a bike, when 5 youth of North-African descent kicked him off his bike at the Spoorweglaan in Melsele and heavily injured him. They left him behind afterwards. He woke up several hours later and made it to the ER, with a lot of bloodloss."

Reactnieuws is owned by Bert Deckers, Vlaams Belang chair member. The website recently added an English 'About Us'-page, writing that they created the website as a result of "a strong sense of irritation with the mainstream media (MSM)". Further down, the website claims that "80% of journalists vote left or even far left (communist)". They dedicate their time to "bringing the news about Belgium and the Netherlands that the MSM doesn't want to bring or daren't bring" such as "rapes and crimes by foreigners in Belgium" and Islamisation. They call their readers to support Filip De Man, a European parliament member and one of their advertisers. The website deploys colourful wording in its articles: for example, immigrants leaving their place of birth for a myriad of reasons are now individuals who "once upon a day decided to move countries".

Junk websites propagate a variety of conspiracy theories, especially the belief that a (Jewish or Arab) elite is trying to control the world. They use emotional and sensationalised language in their articles, alongside eye-catching visuals (see Figure 14). While some junk websites are easy to recognise, the danger lies within the messages they try to spread. When political figures are the ones sharing these articles, it legitimises the websites.

Figure 14. The frontpage of the Dutch junk website 'JDreport'. The headlines consist of a variety of conspiracy theories such as COVID-19 ones or 'The Great Reset', a variant of the replacement theory.

2.3   Rabbit Hole

As established prior, claiming only introverted teenagers can develop problematic internet habits would be a generalisation. The same goes for stating only depressed individuals cultivate a dependence on social media: they are by no means the exception. The use of profiling will be further discussed in the chapter 'Alt-right Pipeline', but studies have established it is often inaccurate and unhelpful. Depressed or troubled teenagers aren't the only ones finding solace in anonymous, online spaces - though they may be quicker to find their way in. The taboo surrounding finding like-minded strangers on the internet has diminished. The internet has all kinds of self-discovery tools that teenagers, with any type of background, can use. The image of the socially inept basement dweller is not only outdated but also stereotypical. It is due to these images that people think a radical individual has a set appearance or personality. Besides the stereotypes being dehumanising, it also robs these individuals of their autonomy. Elements may influence and drive our online habits but we can still make conscious decisions.

2.3.1   4chan as the Defining Culture

Only a handful of the surveyed students use 4chan (see Attachment 2). Regardless, it is an important platform to discuss for its impact on modern-day internet etiquette and habits. The trolling culture of the new far-right was a strategy perfected on 4chan boards. The internet's penchant for irony and dark humour, which are both effective tools in radicalisation, know its formative years on 4chan or 4chan-adjacent websites. This sub-chapter discusses the current dominating internet culture through the history and development of 4chan.

The birth of the platform 4chan cannot be justly framed without discussing Something Awful. Something Awful, or SA, was founded in 1999 by Richard "Kyanka" Lowtax. The name was decided upon arbitrarily. Lowtax said: "that Del Taco burrito sure is something awful" (Beran, 2019), and the rest was history. SA is considered a comedy website and has been a decisive force in our current internet culture. It was characterised by nonsense humour and making a mockery out of anything. Unlike today's mega-corporations, Something Awful was not backed by a lot of money. Lowtax had to use freely available software and relied on his coding knowledge. The platform was an internet forum: an online message board where people can hold lengthy discussions about all sorts of topics. Within the forum, there are a set of "chat rooms" dedicated to a specific theme. One single discussion is a thread or topic. Whenever someone commented on a thread, it would be "bumped": moved to the top of the page. Within a thread, all comments are arranged in chronological order. While SA may not have been the first forum, it was certainly the most popular one of its time. It was also one of the first platforms with regularly circulating memes. Something Awful still exists today but its user base has shrunk significantly.

The significance of Something Awful lies within their cultivated culture. While any forums will inevitably deal with obsessive, inappropriate users and rude comments, SA had a very specific way of dealing with it. Instead of punishing tasteless behaviour, the forums allowed it to fester. Moderators themselves were encouraged to be as cynical and vulgar as possible (Beran, 2019). As the entire point of the website was to create humorous content, its users were expected to be funny at all times. When a joke fell flat, you were sure to be shunned for it. Naturally, this developed a culture of adolescents acting as barbaric and outlandish as possible. Collectively, the members would crack dark humour jokes about how terrible life was (Beran, 2019). Something Awful would set the tone for the online trolls we know today.

Lowtax hated anime and ended up creating a new forum so he'd no longer have to see it. This section of Something Awful seemed to attract a younger user base with fewer inhibitions than the more seasoned SA audience. Christopher "Moot" Poole hung out in this chat room as a 14-year-old. Another Something Awful chat room he would visit was known for banning any women that would enter (Beran, 2019). Frustrated with the vitriol they received from Lowtax and other SA users, Moot created a new website in 2003. Inspired by the anonymous message board '2chan', Moot replicated the website's layout. After incorporating the ability to be completely anonymous, he called the platform '4chan'.

The content on 4chan managed to be even more obscene. Moot decided he wanted its users to set their standards and had a rather hands-off approach. It is necessary to mention that Moot was only 15 years old by this point. Even if he wanted to enforce a set of rules, a teenage boy has not yet established his morals and values. Moot and his peers would end up mimicking the behaviour they saw on 4chan. They were teenagers looking for approval and the platform was designed such that the craziest behaviour would be encouraged. Once Moot was met with content that made him uncomfortable, he didn't delete it, nor did he set any rules in place. Instead, he would create a new board, a "containment board", where he didn't have to engage with it. An example of this is the /l/ board, derived from the term "lolicon". It ended up being filled with sexualised drawings of young girls. Moot would end up deleting the board after a year, stating that it "would work horrors on my personal life if my friends or family found out I ran this site." (Beran, 2019). Regardless, 4chan ended up being a much more attractive option than SA: everyone was anonymous and free to post as much gibberish as they craved. It didn't matter if your content wasn't funny, within hours or days the website automatically deleted it. The most interesting content, content that received the most interactions, would move to the top of the website and stay up for longer. There was little to no interaction and not a sense of community either because everyone was anonymous.

The /b/ and /pol/ board are the most notorious on the platform, even today. The anonymity and lack of moderation allowed for content of any kind: gore, racism, misogyny, violence, or even suicidal thoughts were shared without any repercussions (see Figure 15 and 16). In Figures 17 and 18, there are a variety of extreme comments in a thread discussing the elections in the Netherlands. Despite the extent of a user's freedom, 4chan's biggest appeal is its funny content. The supposed 'meme factory' is working 24/7 and its products frequently find their way to mainstream media. The content at hand isn't always rooted in far-right extrem'ism. Most of the memes are innocent, such as the 'rickrolling' trend: the act of sending someone a URL unexpectedly leading them to Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up". Pepe the Frog, while often viewed as an alt-right symbol, was an innocent comic book character before its popularisation by 4chan. The creator of Pepe, Matt Furie, has since condemned the alt-right's adoption of the frog drawing. He has gone as far as suing Infowars, a far-right radio show, for selling merch portraying Pepe the Frog (Lecher, 2019).

Figure 15. A screenshot from 4chan, consisting of the following interaction: "Pair charged with shooting woman who shushed them in movie theatre" "If only the nigger had killed the dyke, that'd be one less queer and one more nigger in prison for life."

Figure 16. A screenshot from 4chan:: "It's natural for a female to be raped. It is necessary for procreation. Thoughts?" "so you'd be fine with a nigger thrusting a white woman who wants nothing of the sort?" "Are you for real or just retarded" "it's only illegal here and only for black men and white women"

Figure 17. A screenshot from 4chan discussing the Netherlands' elections: "Hello Dutchfags, I've recently left Rotterdam after working some shitty greenhouse job there, did you know that Rotterdam is literally all turks? I mean it, all I saw was turks poles and niggers. Women walk in burqas and all shopkeepers are Polish. You guys really need to get your shit together, they already outnumber you 5:1 and they all have families of 3+ kids. Also every cyclist can go kill themselves and your women are SJW whores."

Figure 18. A screenshot from 4chan on a thread discussing the Netherlands' elections: "This is true. Why is nobody talking about the polish problem? Everyone talks about turks and morrocans, but the amount of poles here is increasing way too fast."

Figure 19. A screenshot of an anonymous user sharing a .PDF file titled 'The Third Position' filled with introductory information to Nazism. The reply seen in the screenshot uses an antisemitic slur.

Despite the spread of 4chan content and jokes, the mainstream hasn't exercised any type of control over the platform. In fact, the opposite is true: 4chan seems to be defining internet culture. Its users are churning out content at a phenomenal rate and occasionally it births, or amplifies, something that will be shared virally. It is for this reason that 4chan is an important platform to the far-right movement, despite being far from mainstream. 4chan, a place with next to no limitations on content, is where ideas start and spread. Quite literally, too: anonymous users post a variety of manuals or guides attempting to introduce people to far-right ideology. In Figure 19 and 20, an anonymous user linked a PDF file filled with information regarding 'National Socialism', or Nazism. The post is deleted after a day, not through direct content moderation, but because of the auto-delete feature. But, the thread reposts whenever it is deleted, hence why it includes links to a "previous thread". The discussion always continues.
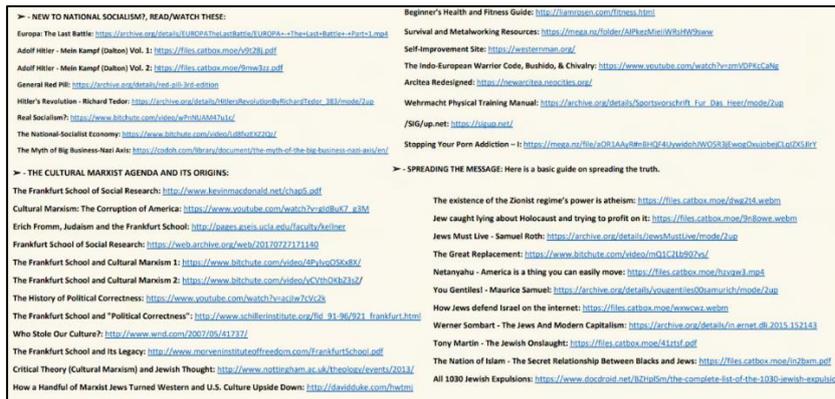
Figure 20. A screenshot of materials linked within the 'The Third Position' .PDF file as a means to "educate" its reader. It includes Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf, a variety of cultural Marxism conspiracy theories, self-improvement guides and Holocaust denial.

So while most teenagers aren't familiar with 4chan, the website has a tangible influence on the internet culture. Many of the most popular memes people share today come from 4chan. The dominant type of internet humour, satirical and full of irony, were trends started on 4chan. QAnon conspiracy theories that are shared on Facebook, often have a loose connection to 4chan. Theories such as Pizzagate[8] spawned on 4chan. It must be stated that 4chan's content is varied: there are also boards dedicated to discussing music, literature, video games, movies and even travel advice. A lot of users stay out of the /pol/ boards. Regardless, the lack of moderation allows for a lot of extreme far-right ideas to fester and spread.

2.3.2   Memes

Memes can be best defined as ideas, turned into visual material, that can be replicated. Each separate meme "format" can be reused to fit diverse contexts which allows for creative expressions. From funny cat pictures to expressive GIFs or a dancing Rick Astley; individuals that spend a considerable amount of time online recognise these visuals instantly. Some formats become more popular depending on the societal mindset that is dominating in its specific place of "creatison". Whatever image evokes a certain reaction will be sent to friends and family, making the reach of your average meme limitless. Memes are just another way the internet has managed to diversify and expand on communication. At its core, there is nothing problematic about the concept of memes. Their main goal is making the receiver laugh and helping them communicate ideas fast and quickly in a no-nonsense manner. Oftentimes, this form of communication is drenched in irony and humour. Laughing at a joke barely skirting the line isn't unheard of. After all, internet memes offer you the freedom and the anonymity to do so. It is incredibly inviting to join in on the meme creation yourself: one can partake in a creative process that is easy and accessible. Meme formats are treated as trends. Naturally, everyone wants to be involved with the newest trend.

A communication model as dominant as memes plays a large part in collectivising different individuals. The far-right has fully perfected this, which we can now understand to be an important aspect of their presence on the internet is. Certain talking points are strategically advertised via these subtle methods. Continuously pushing the envelope will make people susceptible to certain concepts as will be discussed further in the subchapter 'Pre-radicalisation'. In many ways, memes can serve as a powerful propaganda tool. They convey messages meant to evoke a reaction. Innocent formats can convey darker meanings, but the opposite is also possible. A lot of memes that are currently popular have a rather dark history, unbeknownst to many. Individuals using these formats aren't necessarily far-right sympathisers, as formats are reapplied and redistributed to the point that their original intent

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[8] A subreddit dedicated to the QAnon conspiracy theory that believes a variety of restaurants and members of the Democratic party take part in a child sex trafficking ring.

for creation is no longer visible. A prime example is the supposed "Yes Chad", or also called "Nordic Gamer" (see Figure 22). The drawing of a blonde man with blue eyes is often used to debate whoever attempts to mock someone for interest or opinion and these can be rather innocent (see Figure 21).
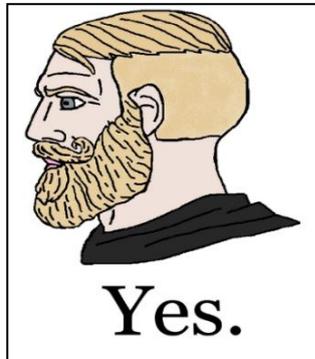
Figure 22. The "Yes Chad" or "Nordic Gamer" meme format.
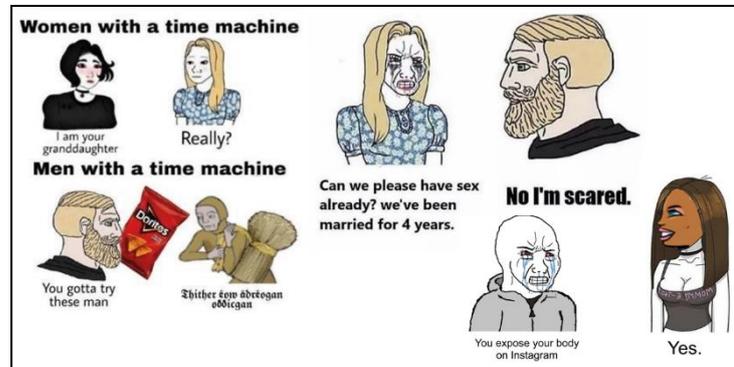
Figure 21. Variations of the "Yes Chad" meme format.

However, it was created on 4chan opposite a caricature of a Jewish man (see Figure 23). In this format, the "Nordic Gamer" is mocking the caricature who is, supposedly, always complaining. The "Nordic Gamer" is a direct representation of the Aryan race. The image of the "Nordic Gamer" has been reworked countless times and as previously mentioned, can be used in very generic contexts. In some cases, the template has been used to recreate a variety of other ethnic groups without the intent to caricaturise. The template is even used in both liberal and leftist spaces. However, to further elude the flexibility of this communication tool, Figure 24 includes controversial examples. The dark meanings are clouded with irony so that they appear less shocking, but the essence remains (see Figure 24).

Figure 23. A Jewish caricature in the "Yes Chad" or "Nordic Gamer" meme format, found on 4chan.
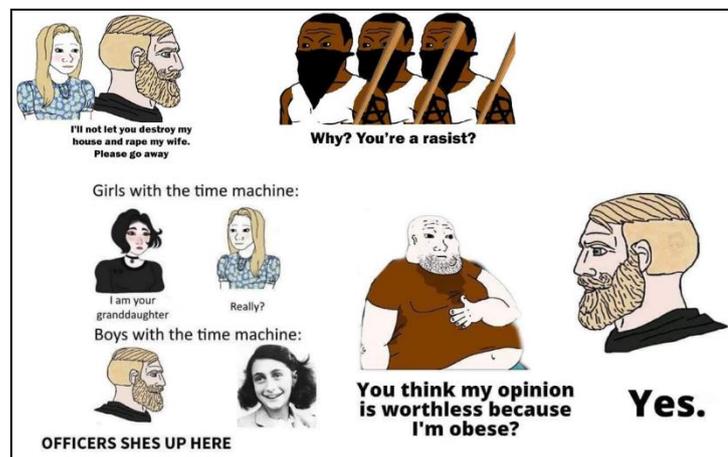
Figure 24. Controversial variations of the "Yes Chad" or "Nordic Gamer" meme format.

The "Nordic Gamer" also received a companion in 2019 as 4chan birthed a new template titled "Trad Girl". What is seen is a blonde, blue-eyed character dressed in a traditional blue dress. The name "Trad Girl" refers to tradwives, a name used for a group of conservative women who celebrate traditional gender roles as the norm. Akin to the "Nordic Gamer", the "Trad Girl" has been repurposed to such an extent that its original intent is no longer clear and appears to be largely innocent (see Figure 25 and 26). It was created to target the "modern" woman, often accused of sleeping around, dressing badly and being overweight by comparing it to the "pure"

apparition of a tradwife. Belgian newspaper De Morgen picked up on the meme in March 2021 in an interview with researcher Katrien Jacobs. She describes the far right's vision on sexuality as the following: "There is a fear in certain right-wing circles that 'real' masculinity is disappearing, and that masculinity and femininity are moving closer and closer together." (Kelepouris, 2021)

Figure 25. A variation of the "Trad Girl" meme format.

Figure 26. A variation of the "Trad Girl" character as she is compared to the supposed "Liberated Feminist".

While these are only two examples of the wide arsenal of memes out there, this thesis will include a variety of other formats. The 'Nordic Gamer' and 'Trad Girl' are good starting points to showcase the flexibility of memes as a communication tool and its spread. They are also incredibly popular. Since the far right is going through a process of modernisation, and thus normalisation, it is no surprise that they mastered this aspect of internet culture. Memes play a gigantic part in the far right's appeal to the youth as memes have become an important means of self-expression on social media. Some memes carry innocent messages, while others convey key ideological talking points promoting bigotry. This makes the far-right considerably more attractive to a larger group of people. If a person points out that a certain meme is crossing the line, the accusation can be waved away on the grounds of it being a mere joke. "Thinking this is racist, sexist, homophobic... makes *you* all of those things". This is a very common strategy of deflection. Memes are both a product of their time and therefore serve to influence social mindsets. This further underlines the importance of discussing 4chan as a platform: 4chan may have a small user base compared to companies such as Facebook and YouTube, but their influence is very apparent.

There is nothing inherently wrong with creating, posting, and reposting memes. This thesis is not attempting to argue otherwise. Anyone who uses social media daily comes across memes and shares these pictures with friends regularly. At its very core, memes serve to make people laugh. They could represent certain ideas and concepts that are completely harmless. Figures 14 and 22 very clearly showcase this: there is nothing harmful about loving iced coffee. Finding humour in a meme using the "Yes Chad" template doesn't automatically make one a white supremacist. After all, not many people know about the origins of certain templates. The internet is dynamic and constantly churning out new formats. Pressuring people into keeping up with this everchanging culture would be counterproductive. This subchapter aimed to display the flexibility of memes as a concept, as they can relay certain messages with ease and familiarity. Memes combine humour, irony, and societal discourse in a digestible package, which is why they do admittedly play a role within the online radicalisation process. They are

also constantly viewed and shared by younger people. Memes are an extremely effective desensitisation tool, as proven by the memes shared in the leaked Schild & Vrienden group chats (see Figures 27 and 28) (Pano, 2018). While one could that argue they're harmless jokes when taking a closer look at the views expressed within the group, it is difficult to pinpoint and what isn't.

Figure 27. A meme from the leaked Schild & Vrienden group chat, referring to the movie 'American History X'. Captions read: "Before Schild & Vrienden" and "After Schild & Vrienden".

Figure 28. A meme from the leaked Schild & Vrienden group chat.

2.3.3   Big Tech vs. The Culture War

The addictive component of social media has already been covered: during adolescence, a stage in which an individual is desperate to form an identity and find freedom of self-expression, the internet is the perfect environment in which to experiment. Social media platforms revolve around engagement and ensuring their users stay engaged. The only way to achieve this is through subtle forms of encouragement, whether it's someone replying to a post, attractive recommendations in a sidebar, or flashy notifications. The short-term thrill is enough to get an individual to stay involved but it also lowers one's inhibition. If a specific post garnered a lot of attention, you're quick to make another post just like it to mimic the previously acquired interactions.

Far-right groups are aware of the hand social media plays in removing one's limitations. Throughout the years, they have perfected these tactics. They are also skilled at adapting and evolving whenever met with a setback. These setbacks typically come in the form of platforms taking preventative measures against them. However, large platforms struggle to effectively moderate while still upholding free speech, and are bound by their own terms of service. The new far-right is convinced there is an elite group actively attempting to silence them. If a platform deletes certain accounts, this can bolster the theory. Addressing big platforms, and their lack of transparency regarding what is acceptable content and what isn't is necessary to ensure these platforms are safe. In a personal interview conducted by this author, Chris Janssens of Vlaams Belang was asked about his worries regarding Donald Trump's Twitter ban and whether moderated actions such as these could become a slippery slope: "Absolutely. The censorship of "big tech" companies like Twitter and Facebook continues. [...] These multinationals run the largest public forums we have ever known, without having to give any democratic accountability." This does, however, put platforms in an awkward position. If you don't ban or penalise users for inappropriate content, extreme rhetoric becomes normalised. If you do, you can give stock to conspiracy theories. Regardless, one thing is certain: the harder it is for individuals to access certain radicalised spaces, the less likely they are to encounter them and thus end up becoming radicalised themselves.

In this chapter, the role of a variety of big platforms and their history with far-right content moderation will be discussed. The author will not delve into how their algorithms work. Instead, the previously discussed attractive aspects of social media alongside the characteristics of the new far-right will be framed together to showcase the interplay between the two. While all these platforms will be mostly discussed separately, naturally they bridge to each other and multiple other platforms or websites.

2.3.3.1   *YouTube*
In 2019 news platforms 'De Correspondent' and 'Volkskrant' researched a total of 1.500 YouTube channels, 600.000 videos, 120 million comments, 15 million recommendations, and 440.000 video transcripts of both left- and right-wing spaces on the platform. The amount of far-left content such as antifascist or Marxist commentary was rather minimal while the far-right had a considerably stronger presence. Said far-right content typically consists of philosophical and political commentary regarding certain topics. The research asserted that many of the commenters ended up gradually embracing far-right rhetoric. Comments dating back to 2015 and 2016 were reactionary. They largely criticised political correctness or supposed "social justice warriors". Later, antisemitism, scientific racism, and criticism of the supposed cultural Marxism made an appearance (Bahara et al., 2019). YouTube offers a seemingly endless ocean of content, but only a fragment of it will make its way to your front page. Digging into the how YouTube algorithms function can quickly become complicated, but illustrating a broad picture of its workings should be a part of the conversation.

The current YouTube model has one goal: ensure the viewer is engaged for as long as possible to boost ad revenue. It achieves this by pushing forward content a user may like based on their viewing history. YouTube engineers usually split this process into two stages: in the first stage, YouTube goes through several hundreds of videos that fit within a certain theme. Certain content receives preferential treatment during this selection. Then, in the second stage, the picks are ranked according to popularity within a second network. The highest-ranking videos will be presented to the user (Munn, 2019). These algorithms are constantly at work: other pre-rolled videos can be found in the sidebar, or within the auto-play suggestions right after a user finishes watching a video. This way a person is steered in a certain direction. The curated content is dynamic: a single refresh could change the entire selection on your front page even though it is often thematically similar. This model proves successful as we spend at least 70% of our time on YouTube on content that was recommended to us (Solsman, 2018). The downside of such a watertight system is that viewers are pushed in a certain direction based on whatever is topical. If you search and watch videos on vaccines, YouTube will likely recommend you anti-vaccine content since this is what is currently trending. This system is the same for many other big platforms.

It is not surprising that YouTube's inner workings lead to a lot of controversies. In the past few years, people have actively questioned how far-right messages and conspiracy theories were able to run free, seemingly unmoderated. Opposingly, some of the content that is removed, with unclear reasoning as to why sparks debates of censorship. The secrecy behind these mechanisms doesn't do the platform any service. Regarding hateful and derogatory content, YouTube states the following: "Content that incites hatred against, promotes discrimination, disparages, or humiliates an individual or group of people is not suitable for advertising." (YouTube Help) To avoid shock-value humour, YouTube also adds that stating comedic intent won't always exempt you from removal. In theory, this is an important addition to make. This thesis thoroughly discusses the effectiveness of using humour to spread far-right talking points. A lot of material slips through the cracks by marking one's channel as comedy. A lot of other content manages to stick around by claiming they're simply sharing news. Still, news channels such as Philip DeFranco do find their videos hidden or demonetized despite upholding neutrality (Robertson, 2016). The guidelines and moderation are by no means perfect or all-encompassing and while this research will not be offering potential solutions, it remains an important nuance to note.

In 2019 YouTube officially announced in a blog post titled "Our ongoing work to tackle hate" that they would be cracking down on far-right content. They go on to state that "this would include, for example, videos that promote or glorify Nazi ideology, which is inherently discriminatory." Videos dedicated to denying well-documented events such as the Holocaust or Sandy Hook would also no longer have a place on the platform. YouTube also claims that their efforts in limiting far-right content resulted in the viewership of these videos dropping by 80%. Said efforts included ensuring certain videos were no longer being recommended (YouTube Team, 2019). In 2020 the platform took it a step further: accounts belonging to Klu Klux Klan-leader David Duke, alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer, "race realist" Stefan Molyneux, and others, were banned.

This author created a new Google account to see in which direction the algorithms would steer a brand-new user if they were to watch certain content. A video by Jordan Peterson, a self-proclaimed traditionalist and favourite in far-right circles, was chosen for the number of buzzwords in its title: "Identity politics and the Marxist lie of white privilege". It must be emphasised that viewing Jordan Peterson's content doesn't necessarily mean a person is right-leaning. However, there is a large crossover between Jordan Peterson's audience and more fringe movement right-wing creators. Upon finishing the video, the front page appeared as seen in Figure 29. The algorithms don't possess enough information to truly steer the

account into a deep end, but the recommended videos remain interesting. YouTube recommends themes such as 'consciousness' and 'debates' which makes sense considering Jordan Peterson's content. One of the recommended accounts, 'Parliamentarian', posts a variety of "Tory ravages Labour politician" content. These videos mimic the trend of "SJW is destroyed by logic"-esque content that ruled YouTube in 2016. Interestingly, the algorithm recommends World War 2, specifically Nazi, themed videos. A second refresh led to the result in Figure 30. The results remain similar and aren't a reason to blow the whistle. However, the AI's tendency to tie reactionary content to historical videos about World War 2 is worth addressing.
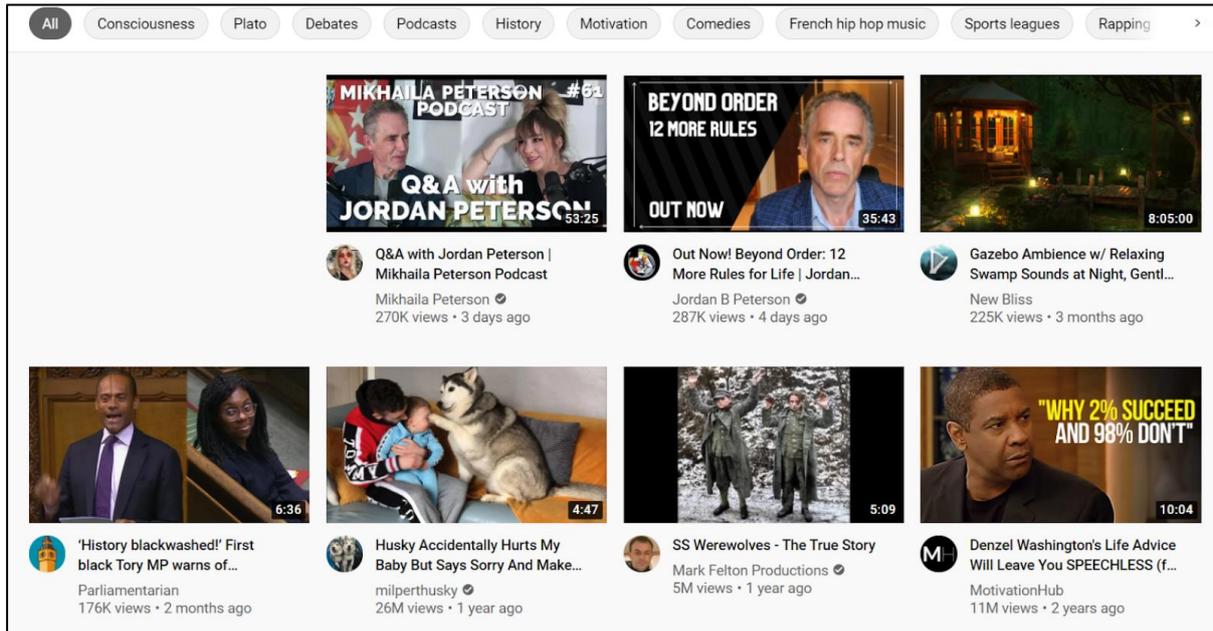
Figure 29. The front page of a brand new YouTube account after watching a Jordan Peterson video.
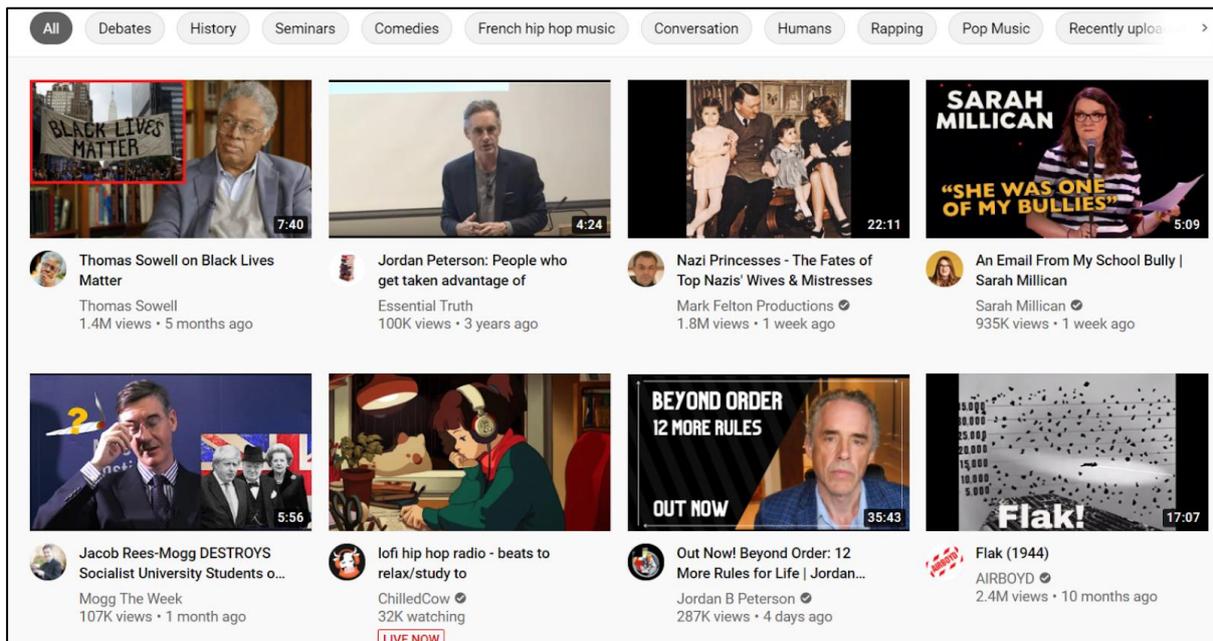
Figure 30. The front page of a brand new YouTube account after refreshing a second time.

Presumably, YouTube is not actively trying to lead its members to consume far-right content. Algorithms linking certain themes to others are a direct product of their user base. The algorithm copies what other users do. The main goal in the "recommended" feature is to get people to keep watching. This is best achieved by comparing one's interests to that of another individual with similar ones. Akin to other platforms, YouTube still hasn't figured out the correct balance between moderating content and upholding freedom of speech. When asked by 'De Volkskrant' on how so many extreme-right videos and comments manage to last as long as they do, a spokesperson noted that the company strives to create a space for freedom of expression (Bahara et al., 2019). The far-right does not think YouTube has done a good enough job to achieve this. Their response to YouTube's first crackdowns was to create an entirely new video hosting service called BitChute (see Figure 31), a platform currently riddled with extremist right content and conspiracy theories.
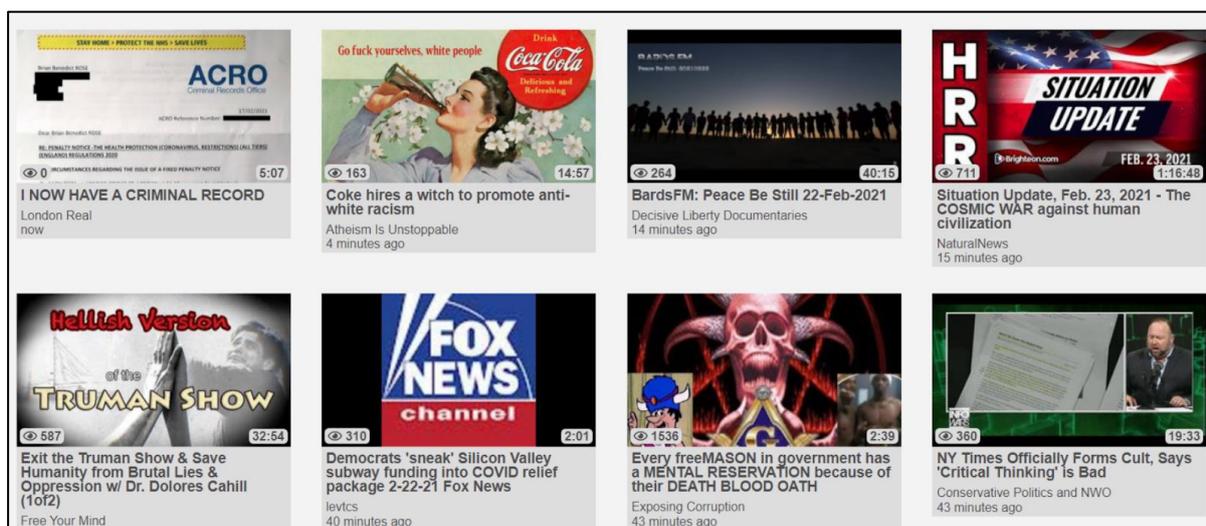
Figure 31. The front page of the far-right video hosting service BitChute, 23rd of February 2021.

2.3.3.2 Facebook and Instagram

Facebook's role in spreading and amplifying far-right rhetoric has been a heavily debated topic ever since Donald Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States. While this thesis will not delve deeper into the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, Facebook's approach to moderating its content does merit discussion. In an interview at Techonomy 2016, CEO of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg denied that the platform played a role in Trump's success. In the same statement, he denied that there was a lot of fake news: "The idea that fake news on Facebook—of which, you know, it's a very small amount of the content—influenced the election in any way, I think is a pretty crazy idea." (The Verge, 2016).

Benjamin Fearnow is a journalist who used to work in Facebook's New York office. He was assigned to keep track of Facebook's "Trending Topics": popular news subjects that show up on users' feeds. These subjects, similar to YouTube's system, are generated by algorithms that check which words or names are being frequently used at that specific time. These generated subjects are moderated by a team of about 25 people, whose backgrounds relate to journalism and media (Wired, 2018). The goal is to weed out any hoaxes or fake news. As of 2020, about 15.000 people are directly employed by Facebook to handle similar content moderation (Koetsier, 2020). The number of outsourced employees is unknown.

In a 2021 study by Cybersecurity for Democracy, far-right content was seen to be generating considerably more interaction (measured per followers) compared to far-left or centrist content. Notably, far-right groups rarely have rules combatting fake news, while far-left or centrist

groups do take this precaution. Misinformation sources outperform non-misinformation sources measuring interaction (Edelson et al., 2021). The reasons behind the far-right's success on Facebook aren't difficult to surmise: the far-right knows how to connect with its audience. Social media platforms thrive on interaction. Posts crafted by the far-right which promote interaction will naturally become more popular, and in turn garner a larger audience. Mark Zuckerberg doesn't deny the reality of his platform's most active userbase, stating that "the community [they] serve tends to be, on average, ideologically a little bit more conservative than our employee base" (Newton, 2020). However, he does assert that Facebook cannot punish people for having different opinions, especially if those views aren't necessarily "hateful or have bad intent" (Newton, 2020). Far-right content and mass misinformation remain an active problem on the platform, as of yet without a concrete solution. The problem is no less tangible in Belgium. Researcher Hind Fraihi and photographer Bas Bogaerts joined 50 far-right Facebook groups and proceeded to study them over the course of two years. The groups in question each had a member count between 50 and 3.000. One of the groups, the all-female 'She Wolves', included a post sharing a yoga pose mimicking the swastika. A group member responded with discomfort, worrying about such content further stigmatising the far-right. The owner of the community waved off the concerns, stating that the post is merely part of the group's "rich palette" (Dheedene, 2021). An individual expressing discomfort with outright extremist sentiment is rather typical within this setting, as will be delved into further in the sub-chapter 'The Radicalisation Process'. Member of Parliament, Vlaams Belang's Barbara Pas, was a member of said group (Dheedene, 2021). Facebook, just like other platforms, is visibly stuck in a dilemma: penalising groups that do not outwardly encourage violence will lead to accusations of limiting free speech. Groups that do use violent language are typically private ones and thus less likely to be reported. In recent years, far-right groups have been quicker to opt for closed-off groups to avoid limitations.

Figure 33. An example of an Instagram infographic on police brutality in the U.S. from known infographic account @soyouwanttotalkabout. In this example, sources have been added at the bottom of the graphic (right).

Figure 32. Examples of far-right infographics. George Soros is a billionaire with Jewish ancestry often at the centre of far-right conspiracy theories.

Considering Instagram's popularity with the young demographic, this inconsistent stance on far-right moderation is worrying. Instagram is a platform where visual appeal trumps all. Messages are short and straight to the point. A notable trend on Instagram is the 'infographics' (see Figure 33). These infographics prioritise aesthetic appeal rather than the actual information they are presenting, and are prone to oversimplification and misinformation. The goal of infographics is to educate individuals on a certain topic in a short and digestible way, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. They present news or heavy topics in an alternative way. It was largely through these posts that the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction on the internet among Gen Z, which serves as further proof of their effectiveness. A common problem with this format is that there are rarely any sources included. The readers take the presented information at face value without doing any additional research themselves. Infographics have become a very popular tool in promoting far-right conspiracy theories as well (see Figure 33). As Instagram's algorithms work similarly to Facebook's, moderating this type of misinformation proves challenging. The infographics aren't directly threatening violence or hatred, so Facebook would rather take a step back. The infographics present themselves as

educational content which gives them carte blanche. This strategy in which far-right figure use algorithms to promote their graphics will be further discussed in the sub-chapter "Red Pill".

2.3.3.3 TikTok

TikTok is arguably one of the most popular applications among 12 to 18-year-olds. The platform hasn't spoken up as often on its content moderation. This is largely due to the newness of the platform's popularity and its rather lowkey approach towards limiting fringe content creators. Bans and suspensions happen sporadically without much public commentary. Alternatively, some accounts are shadowbanned[9]. However, TikTok did address their influx of far-right users in 2020, stating that they would make a more substantial effort to "[preventing] hateful ideologies from taking root" by targeting "the spread of coded language and symbols that can normalise hateful speech and behaviour" (TikTok, 2020). Examples of coded language are spread throughout this thesis but will be addressed in the subchapter 'Red Pill' more directly. Recently, Dries Van Langenhove, founder of Schild & Vrienden and Vlaams Belang party member, created his own TikTok account with his most popular videos getting over 300.000 views. TikTok's model works more or less like both YouTube and Twitter's system: videos are recommended according to one's viewing history and hashtags both boost reach and simplify finding certain content. A trend on the platform is informative content, presented as an attempt to educate the viewers or raise awareness about certain causes. This is very similar to the infographic trend on Instagram. People film themselves educating or informing the viewers on topics, often without any additional sources. This makes it incredibly easy for individuals to spread misinformation. As long as the speaker is charismatic, their statements are likely to be taken seriously. Noteworthy is that a lot of content creators film themselves in their bedrooms or other personal spaces, which makes them appear as more trustworthy.

2.3.3.4 Twitter

Despite not being as popular as Facebook or Instagram, Twitter plays a special role among the major social media platforms. Its model thrives on debate and discourse across a wide range of topics. Today, Twitter is considered an important political forum. The incorporation of the 'hashtag' feature assures that Twitter users always know what is being discussed throughout the world, at that specific time. The more a certain hashtag is being used, the more likely it is to show up on users' timelines. Hashtags aren't always political. Fans may end up trending their favourite artist on the day of an album release. The feature ensures that users continue to pump out tweets, keeping engagement. Hashtags can also be incredibly polarising. The hashtag '#FlattenTheCurve' may sound like it's trying to encourage people to follow COVID-19 regulations, but when diving into the hashtag you will find criticism of the measures instead. In a 2020 study titled "How the Far-Right Polarises Twitter: 'Highjacking' Hashtags in Times of COVID-19", researchers Philipp Darius and Fabian Stephany concluded that hashtags named after German political parties were being predominantly used by people against the said party, rather than its supporters (Darius et al., 2019). Another component to its "viral" model is the length of a tweet: a single tweet can only be 280 characters long. One doesn't need a long attention span to be a frequent Twitter user, quite the opposite; ideas are communicated quickly and concisely. Even though only a small percentage of teenagers use Twitter, its 'viral' model influences other platforms.

Twitter dealt with a barrage of both criticism and applause upon permanently suspending Donald Trump's account on the 8th of January 2021, citing Trump's call to protest as the main reason for this action (Twitter Inc, 2021). Some considered the act long overdue while others wondered if this would snowball into Big Tech companies stifling freedom of speech on a larger scale. Alongside Trump's ban, Twitter swung the hammer on 70.000 accounts related to the

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[9] When social media platforms ensure certain content or content creators won't show up on the frontpage or in search results, without outright banning. This action is often taken by Twitter too.

far-right and QAnon. This widescale deplatforming led to a mass migration to alt-tech[10] platforms such as Gab and Parler.

2.3.3.5 Reddit

Reddit is another platform that doesn't seem to be popular with most teenagers yet still plays a key role in the spread of the new far-right. Many consider the website loosely related to 4chan due to the crossover in users, a slightly similar anonymous community, and the role it plays in the development of internet culture. Reddit is a platform that aggregates, or accumulates, a variety of posts onto a single, personalised feed. One can follow a variety of different 'subreddits', which are communities sorted according to specific video games, tv shows, music, funny content, or even political ideologies. This personalised feed easily leads to echo chambers, if conducted in a certain way. Anyone can post and gain traction through 'upvotes', though there are moderators who ensure the content isn't breaking any rules. While Reddit has a list of rules, each community can set up its own rules. Much like Twitter, Reddit relies on interaction. Negative posts or communities tend to thrive.

In 2016, Reddit CEO Steve Huffman stated that the platform "knows [its users] dark secrets" (TNW, 2016). This took place not long after a slew of bans and deletions of subreddits such as r/fatpeoplehate[11], r/kiketown, r/shitniggerssay, r/transfags, r/pizzagate, and many more. Reddit took it a step further in 2020 when banning about 2.000 subreddits citing hate speech or hateful conduct. The most notable ban was that of subreddit r/The_Donald, a pro-Trump community notorious for its conspiracy theories, racism, and misogyny which amassed 800.000 users at its peak. The bans brought on a lot of criticism: users accused Reddit of limiting free speech. While many felt that these actions were a targeted attack on the far-right, popular far-left subreddit r/ChapoTrapHouse was also part of the ban. Alternatively, there were also people stating that the actions were "too little too late". Former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao took to Twitter after the news broke, stating the following: "[…] You should have shut down r/the_donald instead of amplifying it and its hate, racism, and violence. So much of what is happening now lies at your feet. You don't get to say BLM when Reddit nurtures and monetizes white supremacy and hate all day long" (Pao, 2020). Ellen Pao had previously resigned in July 2015, following massive backlash after she decided to delete the aforementioned subreddits.

2.3.3.6 Discord

The brand-new communication platform pushing Skype off its throne only entered the scene in 2015 and is by no means part of the 'Big Tech' industry. Discord started as a platform made for gamers, by gamers, to offer an alternative to VOIP (Voice-Over-IP) applications such as Teamspeak. As its user base grew, so did its target. In 2019, the application was said to have as many as 250 million registered users. With this growth the app has since shifted gears away from its video game-heavy focus, making active changes to appeal to "normies" as well. Today, the app offers a variety of features: messaging, group chats, voice and video calling, and streaming. During the COVID19 pandemic, many educators have even started using Discord as their teaching platforms.

While the application offers features that big apps like Messenger or Instagram already have, Discord has an entirely different appeal: a sense of anonymity. Rarely anyone on Discord uses their full names, typically relying on nicknames to be recognisable, and the same goes for profile pictures. The application also doesn't require you to add a phone number or even mention your age. Your Discord account is what you make of it and this is appealing to the younger generation. An individual still going through the motions of identity crafting will find satisfaction on this platform through its anonymity yet strong sense of community. There is still

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[10] Social media platforms popular among far-right internet users.
[11] A subreddit where users took pictures of random people, in order to make fun of their weight on Reddit. At the time of its deletion, it had over 150.000 users.

an aspect of networking as a user can pick which communities, or servers, to join and who to connect with. These servers are typically built around a common interest or characteristic such as favourite video games, movies, tv shows, music, sports, sexuality, and more niche interests. Naturally, there are political servers as well. There is a server for anything. Anyone has the freedom to create their own server. It is common for users to create private servers as well, only for use by their closest friends. Privacy is also an important characteristic of Discord: big servers have public links which are easy to find and access while smaller servers require a member's invitation.

Figure 35. A screenshot of a meme posted on Discord dubbing the hanging of black people as "justice".

Figure 34. A meme referencing the 'Back to the Future' movie, instead captioning it "Back to the Fhurer" (misspelling copied from the image) alongside a picture of the car driving into the Charlottesville counterprotestors.

Figure 37. A screenshot of a meme posted on Discord of one of the injured individuals of the Charlottesville terrorist attack. The caption "The floor is child support" refers to a common racist stereotype regarding black men. Below the image, the poster writes: "The woman killed was a coal BURNER anyways". A coal burner is a derogatory term for a non-black person who has sexual relationships with black people.

Figure 36. A meme referencing the 'galaxy brain' meme format, except with images of cars. The car at the top represents a normal action, captioned "Driving in traffic"; progressing to "Driving at high-speed" and followed by "Driving through communist niggers". The latter caption is supposed to represent the most "intelligent" deed, according to its poster.

Discord's battle with far-right content on their platform has a lengthy history, but a breakthrough was made on August 11th, 2017: The day of the 'Unite the Right'-rally in Charlottesville. The rally, with chants such as "Blood and soil" and "Jews will not replace us", was led by a variety of far-right groups: Neo-nazis, the Klu Klux Klan, identitarian movements, and self-proclaimed alt-righters. Following the murder of Heather Heyer, a victim of a white supremacist ramming his car into a group of counter-protestors, Discord announced that they had removed several far-right servers believed to be involved in the planning of the rally. One of these servers, the altright.com server, was believed to be the main organisational centre of the rally. In a Twitter announcement, Discord stated: "Today, we've shut down the altright.com server and several accounts associated with the events in Charlottesville." The message continues, "We will continue to take action against white supremacy, Nazi ideology, and all forms of hate." (Discord, 2017). The server of the Daily Stormer was also shut down. Other servers affected by the large-scale measurements were TRS, Atomwaffen, Nordic Resistance Movement, Uncensored Politics, Ironmarch, Pagan Pathway, European Domus, and Fashlash. Atomwaffen is labelled an official hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Alexander, 2018). The non-profit media organisation Unicorn Riot was able to grab hold of some of the contents of the deleted servers. Recordings and screenshots of the server members discussing the rally were published along with a 9-page .PDF document titled "General Orders", detailing the organisational aspects from accommodations to what protestors needed to pack (Unicorn Riot, 2017). After the attack on the counter-protestors, the Discord servers were filled with memes mocking the events that transpired (see Figures 34, 35, 36, and 37). "Discord has had a monopoly on communication between members of the far-right hate groups for the past six months if not more," said Keegan Hankes, an intelligence analyst for the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Almost every leader in this movement has an account there. So much of the coordination and collaboration of Charlottesville took place on Discord." (Wong, 2017).

From this moment on, Discord continued to crack down on far-right activities on their platform and seemed to make clear attempts at dissociating from their gamer brand. The application's design proved perfect for both community building and organising at large, thanks to its anonymity. However, despite its attempts at suppression, far-right servers continue to pop up every day. They are typically much smaller and fractured communities, which ensures they stay out of the limelight. These servers are difficult to access oftentimes, as the only way to get in is with a direct invite. Sometimes a direct invite can only be obtained after strict vetting processes. The official Discord server of Schild & Vrienden made an appearance in the Pano documentary, dubbed as the main hub where their trolling campaigns were organised. As of today, the official server has been deleted, though splinter groups are likely still around. Discord has Terms of Services (ToS) in place, which they clarify they won't ever read any private messages, thus protecting the privacy of their users, however: "[...] we do investigate and take immediate appropriate action against any reported ToS violation by a server or user." (Liao, 2018). The only way these servers or users are moderated is through direct reports made to Discord. Otherwise, they continue operating in the shadows.

In the personal interview conducted by this author, Faraday Speaks described Discord and the way the new far-right, and other political ideologies, utilise the platform as a type of PVP[12] video game. Members with a specific ideology collect in fractured, more private servers where they stick to their bubbles. Groups that have the desire to spread their beliefs and thus recruit new members, move to "hubs". In these hubs, people with opposing worldviews directly face each other and engage in debates; attempts are made to impress neutral onlookers. Once you join some of these hubs, you are given the option to pick "roles". Through these roles, you summarise your identity to the strangers you'll engage with (see Figures 38 and 39). The hubs

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[12] Player versus player.

typically have dedicated mods that ensure nothing inappropriate takes place. Regardless, these spaces are some of the biggest recruiting grounds for far-right groups, as a lot of young, neutral individuals pass through.

Truly putting a stop to the far right's prominence on Discord seems like an impossible feat, though the platform does follow up on reports diligently. The platform relies heavily on its users to be the ones reporting inappropriate behaviour as the promise of privacy prevents the mod team from going through messages on their own accord. Nevertheless, a platform with such a young, large user base has a responsibility to bear.

Figure 38. A screenshot of a collection of personalised roles in a political Discord server.
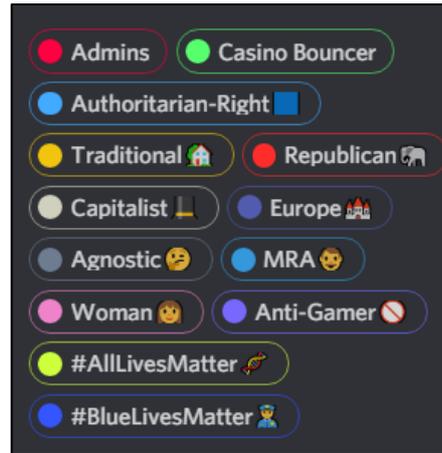
Figure 39. A screenshot of a collection of personalised roles in a political Discord server.

2.4   New Far Right Pipeline

The term 'alt-right pipeline' is a relatively new one, though traces of it being used can be found as far back as 2015[13]. It was popularized in 2019, largely due to Luke Munn's work titled 'Alt-right pipeline: individual journeys to extremism online' and Faraday Speaks YouTube video 'My Descent Into the Alt-Right Pipeline'. It is not an official term as it is almost exclusively used in online spaces among people either describing their journey through the pipeline or among people commenting on the journey of others. For this research, it will be referred to as the 'New Far Right Pipeline' instead to showcase its current importance.

The word 'pipeline' itself suggests a pathway that leads to a certain result. The steps towards the pipeline occur at a rather slow pace. One needs to put effort into finding this pathway in the first place. Once the individual enters the pipeline, there is little to no way to climb out. The plunge is fast and hard to back out of, but making one's way to the very 'end' result frames a long journey. To fully illustrate what the 'new far-right pipeline' can look like, this thesis will place it within the context of the classical model of the radicalisation process.

2.4.1   Radicalisation Process

On January 6th, 2021, the world watched on as protestors stormed the US Capitol. The highly publicised riot was an effort from Donald Trump supporters to overturn the election results. Said results were supposedly fraudulent and thus wrongly appointed Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States of America, according to the rioters. Political leaders worldwide condemned the insurrection, dubbing it an act of violence and even terrorism. Donald Trump himself was blamed for inciting the event, as he called for his voters to organise a big protest on the 6th of January: he promoted this event on Twitter a total of 13 times between the dates of December 19th, 2020, and January 4th, 2021[14]. In a set of leaked chat records, a Discord user Chrisdub2010, who was present at the riot, describes the anticipation for Trump's commands: "I was biting at the bit waiting for the Trump text/tweet/announcement to go Weapons Hot and so were a few thousand others" (Chrisdub2010, 2021).

Examples of the weapons carried by the rioters include stun guns, pepper sprays, baseball bats, lead pipes, Molotov cocktails, and pipe bombs (Dreisbach, 2021). Guns were mostly disposed of before the rioters stormed the building, out of fear of "going straight to federal prison" (Shamsian, 2021). Discord user Chrisdub2010 states he "can't believe how many dumbasses showed up without guns nor why in the fuck they breached unarmed" as he was "armed to the teeth". Later on, he goes into detail: "stayed in Virginia, stowed our long guns here and conceal carried in dc [...] we had 2 shotguns a rifle and 3 pistols [...] only took pistols [...] I brought a smith and wesson mp40 and two armed friends." (Chrisdub2010, 2021). A picture of one of the pro-Trump rioters carrying zip ties went viral, with onlookers assuming he intended to take hostages. The man himself claimed he wanted to keep them out of the hands of the police (Shamsian, 2021). Another rioter was spotted wearing a 'Camp Auschwitz' hoodie (Debonis, 2021). Whether the event was deliberately planned is still heavily debated, though it has been uncovered that some planning took place on Parler, Discord servers, Gab, MeWe, Spreely and others. The notorious subreddit r/The_Donald contained a multitude of posts encouraging people to take matters into their own hands (see Figure 40). The planning was not limited to alternative far-right platforms: 1.480 posts explicitly calling for violence zere found on Twitter between the 1st of January and the 6th of January (Wamsley, 2021).

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[13] Conducting a Twitter search, the author found its earliest use dating back to October 26th, 2015.
[14] Found by conducting a search on the website 'The Trump Archive'. The author used the search term "6th".
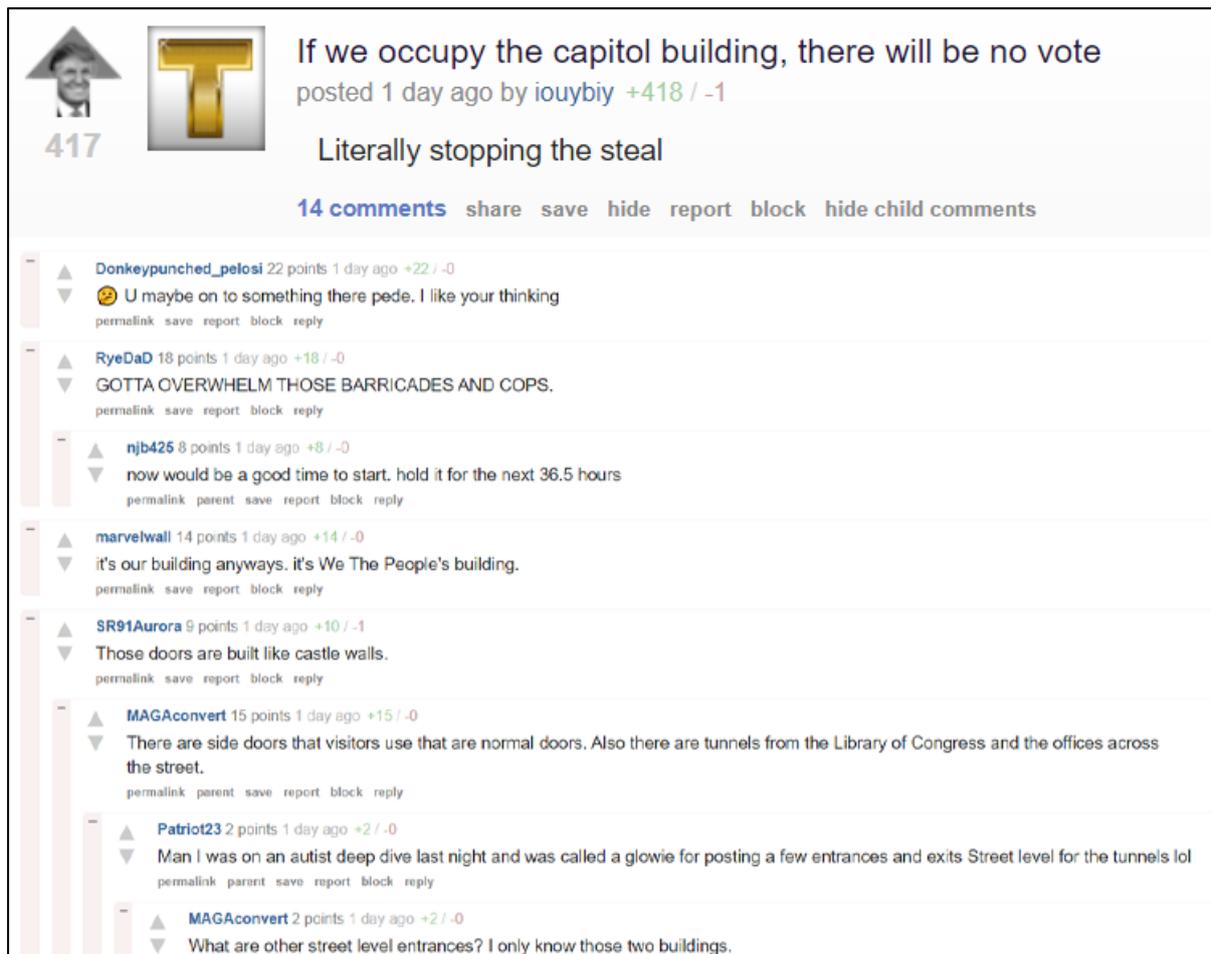
Figure 40. A post from the website of the past r/The_Donald subreddit, patriots.win, titled "If we occupy the capitol building, there will be no vote. Literally stopping the steal"

The riot cost the lives of four rioters and one police officer. One of the victims was the 35-year old Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt. She was shot and killed by the police during an attempt to break into the Speaker's Lobby. Once her name was published, it didn't take long for people to find her social media presence and thus go through her "political awakening". Five years ago, Ashli Babbitt was a proud Barack Obama voter, tweeting in 2018 that "[Obama] was our president dude... [...] I think Obama did great things". She ended up switching to the Republican party because of a staunch dislike for Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton. By 2019, Babbitt tweeted that Trump has "America's heart despite being hated by the political global ring/Hollywood/elite", echoing the common far-right anti-elite rhetoric. She also started discussing Pizzagate. In February 2020 she began tagging her tweets with #Q, a reference to QAnon (Babbitt, 2021). While Babbitt's social media presence is a clear visual representation of the radicalisation process, the end of her journey was unfortunate.

Defining the radicalisation process can be incredibly challenging due to its unique factors. In any given group, an individual may radicalise, while surrounding people do not. While an individual with depression may dive into the far-right, not everyone with depression will necessarily do the same. Experts could not pinpoint specific mental disorders that influenced one's susceptibility to radicalism. However, there are other demographics that do display quantifiable leanings one way or the other. In terms of gender, young men radicalise more frequently than young women. In terms of educational background, those with a higher level of education are less likely to identify as being far-right (Victoroff, 2005). The specific reasons behind this are unclear and should not be taken as a standard. A lower level of education could

be influenced by a lower economical standing. Additionally, during the 2020 elections, Trump gained more votes from individuals with a higher level of education compared to his results in the 2016 elections (New York Times, 2020).

Overall, attempts at profiling have not been very effective: in a 2007 analysis by criminologists Brent Snook, Joseph Eastwood, Paul Gendreau, Claire Goggin, and Richard Cullen, researchers found that profilers did not perform significantly better than the general public. Expert profilers and members of the public were each tasked with analysing a crime scene. Upon completion, they were required to construct a criminal profile. The study states that, in an ideal situation, "an 'expert' should decisively outperform nonexperts", but this was not the case as neither group performed much better than the other (Gendreau et al., 2007). Another problem is that profiling often brings with it an onslaught of legal issues with it, too (Buruma, 2005). From age to ancestry or ethnicity, there are rarely any consistencies that can be set in stone. We can establish that a focus on physical characteristics isn't very productive. Instead, researching specific social contexts is considerably more fruitful. There are innumerable paths one can take that will eventually lead to radicalisation or extremism. However, we can isolate some specific factors common most cases of radicalisation.

If we treat the radicalisation process as a pyramid construction, at the bottom you will typically find individuals that are unsatisfied with society. They may feel isolated and believe that no one in their immediate surroundings understands their plight, thus causing the individual to isolate themselves further. Oftentimes, they won't consider professional help as a viable solution, either because of financial standing or personal beliefs. There is a strong need to discover an identity on their own accord that they feel is unique. Adolescents especially are susceptible to this; they have a stronger need to establish a personal identity than others, mostly due to low self-esteem (Ollson, 1998). It is important to underline that these feelings do not automatically place someone on a path to radicalisation. Often, most remain in isolation and non-action (Precht, 2007). Another factor is based on the novelty-seeking theory (Kellen, 1979), built around seeking thrills. A significant part of the far-right pipeline is the need to continuously push limits. The group bonding aspect of the process seems to be a recurring element. Even if the individual hopes to achieve a solution to their problems on their own accord, they remain reliant on like-minded people to drive them to said solution. These like-minded people tend to be authoritative figures on the subject at hand, yet remain completely relatable and accessible.

Faraday Speaks describes a series of events that eventually caused him to fall into alt-right groups. He had a bad relationship with his family and achieved dissatisfactory results in college, thus losing his financial aid. Eventually, he developed depression. In his 2019 video "My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline", Faraday Speaks expresses a consistent interest in ideology even as a young child. The only way he figured he could work on himself was by searching for self-help videos on YouTube. He eventually stumbled upon Stefan Molyneux, a Canadian self-proclaimed white nationalist formerly boasting a YouTube subscriber count of over 900.000. Molyneux was eventually banned from the platform for hate speech (Alexander, 2020). He presents himself as someone who has achieved a successful life through the fruits of his labour. Just like Faraday Speaks, he dealt with an abusive household and a sense of being lost during his college years. He did not call himself a YouTuber, and instead presents himself as a "philosopher". Stefan Molyneux promotes himself as a relatable and trustworthy figure. His channel was easy to find and made use of eye-catching thumbnails. He knew how to make himself as accessible as possible. Through this, Faraday Speaks found a figure to look up to and a community, Molyneux's subscribers, with the same end goal as himself. The main takeaway from Molyneux's videos was that an unsatisfying existence is largely to blame for the supposed status quo; widespread liberalism and "our current culture" are leaving people behind. Faraday Speaks continued to dig through Molyneux's content and quickly discovered

a series where the Canadian ex-YouTuber interviewed a variety of people within the far-right nexus. "From there, I got introduced to people like [Steven] Crowder and [Ben] Shapiro. And from there I got introduced to people like Lauren Southern and Gaven McInnes." Faraday Speaks continues: "By the end of it, I'm listening to Jared Taylor talking about racial differences." (Faraday Speaks, 2019).

Faraday Speaks describes a shift in his political standing from liberal to libertarian, and eventually to the far right. This "descent", as he puts it, happened quickly and easily. The content put out by Steven Crowder and Ben Shapiro is usually defined by its satirical approach. Neither identifies with the alt-right label, instead of calling themselves radical conservatives. Lauren Southern takes it a step further: she does not call herself a white supremacist, but a white *nationalist*. Jared Taylor, however, has no qualms with the prior title. Each discovery can be illustrated by a descending staircase and Faraday Speaks defines it as such. A strong influence for each content creator he stumbled upon was their sense of community building. Faraday Speaks was suddenly surrounded by people he believed were just like him.

Within this research, the radicalisation process will be analysed through several lenses. The Belgian association research group 'Governance of Security' released a report in 2010, commissioned by the Belgian Federal Public Service of the Interior, describing a potential integrated, preventative approach for polarising and radical behaviour. The report describes the radicalisation process through a set of phases previously defined by Bob de Graaff, Christianne de Poot, and Edward Kleemans in a 2009 work titled 'Radicalisation and radical groups in a nutshell'. Another exploration by Tomas Precht, funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice in 2007, included a streamlined model of the road from conversion to terrorism. The final study that will be examined is the model designed by Luke Munn in his work 'Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online', where he sorts the radicalisation process in three cognitive phases.

These reports were typically constructed with religious radicalisation in mind, rather than radicalisation on a political level. Munn's work is the one exception as it specifically focuses on far-right radicalisation. However, we know that religion can potentially influence norms and values, thus impacting social interaction and identity. Political ideology similarly impacts these facets. While this thesis will not necessarily create a new model, it will attempt to apply these predefined phases to far-right experiences.

2.4.1.1   Red Pill

The new far-right describes the start of the radicalisation process as "taking the red pill". The metaphor finds its origins in the 1999 film The Matrix, written and directed by the Wachowski Sisters. In the script, the protagonist is offered two choices:

> Morpheus opens his hands. In the right is a red pill. In the left, a blue pill.
>
> MORPHEUS: This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe.
>
> The pills in his open hands are reflected in the glasses.
>
> MORPHEUS: You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.
> *(Excerpt from 'The Matrix' script, 1999.)*

The protagonist, white-collar worker Neo, finds himself deeply unsatisfied with his life but has been unwilling to bring the necessary changes. When he is offered the two pills, a final choice makes itself available: take the blue pill, and you will accept your current state for what it is; bleak, unsatisfying, and unquestioned. Take the red pill and the lies of the real world are finally exposed. You see existence as what it truly is. The metaphor describes how one single event can warp your subconsciousness forever. The far-right uses this allegory to describe the act of converting someone to radicalism; i.e. opening one's eyes' to the their supposed truths.

In August 2020, the Wachowskis confirmed that the allegory was written as a reference to their journey in discovering their transgender identity (Independent, 2020). Fan theories had been floating around long before the confirmation even came through, but this never stopped certain far-right spaces from giving it their twist. The red pill concept was adopted as a pinpointed moment of sudden realisation. Usually, it is not used to describe the general shift to the right side of the political spectrum, but rather a change in perspective after researching particular issues or instances, such as racism, feminism, conspiracy theories, and so on. In a set of leaked Discord messages, a self-proclaimed alt-righter expressed the following: "Everyone between us and *normies*[15] red pills people a little more, until they become more like us. [...] I definitely received some red pills from more extreme sources at the beginning, but the little ones along the way really helped." (Ronny TX, 2017).

Going through a sudden, life-changing revelation implies that becoming red-pilled is an unexpected occurrence. An individual stumbles upon certain information, unbeknownst what its effect would end up being. However, the act of "red pilling someone" seems to be a deliberate attempt at radicalising an individual. In the following Discord message, anonymous user Jossi expresses his interest in a girl he met on *Gab*: "I want to red pill her, because she seems okay. [...] Just a little too libertarian right now." (Jossi, 2016). In the same Discord server, there is a rule set in place that prohibits members from calling each other Nazis or fascists, as this would "scare away the normies we are trying to red pill." (HeimatFreiheitTradition, 2016).
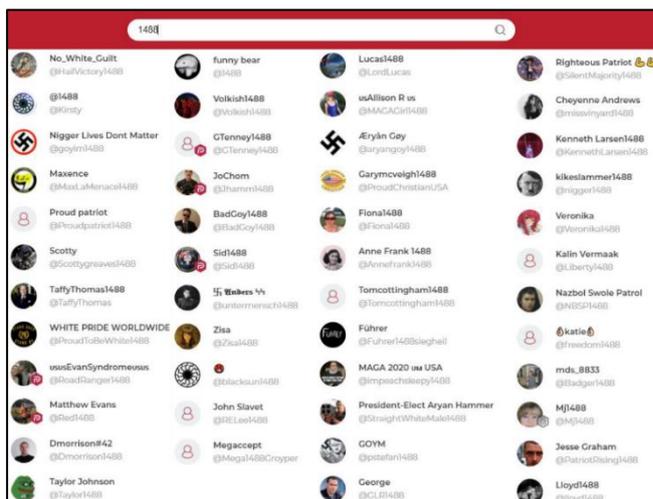
Figure 41. Username results on social media platform Parler containing "1488". Also visible on the same screenshot is the use of the n-word, k*ke and "goyim".

The 'The Third Position' .PDF file mentioned in the 4chan subchapter has an extensive category dedicated to "spreading the message". First and foremost, they make it clear you can't go "full 1488": "1488" is a combination of two numerical symbols commonly used by white supremacists. The "14" refers to a 14-word Nazi slogan: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children". '88' means Heil Hitler, as the 8th letter of the alphabet is H. This may seem like an obscure reference but it proves to be common in far-right spaces. When searching "1488" on the social media platform Parler, the username matches are endless (see Figure 41) and typically paired with words like "kike[16]" or "goyim[17]". The document

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[15] Internet slang used to describe people that are too "mainstream".
[16] A derogatory term for Jewish people.
[17] In modern Hebrew and Yiddish, "goy" is a term used for non-Jewish people. "Goyim" is plural.

makes it clear that, instead of being instantly labelled a Neo-Nazi, its readers have to be subtle and cautious. Readers have to know when they can "truth bomb", or red-pill, effectively: "Dropping truthbombs at random or without being prompted, no matter how subtle, is one of the worst ways to get someone to consider what you have to say."
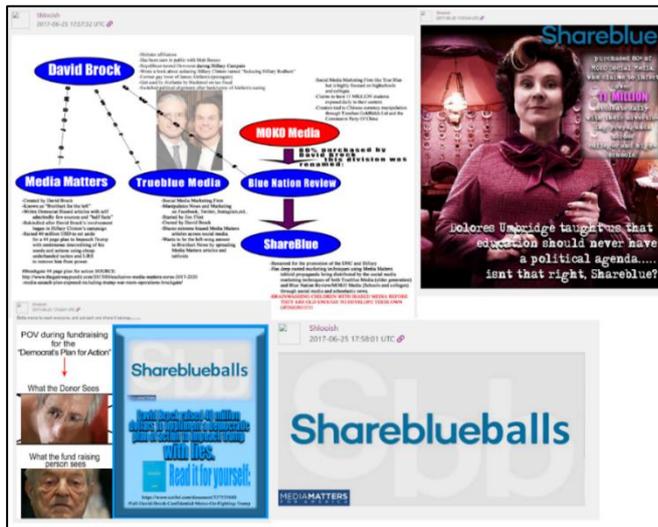
Figure 42. A collection of images crafted by Discord user Shlooish, 2017, depicting conspiracy theories about the American liberal news website.

The type of content one can be red-pilled by is incredibly varied and takes on many different shapes: infographics, interviews, conspiracy theories, and even memes. In a set of Discord messages, user Shlooish brags about how he has "red-pilled hundreds of thousands". He then shares a set of self-created images (see Figure 42) that have gained considerable traction. Shlooish has made infographics on conspiracy theories, punchy memes, and snappy quotes all specifically catered to different outskirts of the internet. He continues to elaborate on his strategy: "[I] gotta meme to reach everyone.. and [I] put each one where it belongs." The first image he shares is a sleek grid with bullet points. The next is the same conspiracy theory shortened to fit on a picture of a Harry Potter character, calling for political neutrality in education. This is a rather common liberal talking point. Another adapts the theory to the classic "What person A sees vs. What person B sees" meme format. In this way, Shlooish has reframed the conspiracy theory to fit just about anyone's tolerance level. He rounds up by saying: "Learn to reach them... Deception.. Get the fuck out there and do something about it." (Shlooish, 2017).

Fans of the Matrix have long theorized that the red pill's colour was a direct reference to the estrogen pill (Crowley, 2020). The estrogen pill is typically repeatedly used, over a longer period, rather than a one-off instance. The far right's interpretation seems to take a similar stance: instead of a single dose, one is meant to take all the different types of red pills, slowly "awakening" to each facet of society. This underlines the far-right radicalisation as a process.

2.4.1.2 Pre-radicalisation

The pre-radicalisation phase describes the moment in time in which an individual becomes susceptible to radicalisation. As described previously, there are a large number of factors that influence this "preparation". Some factors include a potential search for identity, past traumas, less than optimal living conditions, or general frustration with society. The individual feels "less than they should be" (Innuendo Studios, 2019). Something or someone is holding them back from reaching their full potential. This deprivation is regarded, by the individual, because of being a part of a group with little to no (political) representation (Hellinckx et al., 2017). The individual ends up minoritizing themselves and begins to believe they are being discriminated against. This phenomenon is also known as blame-shifting. Blame-shifting describes the action of moving responsibility *away* from a subject *over* to an unrelated target. The process typically happens when said subject experiences a sudden setback, mostly of economic or societal origin, i.e., losing a job. While this sense of unbelonging is usually grounded in one's societal position, it will gradually start including other people with similar situations. Other people with comparable problems must be suffering from the same causes. The individual starts finding

patterns. Oftentimes, this creates a vicious cycle as the blame-shifting individual expects others to do the same (Laurent et al., 2019).

In short, the pre-radicalisation phase is typified by the notion of a perceived threat. Believing your morals and values or livelihood are under attack, in one way or another, can be a powerful stimulus. When most of society seems to view the individual negatively, it only emboldens their belief of being minoritized. The individual starts seeking out like-minded people. For Faraday Speaks, this is the exact moment he began delving into self-help YouTube. He discovered a community of like-minded lost souls, and a charismatic authority figure in the form of Stefan Molyneux. This newfound sense of community plays a critical role in the development of social identity and interaction. Upon discovering this new bubble, interaction with anyone else will be subsequently cut short as these social interactions are no longer necessary. The individual has found a group of individuals that seems to understand them better than anyone else. This process is not sudden, as Faraday Speaks himself asserts, but is more akin to slow descent. The sense of endangerment becomes stronger when multiple people deal with the same "problem". The research concludes that one's social identity becomes more important when the individual believes an entire group is being threatened. It lays the foundation of the "us vs. them" thinking pattern. The individual starts highlighting their positive traits while emphasizing the negatives of the opposing group (Hellinckx et al., 2017).

Explaining his further descent into the alt-right pipeline, Faraday Speaks describes a feeling of discomfort when confronted with the rampant scientific racism within his new community. Scientific racism is the idea that one race, typically the white race, is biologically more superior to others. Since he hadn't completely fallen down the pipeline just yet, Faraday Speaks felt weary of certain ideas, though he couldn't exactly say why it made him feel so uneasy (Faraday Speaks, 2019). This is where one can tie in Luke Munn's first cognitive phase: **normalisation**.

While individuals in a similar situation as Faraday Speaks may feel discomfort with outward racism, they are still able to find the humour in jokes that (seemingly ironically) play around with certain ideas. The keywords in this are "irony" and "humour". This is where the internet comes in handy: by cloaking ideologies in a jacket of accessible, funny jokes and references one can express a point of view without necessarily engaging in discussion. The added "irony" allows the jokester a level of deniability. When an individual is being accused of parroting far-right rhetoric, they can simply state that it was just a joke.

Figure 43. A satirical post shared by the 'Vlijmscherpe Vlaemsche Memes' Facebook page on November 21, 2017. The description text translates to: "When someone is roasting on you because you are Belgian, but it doesn't matter because you hate

In a 2018 study, aptly titled "Can it be hate if it is fun?", Christian Schwarzenegger and Anna Wagner investigated a set of Facebook pages and groups known for their supposed satirical content. Usually, no topics in these groups were considered off-limits. However, serious discussions were prohibited in the comment section as this would spoil the fun. Within the study, Schwarzenegger, and Wagner establish that social media environments dedicated to criticising certain elements of the political spectrum, in the format of humorous content, play a large part in the *mainstreaming* of discourse. Through this, "edgy" memes are utilised as ammo against the political establishment, albeit for purely satirical reasons. If a user points this out, they are met with deflection rather than a full-on debate. To build a community, members are

encouraged to recreate certain meme formats regarding different topics. Jokes relating to racism, sexism, or even ableism are thus trivialised, and a culture of hate speech becomes enforced.

These groups and pages don't solely produce politicised right-wing content. Some of their posts are seemingly harmless. In an example (see Figure 43) found on the Facebook page 'Vlijmscherpe Vlaemsche Memes', or 'Razor Sharp Flemish Memes', an image of the flag of Flanders with a smiley face says the following: "When someone is roasting on you because you are Belgian, but it doesn't matter because you hate Belgium too." Nothing in this post alludes to an outward political stance on one side or the other as it is a rather common, cynical joke that could be passed around anywhere.
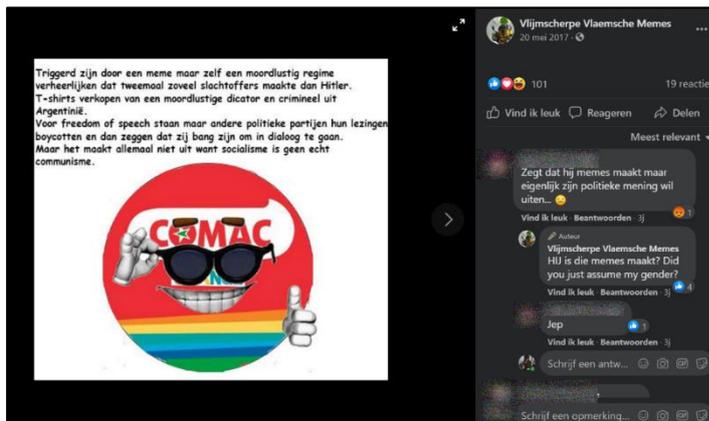
Figure 44. A satirical meme shared by the 'Vlijmscherpe Vlaemsche Memes' Facebook page on May 20, 2017. The description text translates to: "Being triggered by a meme but glorifying a homicidal regime that killed twice as many as Hitler. Selling T-shirts of a murderous dictator and criminal from Argentina. Supporting freedom of speech but boycotting the lectures of other political parties and say they are afraid to enter a debate. But it doesn't matter because socialism is not real communism."

However, several months later (see Figure 44) they published content with a similar format but an entirely different tone. This time, the smiley face is draped across the logo of Comac, a youth movement of the left-wing Worker's Party of Belgium. In this context, the original poster is criticising the leftist organisation and its ideologies. They are dubbed as being "triggered[18]" for being offended by the content output of 'Vlijmscherpe Vlaemsche Memes' all the while "glorifying a homicidal regime that killed twice as many as Hitler".

It is important to note that the users frequenting these meme pages aren't a monolith. In Figure 44, one user commented the following: "[The owner of the page] says he creates memes but actually wants to express his political opinions…" As described earlier, outward criticism is typically met with deflection. Here, too, the owner of the page responded with a meme reference. "HE who creates memes?" They write, "Did you just assume my gender?". This phrase is a satirical joke typically used to mock leftist identity politics. We can establish that Vlijmscherpe Vlaemsche Memes' user base potentially feels uncomfortable when jokes enter a certain territory, much like Faraday Speaks described in his video. They won't necessarily stop visiting the page nor do they usually voice their uneasiness. We cannot assume its users are passive recipients (Schwarzenegger et al., 2018). Through this, satirical pages are often unwilling to draw lines in the sand.

During the pre-radicalisation phase, desensitisation seems to be the core component. When consistently viewing certain content, one's tolerance level will eventually become higher. A user can become detached from reality. Satirical memes start to form a bridge to white nationalist rhetoric. Within 4chan forums, they call this phenomenon "irony poisoning" (Fang et al., 2017). This shouldn't be confused with the aforementioned term "red pilling". The act of

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[18] The term was originally used to describe a PTSD-like reaction to an event bringing up trauma. In recent years, the far-right has repurposed the term to refer to anyone they consider too sensitive. It is most commonly used in content mocking supposed SJWs.

red pilling an individual can only take place after they have already been "irony poisoned". In other words, a person is being steadily groomed to begin accepting satirical jokes as potential truth bombs. "I saw ppl negging Jews so I joined in as a meme first off," explains Discord user FucknOathMate, "then all of a sudden it stopped being a meme." (FucknOathMate, 2017).

2.4.1.3 Self-identification

The pre-radicalisation phase and the self-identification phase can transpire concurrently. The different phases don't necessarily connect perfectly. The start of the self-identification phase doesn't mean we have fully left the pre-radicalisation phase. What sets this phase apart from its predecessor is found in the name: the identity of the individual is now impacted. As described in the previous phase, discovering a new identity is the ultimate end goal of someone who feels lost in society. When other attempts don't work out, the missing puzzle piece may be found within radicalistic ideas. What started as a morbid curiosity in certain perspectives now becomes a part of their ideology. The identity of the individual is starting to change. We can describe three types of transformation within the patterned behaviour (Precht, 2007):

1. The individual goes from having no specific ideology to a radical one.

2. The individual goes from a neutral or centrist ideology to a radical one.

3. The individual goes from an ideology based on one side of the political spectrum to the complete opposite side.

These forms have been established prior regarding religious extremism (Precht, 2007). Said shifts take place gradually and uniquely for everyone. As Luke Munn states, the individual becomes acclimated to the new surroundings. They become conditioned. The flexibility of the internet is an asset to this process because it supports a fluid transition between each "step". While a video debating racist science is a clear step in a certain direction and one that is likely to make the individual stop in their tracks, anti-immigration content may be less of a problem for the viewer (Munn, 2017). After the individual has been exposed to other media for a longer period, they may give the video that was considered excessive before a chance. This is where habituation comes into play: one's response to a stimulus decreases after one has been exposed to it repeatedly. While the internet is limitless, the mind cannot operate at the same speed when consuming all these different ideas. Instead, after a period, one's sensitivity to "rationally" process certain elements (like stereotypes) lessens. The mind becomes overwhelmed and eventually desensitized (Munn, 2017). Through this, the individual has created a new normal. They have acclimated to their new environment.
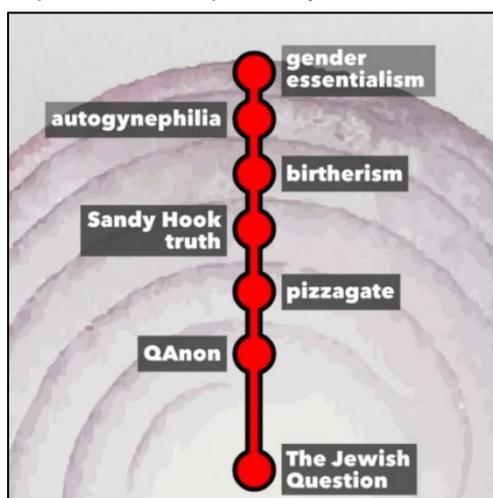
Figure 45. A screenshot listing a variety of popular right wing (conspiracy) theories from the YouTube video 'The Alt-Right Playbook: How to Radicalize a Normie' by Innuendo Studios.

There isn't a step-by-step guide that pinpoints when exactly an individual is crossing over to the "danger zone". In a YouTube video by Innuendo Studios called 'The Alt-Right Playbook: How to Radicalize a Normie', the host presents a picture of an onion (see Figure 45). They describe the onion as symbolism for the supposed journey one (a "normie") takes to becoming radicalised (or red-pilled). The outer layer of the onion is extremism in its most innocent stage. If the individual were to be confronted at this point, they have quite some room for denial. The more layers you pass, the harder it becomes to deny one's radicalism.

However, a common misconception people have is that there are degrees to types of ideas or stereotypes one can "safely" believe in before being considered radical. The figure seems to imply that being a QAnon is morally worse than being a birther[19]. However, there isn't a specific order that one must follow to eventually become radicalised and one doesn't necessarily have to support each idea presented in the figure. As Innuendo Studios puts it: "Each layer sells itself as being the ultimate truth." (Innuendo Studios, 2019).

In the self-identification phase group bonding is integral. Opinions can become more extreme under influence of group polarisation (McCauley et al., 2008). This is a process that takes place when a group of people consistently discuss ideological topics. With the rise of the internet, group polarisation doesn't necessarily need to take place in physical proximity. If a set of individuals have similar points of view and repeatedly discuss these points of view, polarisation can take place. Through peer pressure, the minority will feel forced to agree with the majority opinion. Steadily moderate opinions become more radical. Another component to group polarisation is the argumentation theory (McCauley et al., 2008). This theory states that groups always have a set of views they prefer over others. When engaging in a debate, these individuals draw views from their own specific set or framework. Eventually, they all have a shared point of view since they drew it from the same framework. Discussions consist of repeated arguments with different wording. The parroted point of view tends to be the most radical one and consistently hearing the most extreme opinion frequently causes people to believe it. An individual with the most extreme opinion is lauded for expressing it. This naturally encourages them to do it more often. If they build up enough credit, they will be able to influence group discussions most effectively. In the meantime, having a moderate opinion is looked down upon. Step by step the group becomes more homogenous. Finally, another important phenomenon is the development of a sense of superiority (Hellinckx et al., 2017). The aforementioned "us vs. them" thinking pattern reaches a new height, causing the group to believe they are the only ones with the correct moral compass. Anyone that does not adhere to this compass will be looked down on.

In a modern context, the internet plays a key role during the acclimation process. 'Generation D', a German far-right group, circulated a document titled "Manual for Media Guerillas" in which they give tips on how to effectively use memes as a form of online activism. They state that people have a stronger response to visual material than text. "By using visual material, we can do excellent memetic warfare and bring our narratives to the people." (Generation D., 2017) Members are encouraged to make fake accounts, preferably representing a member of a targeted or opposing community. This is not an uncommon tactic for the far-right: in a 'Telefacts NU' documentary, two board members of local Vlaams Belang factions were part of a group chat exposed for creating fake accounts. On these accounts, members of the group chat pretended to be Muslim. One of the fake personas, named 'Bilal Bacaoui', posted the following: "Us Muslims will become plentiful. Within 10 to 20 years, we will apply Sharia law in Belgium." In a message discussing the fake account, a member said to ensure using bad grammar. The board members of Vlaams Belang are seen encouraging the practice (Telefacts NU, 2021). When outsiders see this account, the 'us vs. them'-mentality is emboldened. Individuals that were previously on the fence are now given "proof" that substantiates their suspicions. In this specific case, someone already uncomfortable with Islam can now point to the fake account, typically without being aware that the poster isn't a real person.

2.4.1.4 Indoctrination
During the indoctrination phase, the individual starts to separate from their former life. People in their surroundings may notice the individual pulling back, sometimes even completely cutting

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[19] An individual who believes in the conspiracy theory claiming Barack Obama's birthplace is in Kenya and is thus secretly Muslim.

off contact, as they instead surround themselves with like-minded individuals. They have completely accepted their new ideology, which they perceive as a cause that needs to be advanced. The individual starts actively theorising how certain problems can be solved; which is also known as justification processes (Hellinckx et al., 2017). This phase is also typified by the more frequent infighting of the group. People who aren't considered dedicated enough to the cause become ostracised. Whoever isn't radical *enough* will be blamed for perceived injustices done to them. It is *their* fault for not defending themselves.

Whoever is considered the enemy has been completely stripped of their humanity. This encourages the group to treat them with little to no sympathy. It is within this process that vocalisations encouraging violence are amplified. Luke Munn calls the third cognitive phase: *Dehumanisation*. It ensures that people who arepart of the far-right are never confronted with a human being that has a name or a story tied to them. Instead, they are dubbed Marxist or SJW. While it sounds like a conscious act, in many cases the individual believes that the target lacks a basic element that makes them human. Because of a certain characteristic or identity, they made a choice- and in the eyes of the far-right, that choice is a good enough reason to renounce their rights (Munn, 2019).

Whether dehumanisation plays a big part in the step to mass violence is still an avidly researched question. We do know that scientific racism was at the core of the Nazi ideology, striving to create a new image of what is considered a human being. A common strategy to achieve this was dubbing Jewish people as "parasites", in daily forms of propaganda. This parasite needed to be exterminated as if they were nothing but an invasive species (Steizinger, 2018). In his 2019 manifesto 'The Great Replacement', the Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant states the following: "Do not allow your enemies to grow unchecked. When you discover a nest of vipers in your yard, do you spare the adolescents?" The vipers in question are Muslims, lumped together as an anonymous pest. A little further down, Brenton Tarrant continues: "The enemies of our children are being born in our lands right now, even as you read this. [...] Preventing these enemies from reaching adulthood and their full potential of effect is of the importance." (Tarrant, 2019).

Donald Trump applied this strategy to his public speeches in a more discreet manner. When discussing certain minorities, he generalises them, stripping the group away from any nuance. Trump does this by adding the article 'the' to certain words. For example, the sentence "Afro-Americans work in the automotive industry" becomes "*The* Afro-Americans work in the automotive industry". The latter seems to imply that *all* Afro-Americans work in this industry, while the prior simply states that *some* do. Trump's strategical 'the' can completely overhaul the meaning and implications of a sentence. He doesn't always refer to black Americans as "*the* Afro-Americans", only utilising this strategy when it benefits the message. Donald Trump makes a clear separation between who he considers "us", or the "cultural us", and who is "them". "Us" are the supposed true Americans. When using an unnecessary article, he makes it clear who isn't a part of this group (Maly, 2018).

2.4.1.5 Action

The final phase in the radicalisation process is called "action". According to Luke Munn, this is the end of the new far-right pipeline. The individual has crafted their newfound identity. A group's political frustration is now turned into outward speech, actions, and perhaps even physical training. They have a strong need to "do something"; radical or extreme behaviour is communicated in actions. When discussing Lane Davis, a man charged for killing his father,

his friends shared that he had dabbled in Islam, in Marxism, in the *Occupy*[20] movement and even went through a phase of supporting al-Qaeda. Lane Davis would spend his time churning out conspiracy theories on his YouTube channel Seattle4Truth. Eventually, he would consider himself to be a white supremacist. In 2018, Davis fatally stabbed his father while calling his parents "leftist paedophiles" (Bernstein, 2018).

Even while using Lane Davis as an illustration of the descent into the pipeline, it is a common misconception that the final phase only concerns violent physical attacks. Instead, we define this phase as any type of "rebellious" behaviour carried out in front of a large crowd. Violence is intrinsically part of it. We don't limit acts of violence to physical violence but also include verbal violence or language that can initiate violence. The action phase consists of behaviour that is carried out because the individual does not believe there is any other solution left. This could include rallies, riots, physical training (often in a group), and violent attacks - both online and offline.

Naming these individuals can be extremely challenging when going by government official checklists. You can't call them terrorists when they haven't committed an act of physical violence yet. You also can't dub them a white supremacist if they haven't joined any official hate groups; in this case, "white supremacist sympathiser" would be more apt by formal definitions. For example, an official Australian government document written by Chris Angus in 2016 states the following: "If their ideas do not extend to using violence or advocating the use of violence, they should not be considered violent extremists." However, there is a current discourse questioning how these distinctions hold up when the internet has been blurring so many lines. Someone yelling racial epithets on public transport would be unanimously considered a hate crime, but what if these racial attacks happen online? Does a computer screen protect an individual from feeling threatened or harmed? Within this thesis, online attacks are included in this final phase.

Precht states that a spiritual leader becomes the most important element of the radicalised individual, in the case of religious radicalisation. When it comes down to radicalising towards the new far-right, this plays out a little differently. Even in tight-knit online communities, anonymity to a certain extent is encouraged. Otherwise, one risks being penalised. While there are figures in the media that are considered spokespeople, they aren't always blindly followed, nor do they always explicitly call for violence.

As mentioned previously, systemic research into specific features or psychological make-up of radicalists shows that very few conclusions can be drawn. In a study carried out by the NYPD in 2007, it was stated that most individuals who have carried out attacks mostly led unremarkable lives with rarely any criminal history (Precht, 2007). While far-right violence is by no means new, the addition of our current internet culture adds a degree of unpredictability. The ideologies are no longer formed in carefully organised hate groups but instead nurtured within anonymous environments or communities across the internet. This makes it considerably harder for security services to identify anyone at risk (Munn, 2019). Recent far-right terrorism mirrors the unpredictability of its online spaces: attackers pick their locations, targets, and motives at random without being ordered by a larger figure. They act as lone wolves, though they were encouraged by a large group of anonymous onlookers.

In the document created by 'Generation D.', visitors are motivated to red-pill people through a variety of strategies. For example, sympathisers should not waste their time in the YouTube comment section where only a few people will look, and communication is too fleeting. Instead,

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[20] A political movement against socio-economic inequality. The movement believes large corporations play a big part in causing worldwide inequality.

people are encouraged to post disparaging content in predominantly left or feminist spaces. If anyone attempts to engage in a discussion, respond to them with #FakeNews. It is on these platforms that far-right individuals manage to reach the most people. Readers are also told to target young women with a university background; they're "extra sensitive" and thus easy to rile up. The goal is to mock whoever got "*triggered*". Another element of manipulation is aptly titled "Beat Them At Their Own Game". Accuse the opposing party of being antisemitic, perhaps even photoshop them on a picture of the Third Reich (Generation D., 2017). One can call this a form of online warfare or, in the words of the far-right, a cultural revolution. Acts such as these can still be considered part of the final phase in the radicalisation process: while physical violence may not take place, the objective is still to harm and discredit opposing groups by any means necessary.

3   Practical Research

To answer the practical sub-question "What role does social media play in the daily environment of children between age 12 to 18?", the author ran a survey in two high schools. The questionnaire focuses on social media use among 12 to 18-year-olds. It was created using Google Forms and the questions were written in Dutch. The survey was split up into three main categories: general, social media use and news consumption. The survey offered full anonymity to its respondents and an option to view the answers upon completion. The author collected a total of 175 responses between the ages of 13 to 20. Due to its limited sample size, the questionnaire could serve as a pilot survey.

The survey was presented as a general social media questionnaire. Through this, the author hoped to collect straightforward and trustworthy answers. The author will present the relevant results through comparisons with the theoretical research. New or interesting findings will also be addressed and interpreted. The research sub-question "In what ways are children between age 12 to 18 susceptible to political radicalisation on the internet?" will also be partially contextualised. Through this, the author becomes a step closer to forming a satisfying conclusion to the research. Both the survey and its results can be found in Attachments 1 and 2.

The results will be presented below with further explanation and argumentation. To make the graphs more concise, the author made slight adjustments to the following questions and results:

- When enquiring the respondents about their age, it was requested to answer in digits only. Some respondents wrote their age fully ("13 years" instead of "13"). These answers were turned into single digits. One respondent wrote their name instead of their age and was thus not included in the finalised graph. Their name was also excluded from the results in Attachment 2, to protect their privacy.

- In questions 8 to 13, respondents were asked to detail what they use specific platforms for. If a respondent didn't use one of the platforms, they were requested to ignore the question. Regardless, several respondents wrote that they didn't use the platform in the "Other" bracket. These responses were omitted from the finalised graphs.

- In questions 8 to 13, respondents were asked to detail what they use specific platforms for. They were given the option to add a personalised response. However, some of these responses were redundant. For example, regarding the use of YouTube, two respondents wrote "K-pop". As the survey already lists "Music" as an option, this response seemed redundant. Said answers were fused with a corresponding category instead. Notable personalised answers will be addressed and discussed by the author.

- When respondents were asked to list social media applications they use, 11 individuals mentioned using Reddit. However, upon enquiring what they use Reddit for, at least 15 people responded. To avoid confusion, an adjusted graph will not be included.

- The calculated percentages were rounded up or down.

The original results can all be viewed closely in Attachment 1 and 2.

3.1   Survey – General

For the first part of the survey, respondents were asked general questions. Through this, the author gains a clear view of the demographic. To avoid harmful generalisations, these statistics are purely used to offer transparency to the readers. Out of the 175 respondents, 62.9% are female and 36.6% male. 0.6% identify as non-binary (see Graph 1).
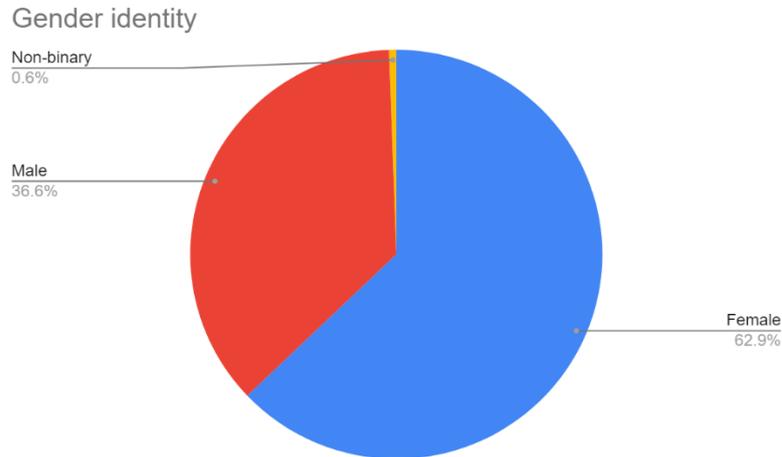
Graph 1. A pie chart representing the gender identity of the respondents.

The majority of the respondents are currently 14 years old: 61 out of the 175. Only two respondents were over the age of 18 (see Graph 2). Overall, there is a satisfactory and varied representation. A mostly younger demographic allows for a better look into which social media applications are currently on the rise.
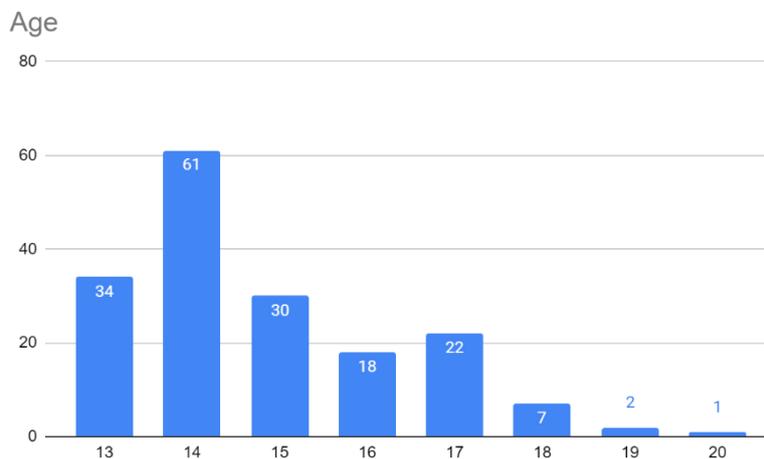
Graph 2. A column chart representing the age demographics of the respondents.

The final question in this section was inspired by the one showcased in Imec's 2019 results regarding one's most indispensable device, shown on page 12 of this work. According to Imec's report, 47% of Flemish people picked smartphones. In second place are computers, with 28% of the votes of the interviewed. Taking a look at this author's questionnaire (see Graph 3), the results among the respondents are considerably more dramatic. No less than 81.7% of the respondents picked their smartphone as the appliance that they cannot live

without. Smartphones are followed by gaming consoles, such as XBOX or PlayStation, but with only 5.7% of the votes. 4.6% of the respondents would not be able to live without their computer or laptop. This stark contrast could be due to the difference in age demographics: Imec interviewed adults, while this survey questioned teenagers. Another possibility is that the results have swayed since 2019. It would be unlikely for Imec to find such a dramatic difference in results only two years later, but there is no doubt the current generation prefers smartphones.
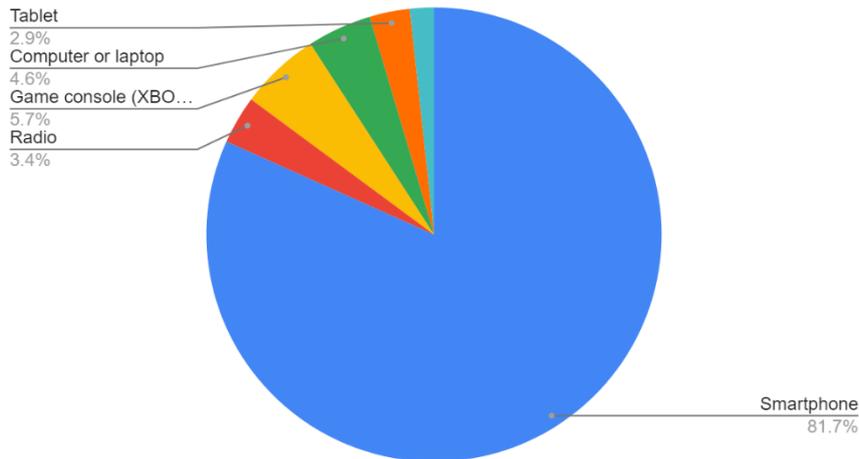
Graph 3. A pie chart representing the technological items the respondents could not live without.

3.2   Survey – Social Media Use
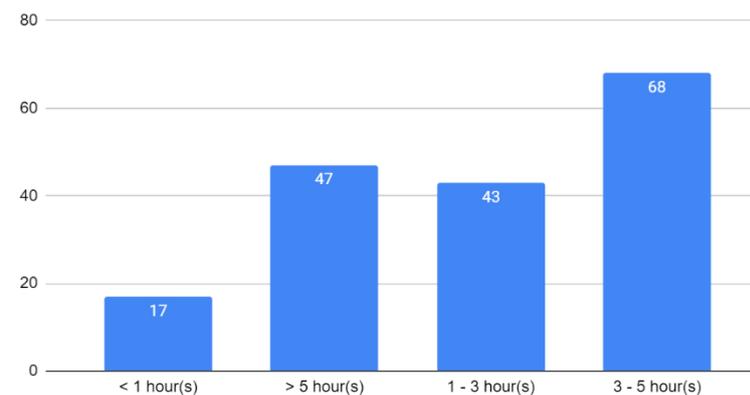
Graph 4. A column chart representing the amount of hours spent on social media on a school day.

The respondents were asked how many hours a day they look at social media on a school day (see Graph 4) and a day off. These hours aren't limited to smartphone use but include computers, tablets, or laptops at home too. The differences in results are notable. On school days, 38.9% of respondents spend between 3 to 5 hours looking at social media. 26.9% look at social media for more than 5 hours. This group is closely followed by 24.6% spending about 1 to 3 hours on social media during school days. Only 9.7% spend less than an hour looking at social media. It can be concluded that there is an even distribution in the answers: 90.3% of the respondents spend more than one hour looking at social media on a school day.

When taking a look at the number of hours spent on free days, such as the weekends, the results are a lot more one-sided (see Graph 5). Over half of the respondents (57.7%) spend more than 5 hours looking at social media on their free days. This category is followed by only 29.1% stating they spend between 3 and 5 hours looking at social media. Only 13.1% spend less than 3 hours on social media. This somewhat aligns with the 2018 Ofcom report, which

states children aged 12 to 15 are online at least 20 hours a week (Ofcom, 2018). According to the thesis' survey, and its focus on the age bracket of 12 to 18, 65% of the respondents spend at least 21 hours scouring social media every week. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the 2019 Imec report in which 33% of Flemish people use social media at least 49 minutes a day. This increases to 76 minutes a day when focusing on teenagers and young adults (Imec, 2019). Thus we can conclude that the intensity of social media use has steadily increased in the past years, especially among teenagers who hit the peak activity.

How many hours a day do you watch social media on a FREE DAY? Both on the smartphone and tablet or computer.
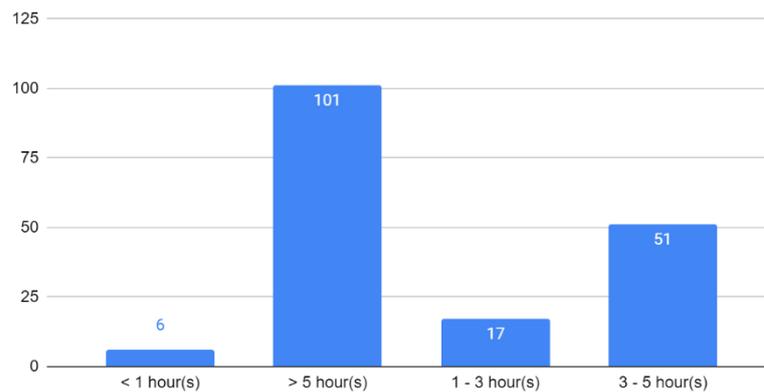
Graph 5. A column chart representing the amount of hours spent on social media on a free day.

According to the EU Kids Online report of 2020, 69% of children and teenagers, aged 9 to 17, say that their parents are the biggest source of knowledge regarding the internet, technology, or social media. Teachers are in 2nd place, with 64% (Eu Kids Online Report, 2020). This same question was asked within this thesis' survey (see Graph 6). The results turned out to be considerably different, with 50.3% of respondents stating they'll just Google the questions they have. 49.7% ask their friends for help. 26.3% ask their parents for help. Teachers are rarely asked for help: only 4% of the respondents stated doing so. Interestingly, 32.6% mentions that they're usually the ones being asked for help by others. These results shed more light on the idea that the digital native is digitally naive. When young people are pivoted as the most knowledgeable group regarding the internet and technology, there isn't an older group able to lead them through etiquette. Teenagers rely on themselves, Google, or their friends to figure out the answer to any questions they may have.

If you have questions about the internet, apps, technology or the like, who do you ask for help?
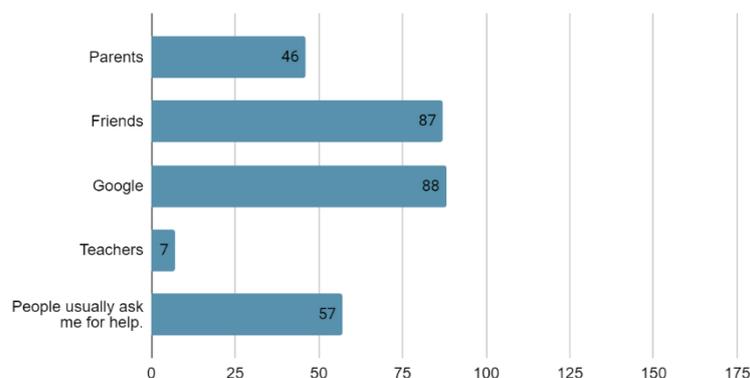
Graph 6. A bar chart representing who respondents ask for help regarding internet, apps or technology.

Apestaartjaren's 2019 report crowned YouTube and Instagram as the most popular social media applications for teenagers age 12 to 18. The report stated that TikTok was steadily climbing the ranks, with 41% of 12 to 14-year-olds using the application. Among chat applications, Snapchat, Instagram private messages, and WhatsApp were the most popular. In the meantime, Facebook and Messenger have been dropping in favourability (Apestaartjaren, 2020). These results are largely consistent with the thesis' survey (see Table 2). When asked to pick which social media applications they use, the respondents could pick more than one.

Instagram (90.3%) and YouTube (87.4%) remain the undefeated favourites. Surprisingly, Snapchat takes out third place with 83.4% of the votes. Reflecting the data from Apestaartjaren's report, TikTok is indeed the hot newcomer with 81.7% of the respondents using the application. Facebook (30.3%) has been losing ground with the new generation, as well as Messenger (26.3%). This doesn't have to be a loss for the company, however, as they own both Instagram and WhatsApp. Discord (29.7%) seems to be slowly surpassing Facebook in its userbase. Twitter only had 25.1% of the votes, though is more popular with older respondents. 4chan's userbase turned out to be tiny, with only 3 out of 175 respondents stating they frequent the website. This was expected: while the website has a rather small community, they remain culture-defining and influence the tone of other platforms.

Table 2. A table representing the answers to the question "Which social media apps or websites do you use?" Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

	Amount of respondents	Percentage
Instagram	158	90.3%
YouTube	153	87.4%
Snapchat	146	83.4%
TikTok	143	81.7%
WhatsApp	124	70.9%
Pinterest	63	36%
Facebook	53	30.2%
Discord	52	29.7%
Messenger	46	26.3%
Twitter	44	25.1%
Reddit	11	6.3%
Skype	9	5.1%
4chan	3	1.7%
Tumblr	1	0.6%

For the following section, respondents were asked on what they use certain platforms for. This question was posed for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Discord, and YouTube. If the respondent didn't use one of these given applications, they could skip the question. The author

will not give a deep analysis on all the collected results, but rather point out the most notable or important notes. The full results can be closely inspected in Attachment 2.

Among the 53 respondents that use Facebook, 80.8% use the application to stay in touch with friends. Its secondary function is to keep up with the news, selected by 65.4% of the respondents. Watching funny content applied to 48.1% of respondents. It is important to keep in mind that Facebook has had a dwindling young user base. These results further underline that majority of Gen Z holds onto the application out of pure formality. Not many thoroughly browse through the platform. Though when they do, they gravitate towards the news on their feed.

Out of the 44 Twitter users, the majority (90.9%) use the platform to view funny content. The second most common use of Twitter, at 75%, is to keep up with famous people. 61.4% of respondents use Twitter to follow the news. Only 38.6% of the respondents stated that they use Twitter to post their Tweets. This could mean that majority of Twitter users only Retweet rather than post anything of their own. Interestingly, one respondent mentioned they use Twitter specifically to have discussions about politics with other people. These results mostly showcase the flexibility of Twitter. You can very easily be a consumer rather than a creator, much like YouTube. When comparing Twitter to other platforms, checking news is one of the most common reasons behind using the application.

Instagram is the most popular platform with 158 out of 175 users using the application. Much like Twitter, the platform is incredibly flexible in what it can offer: 74.68% use Instagram to stay in touch with friends or family. This is very closely followed by viewing funny content (74.1%). 72.8% use Instagram to keep up with famous people. The margins thin out a bit when viewing the final two categories, though they remain significant. Only 62% actively post their content on Instagram. Finally, 37.3% use the platform to watch the news. One respondent said one of their main sources of news was the Instagram profile @cestmocro. Taking a look at the account, the news they post is incredibly sensationalised: their most commonly discussed topics are rapes and murders. The account tends to screenshot parts of news articles but doesn't mention their sources nor include links to the original, full posts. This is a common issue with supposed news platforms on Instagram. It actively discourages its userbase from doing their research as these posts simplistically regurgitate them.

Among the respondents, Discord's userbase is almost as big as Facebook's. Of the 52 users, the majority (84.6%) use the platform for video games such as playing with friends, streaming, or keeping up with their favourite games. 76.9% have Discord to keep in touch with friends or family. One of the respondents stated they mainly use it to keep in touch with people they've never met before. 32.7% use Discord to actively discuss specific interests in other servers. This is followed by 26.9% of respondents who have the application to share funny content. The number of respondents who use Discord for school or news is quite low: both options were picked by only 9.6% of respondents. These results confirm that Discord is still largely seen as a platform for gamers, despite the platform's continuous efforts to appeal to a larger crowd.

Finally, YouTube was the second most popular application with 153 votes. Its most common function is for music-related content, with 80.3% of the respondents. The second most popular category is video games content, such as Let's Plays[21] or reviews, picked by 54.9%. 52.3% use YouTube to watch vlogs. 34% of the respondents stated that they use YouTube to view educational content, such as short documentaries. This category could potentially blend in with the 'news' category, depending on the interests of each respondent. However, 'news' was selected by only 17.7% of the respondents. It would have been interesting to have asked the

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[21] A common format in which a viewer watches a YouTuber or streamer play a videogame.

respondents to name their favourite YouTubers to do a deep dive into what kind of content seems to be the most popular. Regardless, the answers are varied and offer great insight. YouTube offers limitless content.

3.3   Survey – News Consumption

The respondents were asked about their general views on news consumption. Through this, their trust in the media can be measured. The results (see Table 3) turned out to be rather split. The answers with the most votes were bolded and underlined. The respondents could answer with numbers 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 meaning "very" or "completely".

- When gauging how interested the respondents are in the news, the reactions were divided. The majority, 39.4%, had a moderate interest in the news. Only 4% are very interested in the news while 11.4% have no interest at all. Overall, the majority of the respondents have a moderate to low interest in the news.

- The respondents consider themselves better-informed thanks to the internet: 42.3% state they're quite informed thanks to the internet while 32% say they're very informed. 0.2% do not think the internet informs them at all. It can be concluded that the respondents have trust in what they read on the internet.

- Interestingly, this trust becomes wobbly when focusing on the news. A majority (38.9%) have moderate trust in the news. 32% have good trust in the news, but only 4.6% state having complete trust. 5.7% don't trust the news at all. While it's a marginally low percentage, it's considerably higher compared to their view of the internet at large.

- When asked if they ever feel overwhelmed by the amount of news they see, the responses were split. The largest group of the respondents, 28%, don't feel very overwhelmed. 25.7% are moderately overwhelmed. 12.6% of the respondents aren't overwhelmed at all, though this same percentage can be matched to individuals who feel incredibly overwhelmed. The author suspects answers change depending on when respondents are asked the question. In a period of more publicised conflict, whether nationally or internationally, they may be quicker to consider themselves overwhelmed.

- The amount of concern regarding fake or misleading news is divided. The largest group, 31.4%, has a moderate concern. 22.9% is pretty concerned while 11.4% is very concerned. However, at least 12% of respondents aren't concerned at all. The author did notice a pattern: older respondents, above the age of 15, were more likely to be concerned about the spread of misleading or false news.

Table 3. A table representing the answers to the statements on the right. 1 is not at all, 5 is completely.

	1	2	3	4	5
How interested are you in the news?	11.4%	22.9%	**<u>39.4%</u>**	22.3%	4%
Are you better-informed thanks to the internet?	0.2%	2.3%	21.7%	**<u>42.3%</u>**	32%
How much do you trust the news?	5.7%	18.9%	**<u>38.9%</u>**	32%	4.6%
Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the amount of news?	12.6%	**<u>28%</u>**	25.7%	21.1%	12.6%
How concerned are you about the spread of misleading or false news?	12%	22.3%	**<u>31.4%</u>**	22.9%	11.4%

Looking further into how and where the respondents get their news from helps us better understand these statistics (see Graph 7). They were also able to state that they do not keep up with the news at all. The largest portion of respondents (86.9%) uses their smartphone to consult the news, followed by 58.9% picking the TV as one of their most valuable sources. 49.1% use their computer or laptop. Only 13.1% read the newspaper. The minority, 11.4%, state they don't follow the news at all.

What appliances or sources do you use to consult news? You can choose more than one.

Source	Value
Smartphone	152
Computer of laptop	79
Radio	38
TV	103
Tablet	26
Newspaper	23
I'm not into that at all	20
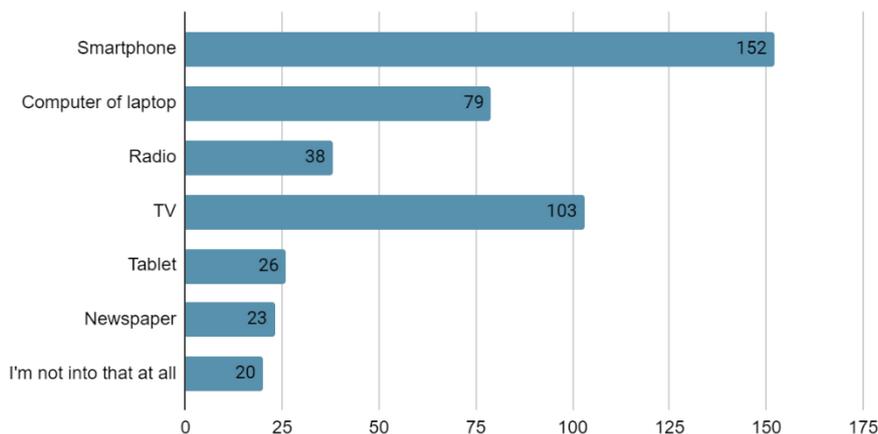
Graph 7. A bar chart representing what appliances or sources the respondents use when checking the news. They had the ability to pick more than one answer.

The appliances or sources from which the respondents get their news makes clear which platforms or applications they are using when they access the news, which was asked in the following question. These percentages will be calculated according to the number of respondents answering this question, which is 175. Interestingly, the results for this question aren't always consistent with the answers given per social media platform. For example, when asked what respondents used Facebook for, only 34 stated they use it to read the news. On

the question below (see Graph 8), 42 teenagers say Facebook is their biggest source for news. This makes up 24% of the total respondents. While out of the 158 Instagram users, only 59 mentioned using the application for news. In these results, 64% of all respondents picked Instagram, making the platform the most common news source for teenagers. News websites, such as HLN.be or VRT.be, came in second with 46.3% of the votes. Only 21.1% use the apps of these news publications. The previously discussed worries regarding teenagers mostly getting their information through second-hand, and sourced, mediums are especially apparent in these results.

Graph 8. A bar chart representing what websites or apps the respondents use when checking the news. They had the ability to pick more than one answer.

Confirming the reliability of an article can be achieved in many ways: one can read past a sensationalised headline, check the news publication, view the website and research what their focus is, and so on. However, the results of this question paint a rather disappointing picture (see Graph 9). Only 11.4% of the respondents can confidently say they always check the reliability of the news articles they read. 51.4% state they sometimes check the reliability of an article. A worryingly large portion, 37.1%, says they never double-check if an article is reliable. This generally aligns with the new trend of bite-sized news on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. They rarely mention any sources for their reposted material, and when they do viewers don't check them out. If an Instagram post names its sources, the viewers are more likely to view the content as trustworthy, without looking any further.
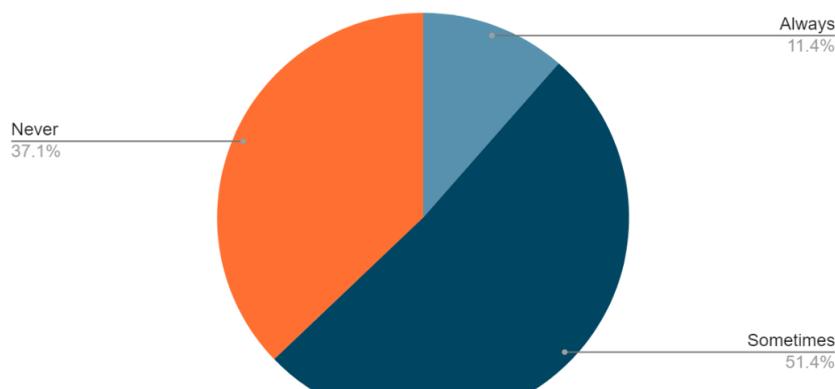
Graph 9. A pie chart representing how often respondents check if a news article is reliable or not.

4   Design Research

Within this chapter, this author will address the motive behind the designed product. The developmental process of the product will be explained, serving as a smooth transition to the design motive. The final version will be presented and put to the test by utilising a set of collected confessionals from individuals with a past far-right involvement, in varying degrees. It is important to note that exploratory research is an intrinsic part of the designed product. The components of the designed model will be thoroughly clarified to facilitate the process. The model can also be found in the attachments. Through this, the design question "How do we sort radicalised children aged 12 to 18 within the radicalisation process?" will be addressed.

4.1.1   Design Motive

Far-right radicalisation in an online context is a relatively new phenomenon. At the very least, the research behind it has only managed to discuss the tip of the iceberg. The movement is ever-changing and dynamic, as are the dominant ideologies behind it. To fully understand how radicalisation takes place, one needs to understand the inner workings of internet personas and cultures. The far-right is no longer white supremacist groups organising gatherings in broad daylight. They have found that online contact is not only safer, but also offers a limitless reach. This online crowd has undoubtedly become the major faction within the far-right. It also poses a variety of new threats. Pinpointing individuals at risk of radicalisation has never been more difficult in an age of anonymity and commodified dark humour. While family and friends can be a strong influence, many individuals radicalise entirely of their own accord, solely through their use of the internet.

The model is based on the aforementioned existing model by Tomas Precht, "Process of radicalisation – from conversion to terrorism". Precht's model was specifically designed to be used within contexts of Islamic radicalisation. This proved to be challenging when attempting reapplication on political far-right radicalisation. While religious radicalisation has a strong online movement as well, there is a stronger sociality component to its framework. For all but one of the collected confessionals, the far-right radicalisation process started online and typically didn't move beyond said online space. The aspect of group bonding is also considerably more fractured within far-right communities: while it exists, and is one of the driving forces behind its supposed attractiveness, anonymity is also sought after. An individual can fully radicalise behind their computer screens without ever having to take part in physical meetings of specific groups. The internationality of the far right's plight also plays a strong role: the greatest benefit of the internet is its global reach. It is the main reason behind Génération Identitaire's influence on the United Kingdom's discourse. 2016 was a year of dominance for the far-right in the United States, which kept the motor running for the rest of Europe; proving first-hand that the far-right never truly disappears.

Existing models that attempt to recognise radicalised individuals typically focus on religious extremism or far-right groupings who gather in person. Because of this limited scope, teenagers tend to be left out. The internet has added a new light to the problem at hand: early radicalisation can happen everywhere, with indoctrination taking place in anonymous communities or private group chats. Profiling someone at risk of radicalising, or already radicalised, is difficult. This became the driving motivation behind the product's design.

To use this model for personal situations, the individual is encouraged to always keep an open atmosphere where the subject is willing to discuss certain ideas. They may shy away from expressing anything that is excessively radical. Far-right talking points, which have been discussed thoroughly in the exploratory research, always share a common and recognisable core. Per the subject's dedication behind the point of view, the language changes considerably.

The characteristics within the model have been carefully analysed throughout the exploratory research. Collecting confessionals of individuals, who radicalised when they were minors, was a key component to developing the model as it added the possibility to further perfect the concept. The confessionals showed that radicalisation doesn't happen within one phase, completely isolated from the characteristics of the next. The radicalisation process is a simultaneous development of several factors. There isn't always a logical progression, though a set of key elements were pinpointed. This allows space for differentiation between phases. This author also wished to avoid an excessively detailed model as this would limit its use. The crafted model aims to modernise already existing concepts. In the future, this system could be built upon further or adapted according to the setting.

The goal of this product, and the thesis in general, is not to fearmonger: it simply adds a different view to the complexity of radicalisation which doesn't need to be an inherently bad thing. Many individuals have radical ideas without posing a threat to society. One should only worry if those ideas are at risk of harming other groups. This author hopes to encourage critical consumption of social media and assert that the influence of internet culture at large cannot be downplayed. Anyone can be radicalised at any time. However, one shouldn't attempt to make assumptions about any individual within the model. The model is best used when there is a concern regarding an individual self-isolating in certain contexts.

4.1.2 Designed Model

The finished product is a minimalised adaptation of Precht's model: one can separate a total of four phases. The exploratory research delved deeper into these exact phases but to correctly frame the developed model, the key characteristics shall be summarised once more. The table is split up into the following phases:

1. The pre-radicalisation phase (or normalisation)
2. The self-identification phase (or acclimation)
3. The indoctrination phase (or dehumanisation)
4. The action phase

It is important to note that the radicalisation process does not occur in a clean, systematic manner. An individual can find themselves within two phases simultaneously: they can showcase signs of characteristics sorted under different phases. It could be much more apt to sort certain individuals in phases 1.5 or 2.5. The "us vs. them"-thinking typical to the second phase can already be a visible characteristic to someone who is otherwise sorted in the first phase. There is no fixed process every individual will follow. Each person's radicalisation process is unique and the included factors within the model only attempt to pinpoint the most common ones.

Another notable aspect of using this model is that individuals are rarely sorted past the second phase: the non-action phases are the most common ones. The action phase is rare, hence the decision to encapsulate non-violent actions within this section as well. For example, Precht's model sorted physical training within the indoctrination phase, or phase 3. This was moved to the action phase as this author considers the need to start arming oneself as a "means to an end" for the radicalised individual. They may not be actively looking for fights, but the very belief that they need to be ready at all times for potential conflict showcases their dedication to the cause at large.

Finally, while phases can emerge simultaneously, one cannot jump from the pre-radicalisation phase straight to the indoctrination phase. While the characteristics can coexist, an individual cannot move to the dehumanisation of their perceived enemy without going through a process

of blame-shifting. To reach the "action" phase, one needs to have experienced at least a handful of features of the previous phases. The perceived factors can develop in an isolated manner. The model and its corresponding explanation will be presented below:

Table 2. The radicalisation process.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**
Background factors: • Identity crisis • Experience of alienation or isolation • Feeling misunderstood • Personal traumas and situations **Key characteristics:** • Identity searching • Frustrations with society • Blame shifting • Discomfort with extreme or radical opinions • Hide behind irony and satire (memes) • Start of the desensitisation process **Opportunity:** Predominantly takes place in online spaces.	**Key characteristics:** • Us vs. them • Discovery of new potential identity • Conditioning to surroundings • Sensitivity threshold is heightened (but not "all the way") • New normal or standard • Group polarisation • Strong influence of argumentation theory **Opportunity:** Group bonding becomes integral in both online and physical spaces.	**Key characteristics:** • Preparation for action • Separation from former life • Cut off contact from previous friend groups • Active theorising • Dehumanisation of the enemy • Full transition to political movements or identities • More group in-fighting **Opportunity:** Stronger group bonding both online and in physical spaces. Individuals that aren't "radical enough" are ousted.	**Key characteristics:** • Need to take action as a last resort → solution to a problem • Not limited to physical violence: protests, rallies, physical training, troll campaigns,… • Core objective: Harm and discredit an opposing group **Opportunity:** Strong group bond but potential acts by "lone wolves". Lone wolves still feel part of a core or fringe group.

The process of "red-pilling", despite being listed before the sub-chapter "pre-radicalisation", is still considered part of the first phase: **the pre-radicalisation phase**. Profiling an individual potentially at risk of far-right radicalisation has proven to be unproductive, but psychological and emotional factors are worth considering. While anyone can be at risk of radicalisation, an existing sense of isolation, depression, or existentialism puts one considerably more at risk. This sense of loss is particularly more tangible among teenagers who feel misunderstood and are thus constantly searching and developing an identity. With the normalcy of the internet, younger demographics uncover a political awakening online much more frequently. Individuals who find themselves in less than optimal living conditions also tend to express frustrations with society. There is a sense that the individual is less than they should be. These grievances could lead to blame-shifting: when the individual's relationship with their surroundings is negatively affected by events out of their control, there is a need to find a tangible target to blame. For example, an unfortunate economical standing can lead an individual to feel slighted by groups who they believe are taking advantage of governmental support. Someone in the pre-radicalisation phase feels their livelihood or morals are under attack by a certain force, and it is their goal to uncover who or what this force is. They'll be introduced to a certain point of

view that attempts to find solutions to questions that may not have any. However, within the first phase, this will remain very surface-level. An individual can only be effectively radicalised through small steps: they'll be visibly uncomfortable with more radical opinions, but those points of view wrapped in a funny or satirical package are easier to accept. There is a certain humour to be found in these expressed ideas, which is why memes prove to be a powerful desensitisation tool. This is the reasoning behind its sub-name "normalisation". The pre-radicalisation phase predominantly takes place in online spaces, though in fewer cases the individual will first be influenced by friends or family.

The **self-identification phase** takes place when the individual has found a group or a community that is typically used as a stepping stone towards a solidified ideology. The individual is introduced to a potential new identity and will start considering themselves a part of this construct, in varying degrees. After a long process of conditioning and desensitisation, the individual has developed a new "normal". The sensitivity threshold is pushed further, though not yet as far down the line as it could be. A consequence of this desensitisation is a lessening of overall rationality: points of view previously deemed excessive are now largely accepted. Group bonding now becomes an integral component of the radicalisation phase. There is a sense of belonging that was not present prior, but this also makes the individual more vulnerable to further conditioning. To avoid polarisation and ensuing ostracisation, the individual will be quick to agree with the most extreme opinion to avoid judgment by the group. The individual develops a reliance on this new community. This is a combination of the aforementioned group polarisation and the argumentation theory. Another result of the strong group bond is the development of a sense of superiority towards anyone considered their opposite.

The third phase, **indoctrination**, is often confused with the self-identification phase: many individuals could potentially find themselves somewhere between both phases. A key component to the third phase is the individual's tendency to start separating from their former life: contact with surrounding people, such as past friends, will either be lessened or cut off completely. Certain topics will no longer be discussed as openly as prior, thus people close to the individual become estranged to various degrees. It is within this process that one will start actively theorising how certain problems could be solved. This is the beginning of the justification process. The individual may now leave online spaces more often as they begin to seek out like-minded people in their physical presence. Regardless, group bonding remains an important factor. The group may start infighting more often as the people who aren't considered radical enough are removed. The indoctrination phase is also dubbed the "dehumanisation" phase as one has perfected their discourse against the enemy. Opposing parties are treated without sympathy, though this isn't always perpetrated consciously. One starts to believe that the enemy has a quality that innately makes them less human.

Action is the name of the final phase. The fourth phase is the most intensive to reach and only a handful of individuals will reach this point. An individual within the final phase believes they have to take action, as nothing else helps. The objective is to harm and discredit any opposing group no matter the cost. However, this author made a conscious decision to include non-terroristic actions within this group. Rebellious acts such as troll campaigns, riots, manifestations, rallies, and physical training are also included even if physical violence was avoided: if violent language was used, they will be considered as part of the action phase. While manifestations, rallies, and protests are perfectly acceptable and reasonable ways to express dissatisfaction with society as a whole, if violent ideas are expressed throughout they are considered inherently part of the final phase. In the case of physical training: the individual ensures they're prepared for a fight at all times. The group atmosphere of the third phase is largely carried over, but individuals are more likely to act as "lone wolves". This is a conscious decision to avoid blame falling into the hands of the identified ideology at large.

In the following sub-chapter, the model will be put to the test by utilising a set of collected confessionals of past far-right individuals; alternatively, individuals who almost found themselves falling into the pipeline.

4.1.3 Testing the Model

This author has collected five confessionals from individuals who either identified with the far-right or almost did. A conscious decision was made to reach out to people who now no longer identify with the far right as they show a bigger willingness to talk about their experiences with a critical eye. The individuals can pinpoint exactly what caused them to fall into a potential pipeline. This point of view allowed this author to add more detail to the model so that it can be easily reapplied to situations where individuals are still an active part of the far right. The confessionals will be presented in the shape of a case study.

These individuals were reached out to through Facebook or Discord, predominantly in political spaces or through members of political Facebook and Discord groups. Some of them have currently found themselves in a more neutral political outlook while others have moved further left. Four individuals are Belgian while one is Canadian. All but one individual is currently older than 18 years old, though they all found themselves radicalising when they were younger than 18. Despite these different backgrounds, this author ensured that the confessionals obtained were thorough enough to apply to the designed model in an even manner. The following set of questions was proposed during each interview:

- *At what age did you (almost) identify with a far-right ideology?*
- *How did you (almost) fall into this identity? Was it related to your environment (friends and family), social media, certain frustrations, or other interests? Maybe a combination of several factors?*
- *What exact ideas did you hold that you would consider (related to) the far-right?*
- *At what point did you realize this was not for you? Was it some kind of "wake-up call" or rather a slow evolution?*
- *Do you have any advice for young people who would be in the same position?*

This author made sure to give the option of identifying with "almost far-right". During the first interview, this author did not include this distinction which caused the interviewee to argue that they "had never gone all the way". This showcased a misunderstanding with radicalisation at large: one doesn't need to actively hold extremist and violent ideas to be considered radicalised. A person's radicalisation can be very surface-level and harmless, but still present. The individuals were given the option to answer with as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable with. Some of the individuals were eager to divulge details while others showed a bit more apprehension. While not necessarily a part of the designed radicalisation model, this author asked the individuals what caused them to step back from these specific spaces. This brought forth some very interesting perspectives.

4.1.3.1 Individual A

Individual A is 16 years old. They were raised nonreligious which left them with many questions about the world. They feel misunderstood by the world and express a need to find people who understand them better. The individual begins watching atheist YouTubers to find answers to their questions. In the meantime, the individual sees a lot about ISIS and its terrorist acts in Europe on the news. Their YouTube feed starts recommending more outwardly anti-Islamic content. They are a frequent gamer and during this period Gamergate is a strong presence in the community. Slowly but steadily, they find themselves agreeing with the points being made in the consumed content.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**

Placement: Phase 1

Clarification: The individual is in a very deep process of identity searching and this is reinforced by their feelings of being misunderstood. The terrorist acts on television leave them frustrated with the state of society. The individual begins considering religious groups as an active problem. This radicalisation process completely takes place in online spaces such as YouTube or gaming communities. However, they have mostly skirted the edge of far-right ideas. The individual did not yet fall down the pipeline, they are looking down the tunnel.

Background information: The individual is now 24 years old. They don't think they were ever fully far right, but rather skirted along a more acceptable edge. At the time, the anti-Islamic discourse was everywhere and an easy radicalisation tool. The radicalisation process was halted after the individual went through a breakup: this event caused them to actively question their own identity. It ended up being a difficult process for them as they had to unlearn past mindsets. The individual started forming an interest in philosophy and environmental issues which steadily shifted their point of view in a different direction. Looking back, they realise they were too young to be so sure of their opinions, especially when said opinions affected other people purely on the grounds of their identity.

4.1.3.2 Individual B

Individual B is 14 years old. Raised in a religious family, they began to actively question their faith at a young age. In search of an answer, they started watching atheist YouTubers such as Mr Repzion and Armoured Sceptic. Not long after, their YouTube feed recommended more right-leaning figures such as Sargon of Akkad, Chris Ray Gun, and Shoe0nHead. Slowly but steadily the content shifted away from religious discourse. Instead, they started watching videos that were anti-feminist and anti-SJW. Individual B does not question the validity of what these content creators are saying: They market themselves as "sceptic debunkers". Eventually, the individual repeats terms such as "free market capitalism" and "big government" without knowing their meaning. They state that healthcare and arts funding are communist and thus bad. They believe justice and equality already exist so feminists and SJWs are "up to something": These groups have ulterior motives and want to take over the world. The individual starts searching out opposing groups to mock their content.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**

Placement: Phase 2.5

Clarification: Individual B largely found themselves in the second phase of the radicalisation process with a small crossover to the third phase. The individual developed a new normal: They moved away from moderate content creators such as Mr Repzion and Armoured Sceptic and instead watch more reactionary figures such as Chris Ray Gun and Shoe0nHead. Sargon of Akkad is one of the more alarming people on the list: the creator was an integral part of the Gamergate controversy and has since self-identified as anti-feminist. He has parroted the Great Replacement theory, believing that Jewish and Muslim people have created identity politics as a means to take down Western civilisation. Knowing this, there is a clear heightened sensitivity threshold, though the individual has not gone to extremes yet. The individual begun identifying with a new political identity. They expressed their "us vs. them"-thinking in the third phase: the indoctrination. The individual was actively searching out opposing content to leave negative or disparaging comments with the goal of discrediting them. This is only a slight crossover to the third phase and is not yet inherently violent.

Background information: Individual B did not give their current age, but they are assumed to now be over the age of 18. They describe 2016 as their turning point, more specifically, near the end of the 2016 US elections. The individual noticed their favourite content creators had begun hanging out with extreme figures such as Milo Yiannopoulos or Dave Rubin. The latter presents himself as a run-of-the-mill conservative but is known for inviting extremist far-right figures such as Paul Joseph Watson, Lauren Southern, and Stefan Molyneux on his show. The individual felt uncomfortable with this shift to more extreme discourse but continued watching. They stumbled upon the transgender content creator Philosophy Tube with the goal of "laughing at a dumb leftist talk about gender studies". Instead, they found themselves feeling informed. This began a spiral of confusion where the individual realised a lot of their previously formed opinions had been misrepresented to them. They now encourage individuals who find themselves in a similar position to search for more professional information rather than sticking to figures who make a living out of "debunking".

4.1.3.3 Individual C

Individual C is 17 years old and identifies with atheism. They express a variety of niche interests and opinions that catch the attention of their surroundings: For example, individual C has recently become vegan. They discovered Hitler was also vegan which made them wonder if perhaps Hitler wasn't so bad after all. They also found interest in the Norwegian musician, Varg Vikernes, who was convicted of murder and committing arson on four Christian churches. Alongside this, Vikernes considers his views to align with Esoteric Nazism. Individual C is fascinated with this case. Slowly, they develop a certain sympathy for Nazi-adjacent movements: Are they that bad?

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**

Placement: Phase 1

Clarification: Individual C has a lot of interest and sympathies with far-right discourse, however, they are not yet fully convinced. While there is nothing wrong with being atheist, it could play a role in their need to search for "something more". As a fan of metal music, they stumble upon the controversial figure Varg Vikernes. Varg Vikernes does showcase a clear alignment with Nazism. At this point, individual C mainly has a morbid curiosity. They have not yet taken any specific actions based on these interests.

Background information: The individual did not mention their current age, only that they are now an adult. They describe their journey as mainly having sympathies. The individual did not elaborate any further, but one can assume they often wondered if certain groups are as questionable as the world wants you to believe. They mention still being opposed to Donald Trump and Belgium's far-right parties during this process of identity searching. The individual says they were never truly convinced, but there was a lot of interest. A turning point was leaving high school and meeting different people. Individual C encourages people to move more towards reality: take a step back from the internet and start visiting individuals who are at the bottom of society economically-wise.

4.1.3.4   Individual D

Individual D is 18 years old and proud of their heritage. In the past, Individual D had been a part of a military youth movement. Now, the individual has started their training at the police force. Every day they see all kinds of media messages about Muslim individuals and acts of terrorism. Simultaneously, they witness violence towards the police. At one point individual D became a victim of a violent altercation with a Muslim. Individual D has now developed a very negative image of the Muslim community. They think Muslims are people that need to be dealt with. Individual D starts turning to far-right parties as they are the only ones calling Muslims a problem.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**

Placement: Phase 2.5

Clarification: The individual is experiencing a clear sense of "us vs. them": It is them against the Muslims, who are violent and disrespectful towards the police. Their traumatic experience with assault pinpoints a strong motive behind their progressed radicalisation process. In search of people who could understand their pain, Individual D turns to far-right parties who voice what was previously unsaid. While not fully identifying as far-right yet, they show interest and support. What moves Individual D further into the third phase is how far the dehumanisation process has developed. Their radicalisation takes place both online and in the real world. The inclusion of their past in a military youth movement is purposefully misleading within this case study: The thesis has discussed the far right's relationship with military training briefly, but Individual D's interest is completely separate from this hobby. Individual D was in this youth movement before their radicalisation process truly started.

Background information: Individual D is now 25 years old. As they started looking into the far-right parties, they stumbled upon a documentary on Belgium's far-right parties and their roots in the Flemish National Union: they are notorious for collaborating with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. As individual D is very proud of their heritage and country, they are appalled by these ties. What added further fuel to the fire was their experiences with coming out of the closet: Individual D felt horrified by the extremely negative messages these parties shared about the LGBT+. Today, they are comfortable with being politically neutral. They believe no one should be discriminated against on grounds of their identity, heritage, religion, sexuality, and so on. As long as everyone works hard, there are no problems. They encourage people to always dig a little deeper than what parties show on a surface level.

4.1.3.5   Individual E

Individual E will soon turn 18, which means they'll have to vote for the first time! They've never really thought about politics before. Individual E has no clue who to vote for. They reach out to friends for advice: They tell Individual E all about why the far-right party is the best option. They're honest and have the guts to call out the real problems in society. Individual E's friends start sharing far-right memes. They're so wrong they're right. Individual E finds themselves laughing along with a lot of these posts. They decide to vote for the far-right party.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Pre-radicalisation Normalisation	**Self-identification** Acclimation	**Indoctrination** Dehumanisation	**Action**

Placement: Phase 1

Clarification: Individual E finds themselves in the early stages of the radicalisation process. They were largely clueless about politics but allow themselves to be influenced by their friends. This is very typical for teenagers. It can also be considered a mild version of identity searching. Individual E is introduced to easily digestible far-right content; posts that can be easily laughed off and considered harmless. Regardless, this convinces individual E to vote for the far-right party.

Background information: Individual E did not mention their current age, but one can assume they are around 20 years old. Individual E did not detail what kind of sentiments they found themselves interested in, just that they were rather inappropriate. They eventually found themselves deeply regretting who they voted for after a conversation with a friend. This friend encouraged individual E to look more into the far-right parties and the things they say. Individual E stumbled upon a lot of the explicitly racist messages and was horrified. They felt extremely uncomfortable with this: Individual E will never vote for them again. They do not have any advice as everyone's political discovery is their own, but they do encourage people to do as much research as they can before they vote: we are all people and we have to learn how to live together.

5   Reflection

While I'm overall pleasantly surprised with the results, there are a few lacking factors that showcase inexperience and some insecurities. Without the confessionals, the model would've been too robust to fully understand. The product relied heavily on an extensive literature study to sum up the different characteristics of each phase. However, with the limited amount of time, I had to make certain choices. This thesis could've easily been over 200 pages. Certain topics could've been explored further. Still, I settled for the bare bones of the problem at hand. The priority was ensuring the research questions received their corresponding answers. Unlike other theses, the literature study was still fully in development well past April. Rather unexpectedly, the topic (far-right radicalisation) gained more traction in the media at large during the first half of 2021. Dries Van Langenhove was put on trial for possible violations of the Belgian Anti-Racism Law, the Negationism Law, and the Weapons Law. Then, in May 2021, career military and terror suspect Jürgen Conings made waves throughout the country following death threats targeting virologists and the government. A Facebook group supporting the man had over 40.000 members. It got to a point where I decided to place a soft deadline on events happening, or unfolding, past April. Admittedly, this deadline wasn't always followed, as can be seen in the bibliography and list of citations.

A big part missing in the literature study is a critical view on the nature vs. nurture debate, and how this could influence one's probability of radicalising one way or another. It is a topic often discussed in the PXL course 'Professional Development'. I believe it is an undeniable factor that a person's upbringing can influence their outlook on life. Maybe an individual with right-leaning parents is quicker to fall into a far-right pipeline. Or perhaps the opposite can take place, and they will move to far-left rhetoric instead. As I haven't collected any thorough information or statistics on this, only mere guesses can be made. There is also the question of the internet's role within nature versus nurture. This thesis established in the chapter 'Modern Internet' that parents are, unconsciously, relying on the internet to play a part in their child's development. A teenager can be surrounded by liberal, or even leftist, individuals in their direct environment but still dwell in right-wing online spaces. What role does nurture play here? It remains an interesting question and this thesis hasn't given a satisfactory answer.

The product is also influenced by the exclusion of certain topics or details. It would've been interesting to include more anecdotal events of behaviourisms such as blame-shifting or group polarisation. These examples would've given the ability to ask the interviewed individuals about their own experiences with certain characteristics. In general, the model is inspired by previously crafted work. A more extensive dive into psychological work could've had different results.

To collect confessionals as fast as possible I interviewed the individuals through messaging or voice calls. The achieved insights were incredibly illuminating. However, a face-to-face meetup could've made asking more questions easier. It would've also been considerably more personable. Instead, I stuck to the prepared set of questions and didn't move past those limitations. It was because of time management I decided to approach individuals who are no longer involved with the far-right. These individuals were found through antifascist or social justice-themed communities on Facebook and Discord: they were either member of these groups or acquaintances of members. All were incredibly open about sharing their past experiences, which made approaching them easier. If I could redo this part of the design approach, I would've included confessionals of both current far-right individuals and ex-far-right. The differences in points of view would be interesting to compare. Ex-far-right individuals

have gained a certain distance from their past and this gives a unique perspective on their journey. Someone who is still in the pipeline may view their experiences differently. In a way, it feels like a missed opportunity despite overall satisfaction with the results.

I realise that the model can't be used as-is without the clear greenlight of professionals, and necessary adaptations. The idea of crafting a model came rather late within the process of working on this thesis: it took until midway the schoolyear to properly conceptualise. While I tried to reach out to professionals, such as the CLB, these inquiries, unfortunately, led to nothing. Because of this, I wonder how different the model could've looked with more input from an external party. In the future, taking into consideration what I hoped to achieve, it would've been fruitful to start reaching out to the necessary professionals earlier.

Another point of struggle was dealing with insecurities. Questions regarding the build-up of the thesis, its effectiveness, and thoroughness, plagued my mind often. I had to self-reflect on whether I was being critical enough and if my messages were being communicated. Eventually, I set up a goal for myself: this work may not include anything surprising or new for individuals well-versed on the topic, but others can be brought up to speed. I do believe this was achieved.

Conclusion

The research question of this work stated the following: "**How can far-right media influence children between age 12 to 18?**". To find an answer to this question, the author included a set of sub-questions. These can be found in the chapter 'Research Question with Sub-Questions'. Through a step-by-step approach, the answers will be summarised.

Social media lives. Never before have human beings, especially teenagers, been as online as they are today, and this new reality won't be going anywhere. Just 6 years ago, we considered the TV as the one thing we couldn't live without (Imec, 2019). Now, barely 1.7% of the surveyed teenagers between the ages of 12 to 18 are even considering the appliance. The smartphone wins, and by a large margin (81.7%). This has a clear influence on our time spent online, too: 65% of teenagers between age 12 to 18 check social media at least 21 hours a week. Generation Z is browsing daily and is likely unaware of the amount of information they consume on average. This plays a role in their upbringing as well as parents often overestimate the internet skills and etiquette their children possess. They tend to believe, since children are incredibly online, that they must understand the internet better than anyone else. This is largely due to a generational gap: one generation had to catch up to the dynamic world of technology, while the other doesn't know a life without it. Shortly said, the judgment skills of children are overestimated.

The most important part of childhood and puberty is the search for an identity. These adolescents are experiencing a period of turbulence and a sense of lacking. To deal with these emotions, children mimic what they see. This is no longer limited to their immediate surroundings. They are both inspired and encouraged by the internet, which has turned out to be the perfect tool for identity crafting. The internet is limitless and can appeal to anyone's most niche interests. On top of that, the internet removes communicative barriers: generation Z is a generation quick to reject social hierarchy, as they never grew up with one. When they go online, everyone is equal and within arm's reach. Because of the internet's perpetuity, its addictive component is very tangible. Nowadays it is difficult to clearly define what internet addiction truly is because the average hours spent online rise every year (Imec, 2019). Perhaps everyone is at least a little addicted. Social media platforms are designed to take advantage of this. They ensure that their layouts have visually appealing stimuli that encourage users to keep consuming; and it is this encouragement that appeals to teenagers. Social media relies on both positive or negative reinforcement. If someone's posts aren't getting a lot of attention, they'll be less likely to keep on posting. When you wake up to Instagram's heart notifications, you'll want to post more soon. Interaction is key. At this critical age, the stimuli we are exposed to have a lasting impact on our identity. Today, the bounds of these influences are no longer limited to one's physical location.

Constantly being online poses another threat: we have become exceedingly more gullible. Generation Z is often dubbed 'generation multi-tasker'. These digital natives are constantly on the search, and this is entirely unconscious. A moment of silence feels too silent, so they start itching for their smartphones. This behaviour makes them unable to keep track of what they're doing. It causes a lack of autonomy in online presence. When someone is no longer critically analysing the content they consume, they become gullible. This is where dangerous and violent rhetoric can find its way into anyone's social media feed.

This thesis discussed a myriad of characteristics of the new far-right. The far-right festers in echo chambers where there is little to no room for debate. It is set apart from the regular, moderate right in its call for a violent revolution and the way it utilises the internet. The new far-right is almost a combination between the traditional far-right and the alt-right. The alt-right implies it is an alternative way of expressing far-right discourse, however, this thesis concluded

the alt-right has grown beyond that. It cannot be an alternative ideology when it is the most predominant one. For this reason, the thesis settled on the term "the new far-right". The alt-right itself has dissolved into a variety of ideas, news websites, and forums that express the same extreme views.

Despite its increasing presence on the internet, the far-right's relationship with populism remains important. The ideology cannot spread without relatability. The new far-right, just like the traditional far-right, claims to vocalise the will of the people. They legitimise their platform by saying that their beliefs are popular, as opposed to extremist. This adds legitimacy to their agenda. The new far-right's characteristics are varied. Just as the traditional far-right, the new far-right is extremely nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist. They are anti-Marxist, antisemitic, homophobic, anti-feminist, and transphobic. The far-right is often reactionarily Catholic but manages to appeal to atheists as well. Its very core is a conflated sense of identity. They believe their identity must be protected from outward threats. The new far-right brings forth contemporary ideas and practices. Firstly, we recognise a very strong online culture consisting of trolling, conspiracy theories, fake news websites, and forums where irony and dark humour are dominant. They focus on European civilisation decline, Islamification, and the dangers of supposed cultural Marxism. Their use of language has changed drastically too. To move away from the stereotypical image of a far-right individual (brash, loud, and violent), they employ new terms that soften the blow of their discourse. It further implies that their way of thinking should be the norm. Feminists become feminazis, Muslims become Islamofascists and trans individuals are dubbed gender ideologists. The perceived enemy is dehumanised through language. When the far-right is criticised for inciteful speech, they call the backlash cancel culture or a breach of their freedom of speech. The new far-right frames their conduct in such a way that it becomes hard for individuals to argue against it. For example, eugenics is replaced by the idea that nations should be separated on grounds of specific physical characteristics. Someone attempting to argue against this could be met with deflection: "Don't you think black people deserve their own nation?" It is through this tactic that far-right ideology has found success in the political centre, and thus gained a larger audience.

With such a strong focus on identity, young people can easily find themselves in these circles. The new far-right relies on online engagement, and this is very present within their communities. It has developed in such a way that the online far-right has become a strong social movement, charging against their definition of the elite. Humans tend to think in patterns: We, inadvertently, like to split the world up into good and bad. We use this principle of fear to stay on guard in dangerous situations (Draulans, 2019). The far-right builds upon this impulse, by positioning themselves against a faceless, dehumanised elite. The *real* enemy is the elite unjustly living off of your hard work: communists, Muslim immigrants, Jews in think tanks, liberals, and Big Tech companies. Daily social media use lends itself to this spiral of negativity and fearmongering. It's an easy, low-effort medium where answers to life questions can be found. Teenagers, who often feel misunderstood by society, discover a way to blame their sense of loss on something tangible. Through blame-shifting, a threat is perceived. After all, it is easier to blame people around you than recognise some things are beyond your control.

Regardless of how easy it is to spread certain rhetoric, the new far-right has to deploy a level of subtlety. To convert someone, they use strategies such as irony poisoning and red-pilling. The new far-right believes outsiders must have a moment of enlightenment before they can go through the normalisation process. A far-right individual can't just spring racist science on a "normie" from the get-go, they'll be scared off. Instead, the far-right uses a combination of memes, fake news, and conspiracy theories to "awaken" people to their truth. The most common types of far-right conspiracy theories are rooted in antisemitism or Islamophobia: Cultural Marxism, Eurabia, the Replacement theory, the Islamisation of society, and so on. According to a Knack research, one in two of the interviewed 18 to 24-year-olds believe in at

least one conspiracy theory (Casteels, 2021). It is a clear attestation to how effective their spread has become. Fake news often serves to bolster these conspiracy theories: they offer "proof". With humanity's newfound penchant for multitasking, and therefore shorter thinking processes, our critical thinking skills have worsened. A study by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences stated that our brain suppresses "normal" ideas. We prefer to develop something more creative. This is a gateway to frequently denying facts because they simply don't fit our outlook on life (Draulans, 2019).

Memes are likely the most effective tool to convert teenagers. Teenagers like to stay on-trend. Posting and sharing memes allow room for their creativity to blossom. While many memes joke about trivial matters, some attempt to convey an ideological point of view. When expressing a political view through a meme, a common tone found is pessimism regarding society. The punchlines are drenched in irony: a joke about only earning minimum wage is still a clear expression of dissatisfaction with the system at large. Similarly, posting a meme poking fun at supposed SJWs can be considered an indirect admission of being critical towards social justice politics. When a teenager frequents an environment where these types of ironic, and politicised, memes are par for the course, they steadily become desensitised. Making a Holocaust joke doesn't necessarily mean you're denying the genocide at large: your punchline could be about the awfulness of what transpired. Red flags arise when you start punching down and actively trivialise the events, much in the same way the memes in the Schild & Vrienden group chats did. The lines become blurred. Where does the joke end and the intent begin? When your sense of humour relies on continuously mocking minorities, it isn't surprising that people think you're being serious. One commenter on the YouTube upload of Pano's Schild & Vrienden documentary, seemingly a high schooler, waved off the seriousness of Schild & Vrienden's memes: "These memes are in every class group chat." Far-right discourse becomes mainstreamed through edgy or humorous content. Memes can collectivise.

Shortly said, social media is the strongest medium for the new far-right. A 2021 study by Cybersecurity for Democracy concluded that far-right content has considerably more interaction online compared to far-left or centrist content. Social media ensures viewers are as engaged as possible, which is good news for the new far-right. YouTube keeps you online by recommending content that tends to be reactionary or sensationalised: watch a video on COVID19, and YouTube algorithms will recommend something with an anti-vaccine sentiment. Twitter's entire trending system relies on the nonstop controversy. Supposed "informative" posts on Instagram and TikTok aren't required to source their materials; they'll trend all the same. On top of that, social media platforms have a difficult time moderating this content. If they remove misleading information that isn't explicitly calling for violence (though still influences the formation of violent ideas), it would be considered a breach of freedom of speech. This would further bolster the idea that a supposed elite group, such as Big Tech, wishes to stifle the masses.

During the adolescence stage, teenagers are desperate for self-expression. The internet and social media facilitate these cravings. Through subtle forms of encouragement, teenagers experience a short-term thrill. This thrill on its own is incredibly addicting. If a certain behaviour is met with positivity, they are likely to repeat the behaviour. If a less-than-tasteful meme can get people to laugh, the next meme might take it a step further. Teenagers are still establishing their morals and values. All they can do is mimic the behaviour they see, and on the internet, the loudest behaviour is rewarded. This marks the beginning of the far-right pipeline. From this point onwards, teenagers may end up continuously pushing the envelope. They realise that the more radical you are, the better the response will be. All of these processes unfold online, in an environment that provides instant gratification. When you're in an online group of like-minded people, it can turn into an echo chamber rather quickly. Individuals who aren't radical

enough are removed, thus refining the group into a very narrow set of views. At this point in the process, the individual has created a new normal for themselves.

The crafted model depicting the radicalisation process offers a better understanding as to why young people fall into radicalised movements. We have established that individuals don't choose to become radicalised - rather, they are steadily nudged into a certain direction. Not everyone will find themselves in the final phase of the radicalisation process: more often than not, individuals will remain frozen in non-action phases. While this offers some comfort, these phases are still not a healthy place to be in. The personal stories shared within this thesis offer a humane insight into a complicated journey. It is easy to forget far-right individuals weren't born with their beliefs. In a world where information surrounds us, it becomes nearly impossible to not have radical views on certain topics. We all have things we feel passionately about, but our points of view shouldn't influence the well-being of others.

Misleading news or conspiracy theories don't just influence adults on Facebook. Quite the contrary, this thesis establishes that teenagers are the most susceptible to reactionary far-right content. Gamergate is proof that a group of young people can be politicised and collectivised through carefully conducted media campaigns. These campaigns notoriously relied on memes or reactionary content. Right now, we are witnessing a breakthrough for the far-right. The COVID19 pandemic ensured more people felt isolated and fearful for the future. Teenagers had to find social contact online. The ramifications have yet to fully develop. Regardless, Belgium has a clear lack of data and research on online far-right radicalisation. Unless an individual makes direct threats of violence, they are not penalised. The reality is that the new far-right has found a way to express violence without using explicitly violent language. It is time these propaganda tactics are recognised.

We have to understand far-right talking points to condemn them. However, they're also necessary knowledge to possess when framing the radicalisation process. The thesis has underlined several times that each person's road to radicalisation is different. When dealing with a sense of loss, an emotion strongly felt by teenagers, we reach for quick solutions in our environment. Blaming a tangible group, rather than something beyond our immediate control, is easy and makes us feel we have regained autonomy. Framing these inner processes and experiences is important. Because of this, the author believes deradicalisation cannot be achieved without a clear understanding of each individual's plights. This thesis only briefly delved into this through a myriad of personal stories. Regardless, the author hopes this work serves as a solid base for a future critical view on how to successfully deradicalise individuals.

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Figures

Attachments

1. Survey – Social Media Usage

Sociale mediagebruik

In het kader van mijn bachelorproef binnen de opleiding PXL Education doe ik een onderzoek naar het sociale mediagebruik van tieners. Aan de hand van jouw antwoorden kan ik mijn onderzoek beter toespitsen op leerlingen in Vlaanderen.

Deze enquête verloopt anoniem en zal minder dan 10 minuten in beslag nemen. Aan het einde van de enquête is er de optie om de antwoorden te bekijken.

Next   Page 1 of 4

Sociale mediagebruik

* Required

Algemeen

Leeftijd? (bv. "14") *

Your answer

Gender identiteit? *

○ Man

○ Vrouw

○ Non-binair

○ Dat zeg ik liever niet

Waar zou je niet zonder kunnen? Je mag er maar één kiezen. *

○ Computer of laptop

○ Smartphone

○ Tablet

○ TV

○ Spelconsole (XBOX, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch,...)

○ Radio

Sociale mediagebruik

Hoeveel uren per dag kijk je naar sociale media op een SCHOOLDAG? Zowel op de smartphone als tablet of computer. *

Tip: Als je het niet zeker weet, kijk eens naar je smartphone via instellingen > batterij.

	< 1 uur	1 - 3 uur	3 - 5 uur	> 5 uur
Keuze:	☐	☐	☐	☐

Hoeveel uren per dag kijk je naar sociale media op een VRIJE DAG? Zowel op de smartphone als tablet of computer. *

Tip: Als je het niet zeker weet, kijk eens naar je smartphone via instellingen > batterij.

	< 1 uur	1 - 3 uur	3 - 5 uur	> 5 uur
Keuze:	☐	☐	☐	☐

Als je vragen hebt over het internet, apps, technologie of dergelijke, wie vraag je om hulp? Je mag meerdere opties aanduiden.

- ☐ Ouders
- ☐ Vrienden
- ☐ Google
- ☐ Leerkrachten
- ☐ Er wordt meestal aan mij hulp gevraagd.

Welke sociale media apps of websites gebruik je? Je mag meerdere kiezen. *

	Facebook	YouTube	Messenger	Instagram	TikTok	Discord	Snapchat	Tinder
Keuze:	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

◄ ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ ►

Waarvoor gebruik je Facebook? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Facebook niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- ☐ In contact blijven met vrienden en/of familie
- ☐ Eigen foto's delen
- ☐ School
- ☐ Nieuws
- ☐ Marketplace
- ☐ Grappige foto's en video's bekijken
- ☐ Other: _____

Waarvoor gebruik je Twitter? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Twitter niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- ☐ In contact blijven met vrienden en/of familie
- ☐ Eigen Tweets delen
- ☐ School
- ☐ Nieuws
- ☐ Grappige Tweets, foto's en video's bekijken
- ☐ Beroemdheden volgen
- ☐ Other: _____

Waarvoor gebruik je Instagram? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Instagram niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- ☐ In contact blijven met vrienden en/of familie
- ☐ Eigen foto's delen
- ☐ Nieuws
- ☐ Grappige foto's en video's bekijken
- ☐ Beroemdheden volgen
- ☐ Other: _____

Waarvoor gebruik je Reddit? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Reddit niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- ☐ Grappige posts bekijken
- ☐ Over eigen interesses praten
- ☐ Nieuws
- ☐ Antwoorden op vragen vinden
- ☐ Other: _____

Waarvoor gebruik je Discord? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Discord niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- [ ] In contact blijven met vrienden en/of familie
- [ ] Over eigen interesses praten
- [ ] School
- [ ] Nieuws
- [ ] Video games
- [ ] Grappige posts delen
- [ ] Other: _____

Waarvoor gebruik je YouTube? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je YouTube niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

- [ ] Muziek
- [ ] Nieuws
- [ ] School
- [ ] Video games (bv. Let's Play, reviews,...)
- [ ] Educatieve video's los van school (bv. korte documentaires over eigen interesses)
- [ ] Vlog content
- [ ] Zelf video's maken
- [ ] Other: _____

Nieuwsconsumptie

Beantwoord de volgende stellingen. 1 is helemaal niet, 5 is helemaal wel *

	1	2	3	4	5
Hoeveel interesse heb je in het nieuws?	○	○	○	○	○
Ben je dankzij het internet beter geïnformeerd?	○	○	○	○	○
Hoe zeer vertrouw je het nieuws?	○	○	○	○	○
Voel je je wel eens overrompeld door de hoeveelheid nieuws?	○	○	○	○	○
Hoe bezorgd ben je over de verspreiding van misleidende of valse nieuwsberichten?	○	○	○	○	○

Welke bronnen gebruik je om nieuws te raadplegen? Je mag meerdere kiezen. *

- [ ] Smartphone
- [ ] Computer of laptop
- [ ] Radio
- [ ] TV
- [ ] Tablet
- [ ] De papieren krant
- [ ] Ik ben daar helemaal niet mee bezig.
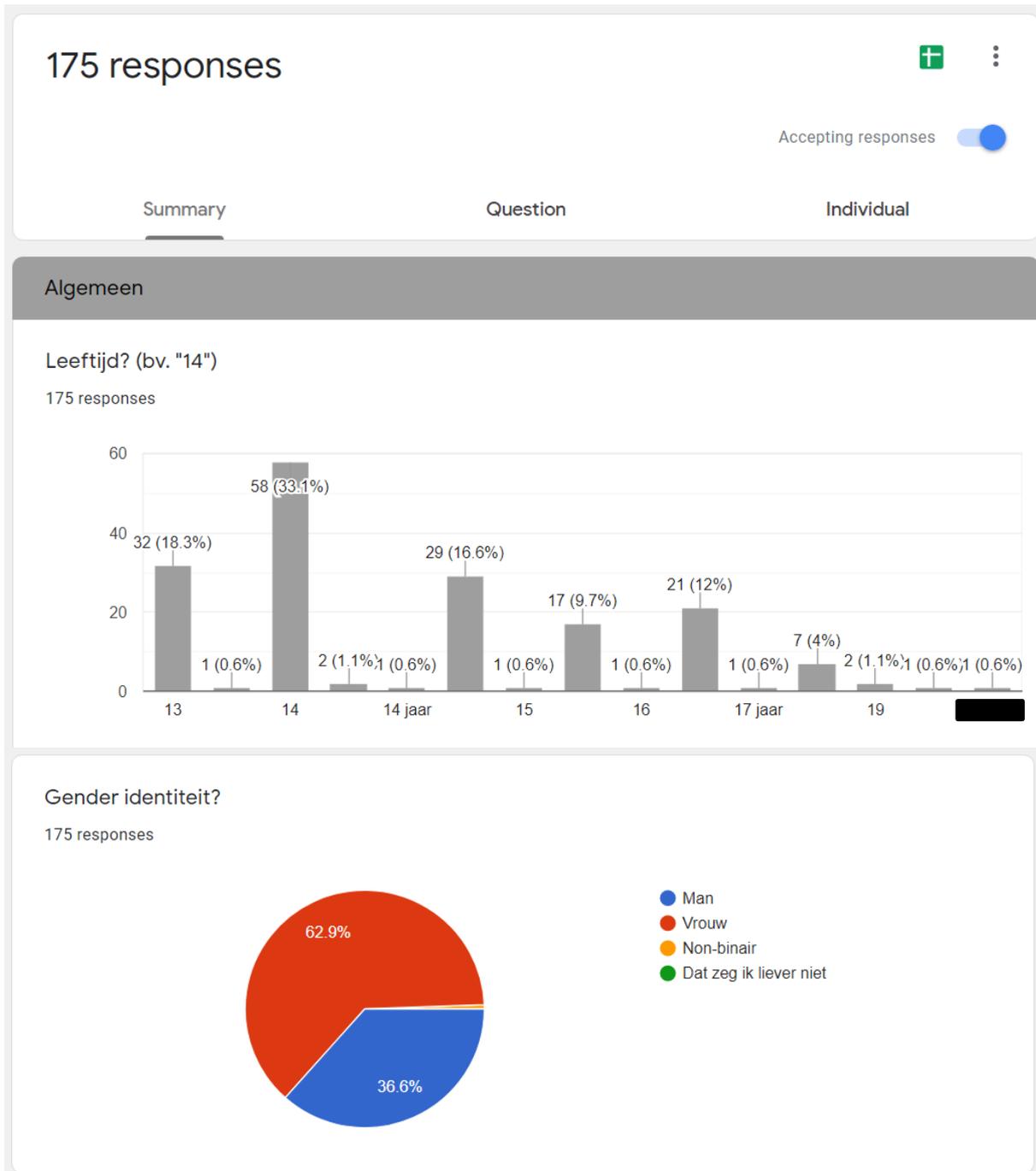- [ ] Other: _____

Welke websites of apps gebruik je om nieuws te raadplegen? Je mag meerdere kiezen. *

☐ Facebook

☐ Twitter

☐ Nieuwswebsites (zoals HLN.be, VRT.be, HBVL.be,...)

☐ Apps van nieuwspublicaties (zoals De Standaard app, AP Mobile, HLN app, Medium,...)

☐ YouTube

☐ Reddit

☐ TikTok

☐ Instagram

☐ Discord

☐ Via messaging onder vrienden (bv. vrienden die nieuws doorsturen via WhatsApp of Messenger)

☐ Ik ben daar helemaal niet mee bezig.

☐ Other:

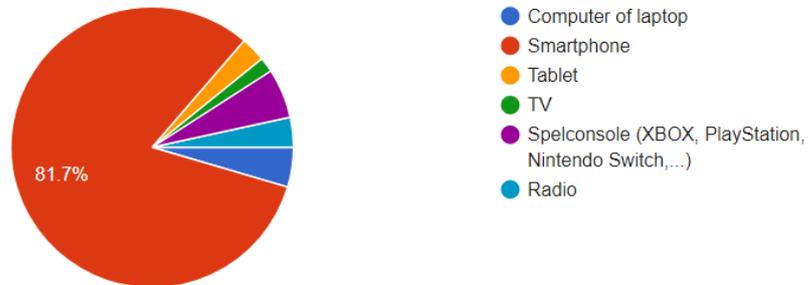Controleer je wel eens hoe betrouwbaar een artikel is? Je mag maar één optie kiezen. *

○ Altijd

○ Soms

○ Nooit

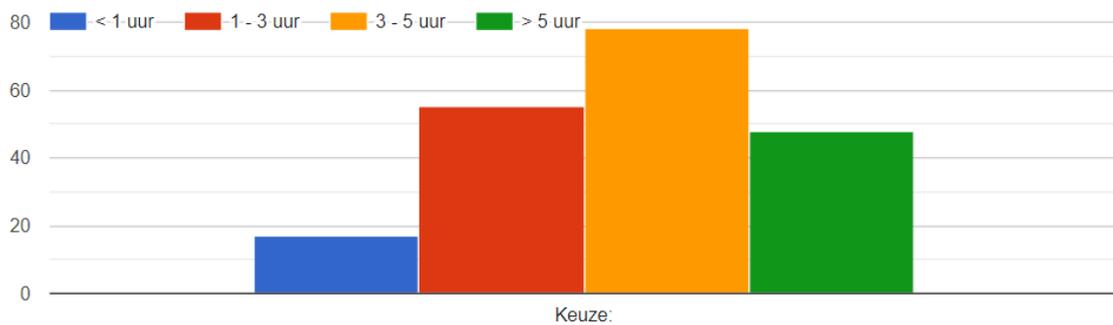## 2. Survey Results – Social Media Usage

Waar zou je niet zonder kunnen? Je mag er maar één kiezen.

175 responses

- Computer of laptop
- Smartphone
- Tablet
- TV
- Spelconsole (XBOX, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch,...)
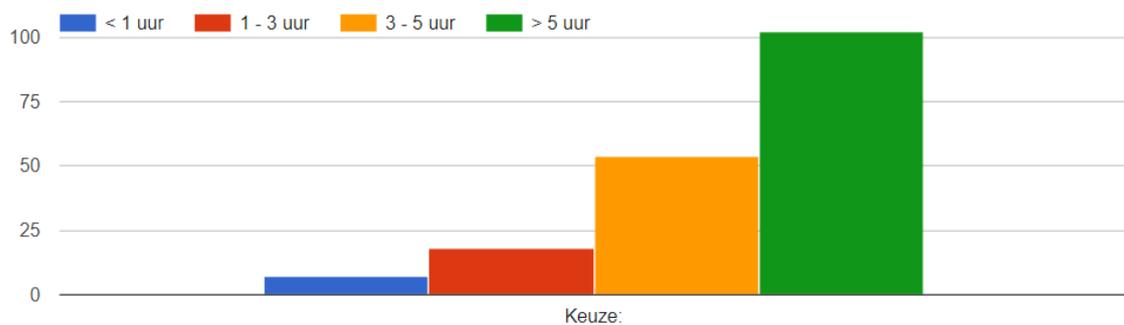- Radio

Sociale mediagebruik

Hoeveel uren per dag kijk je naar sociale media op een SCHOOLDAG? Zowel op de smartphone als tablet of computer.

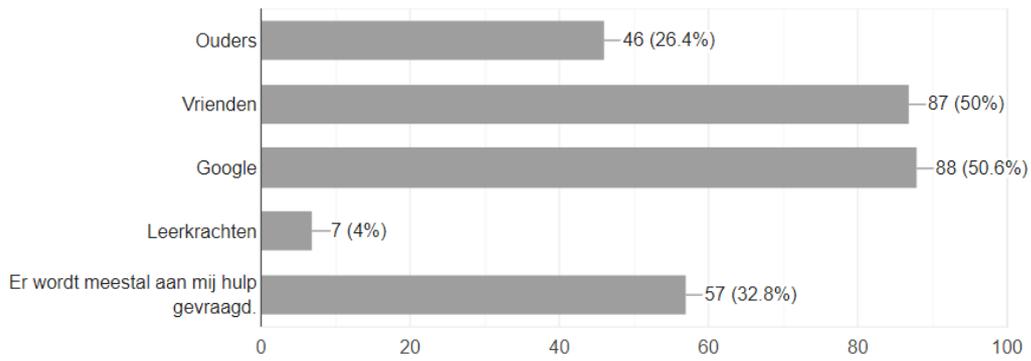Hoeveel uren per dag kijk je naar sociale media op een VRIJE DAG? Zowel op de smartphone als tablet of computer.
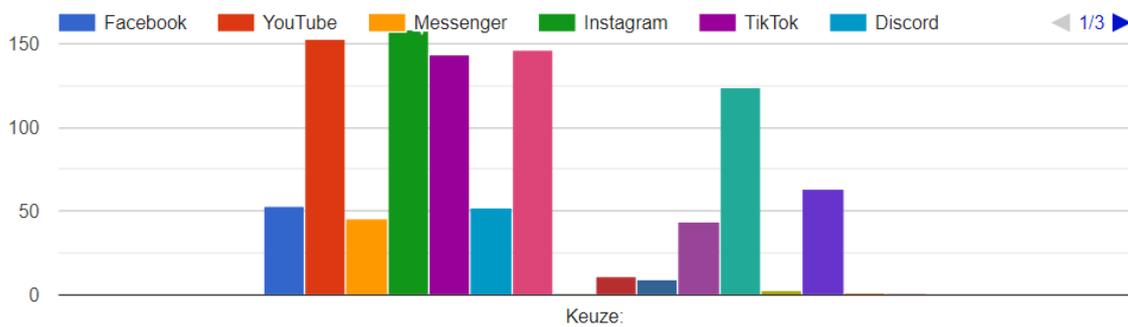
Als je vragen hebt over het internet, apps, technologie of dergelijke, wie vraag je om hulp? Je mag meerdere opties aanduiden.
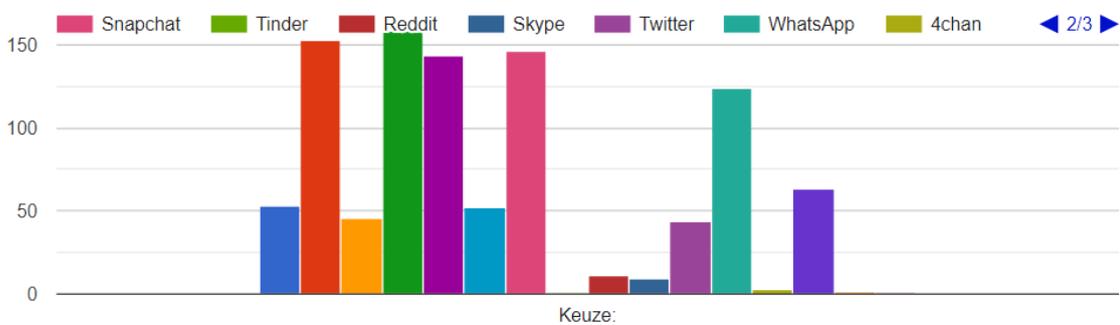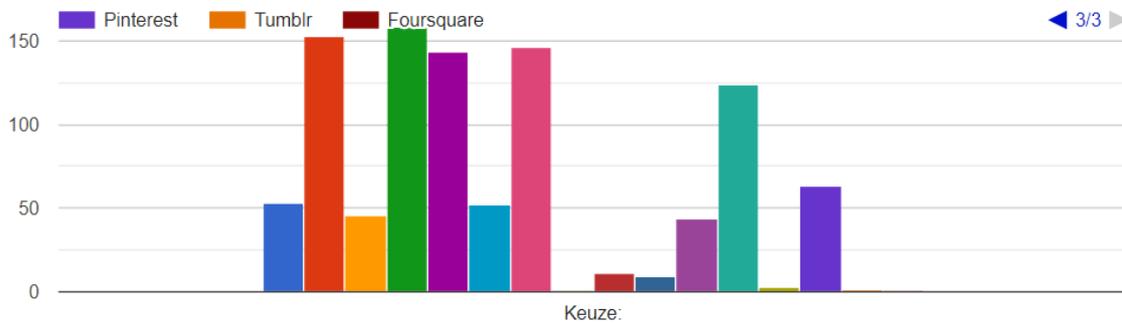
174 responses

Welke sociale media apps of websites gebruik je? Je mag meerdere kiezen.

Welke sociale media apps of websites gebruik je? Je mag meerdere kiezen.

Welke sociale media apps of websites gebruik je? Je mag meerdere kiezen.

Pinterest   Tumblr   Foursquare

Keuze:

Waarvoor gebruik je Facebook? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Facebook niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

83 responses

Antwoord	Aantal
In contact blijven met vriend…	42 (50.6%)
Eigen foto's delen	8 (9.6%)
School	4 (4.8%)
Nieuws	34 (41%)
Marketplace	18 (21.7%)
Grappige foto's en video's b…	25 (30.1%)
Dingen van de wijk	2 (2.4%)
Ik gebruik geen facebook	2 (2.4%)
ik gebruik geen facebook	2 (2.4%)
Ik gebruik het amper;	1 (1.2%)
Enkel met mijn verjaardag	1 (1.2%)
voor pokemon go	1 (1.2%)
Ik geen facebook	1 (1.2%)
Oude foto's kijken op mijn acc	1 (1.2%)
Ik heb het alleen zodat ik ge…	1 (1.2%)
verjaardagen	1 (1.2%)
heb geen facebook	1 (1.2%)
Geen facebook	1 (1.2%)
gebruik ik niet	1 (1.2%)
Als ik mij verveel	1 (1.2%)
ik heb geen Facebook	1 (1.2%)
geen facebook	1 (1.2%)

Waarvoor gebruik je Twitter? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Twitter niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.
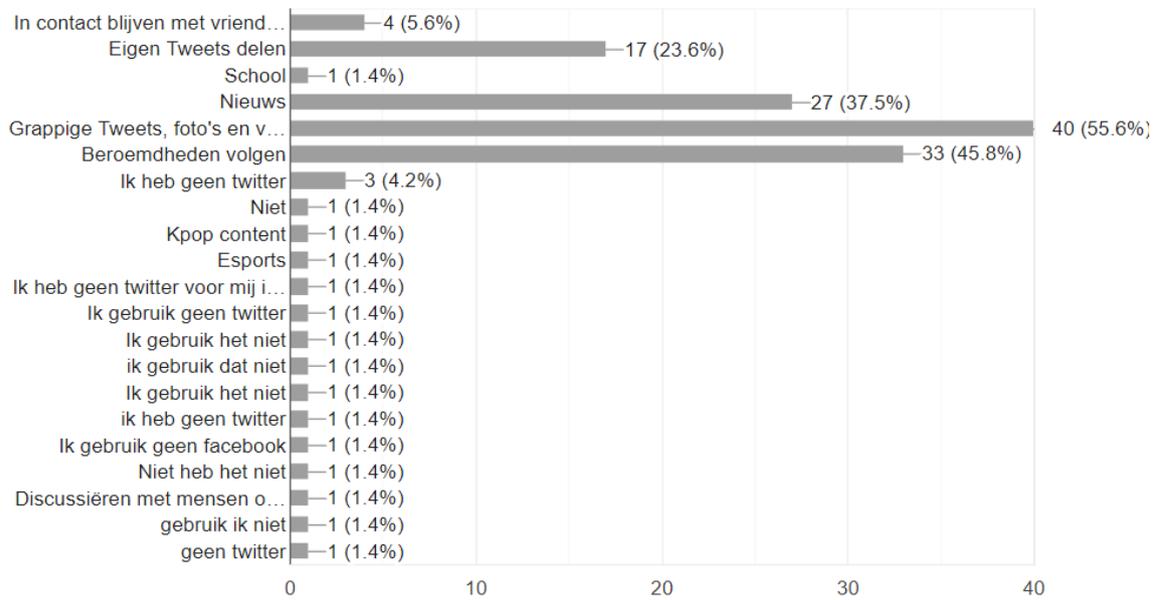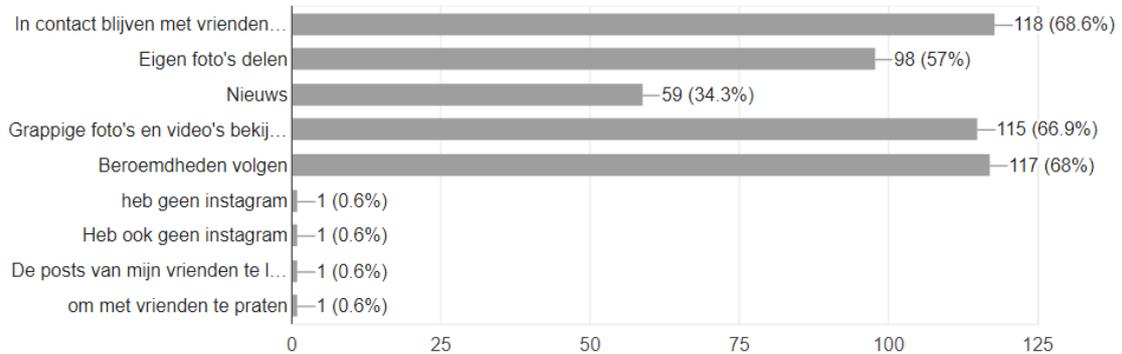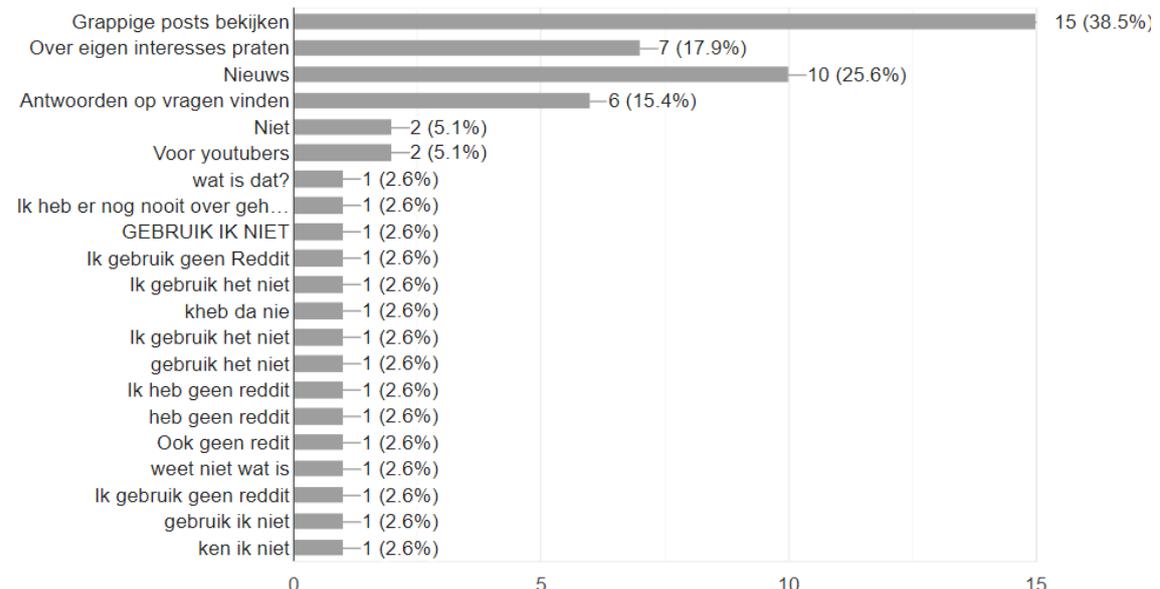
72 responses

Waarvoor gebruik je Instagram? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Instagram niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.
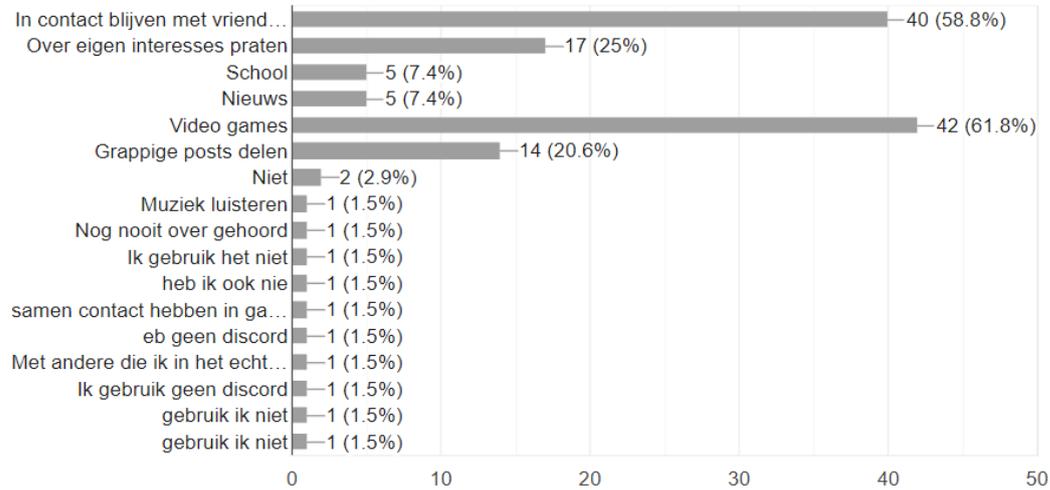
172 responses

In contact blijven met vrienden...	118 (68.6%)
Eigen foto's delen	98 (57%)
Nieuws	59 (34.3%)
Grappige foto's en video's bekij...	115 (66.9%)
Beroemdheden volgen	117 (68%)
heb geen instagram	1 (0.6%)
Heb ook geen instagram	1 (0.6%)
De posts van mijn vrienden te l...	1 (0.6%)
om met vrienden te praten	1 (0.6%)

Waarvoor gebruik je Reddit? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Reddit niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.

39 responses

|	
Grappige posts bekijken	15 (38.5%)
Over eigen interesses praten	7 (17.9%)
Nieuws	10 (25.6%)
Antwoorden op vragen vinden	6 (15.4%)
Niet	2 (5.1%)
Voor youtubers	2 (5.1%)
wat is dat?	1 (2.6%)
Ik heb er nog nooit over geh...	1 (2.6%)
GEBRUIK IK NIET	1 (2.6%)
Ik gebruik geen Reddit	1 (2.6%)
Ik gebruik het niet	1 (2.6%)
kheb da nie	1 (2.6%)
Ik gebruik het niet	1 (2.6%)
gebruik het niet	1 (2.6%)
Ik heb geen reddit	1 (2.6%)
heb geen reddit	1 (2.6%)
Ook geen redit	1 (2.6%)
weet niet wat is	1 (2.6%)
Ik gebruik geen reddit	1 (2.6%)
gebruik ik niet	1 (2.6%)
ken ik niet	1 (2.6%)

Waarvoor gebruik je Discord? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je Discord niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.
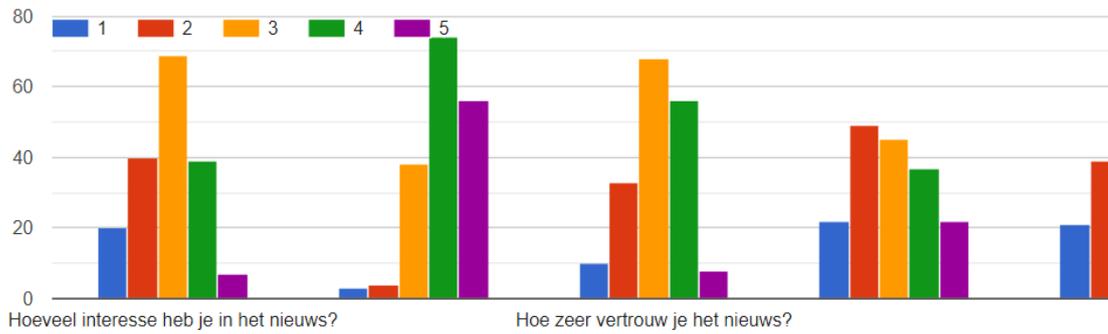
68 responses

Waarvoor gebruik je YouTube? Je mag meerdere opties kiezen. Indien je YouTube niet gebruikt, mag je deze vraag overslaan.
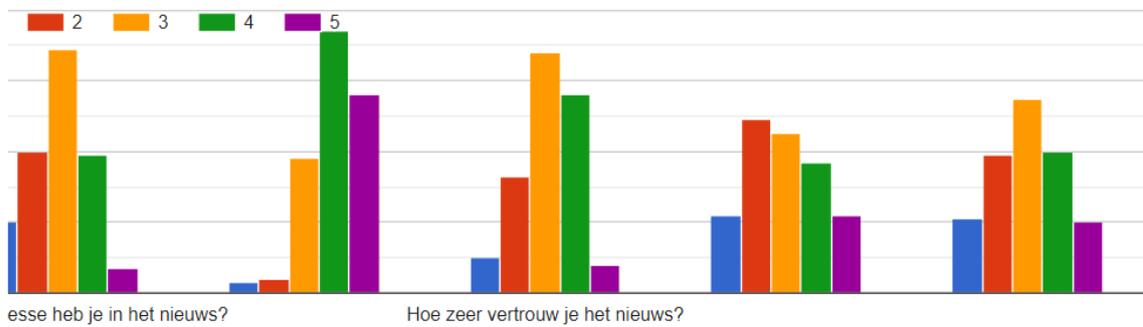
164 responses
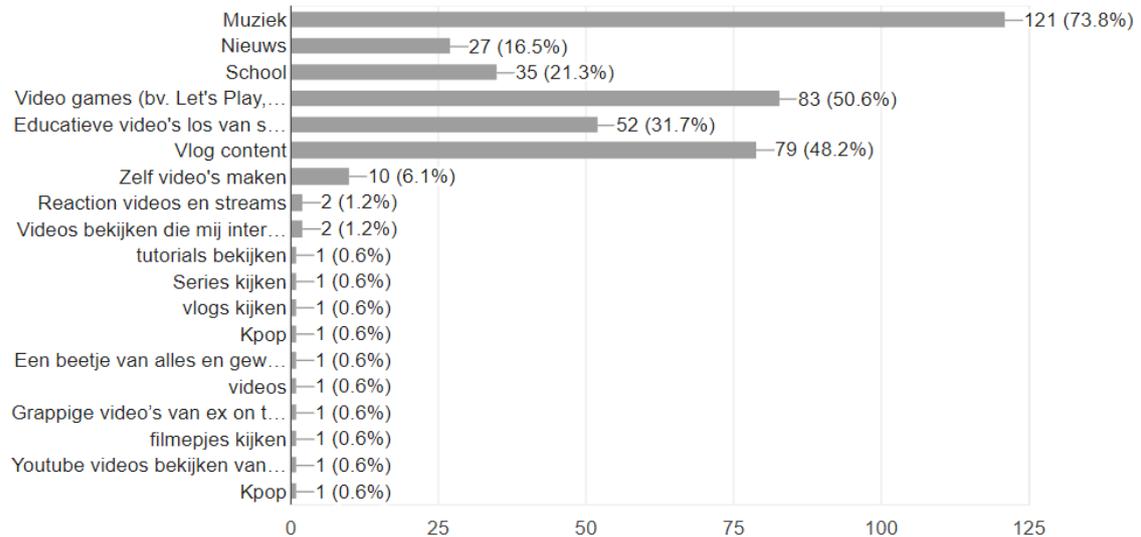
Nieuwsconsumptie

Beantwoord de volgende stellingen. 1 is helemaal niet, 5 is helemaal wel
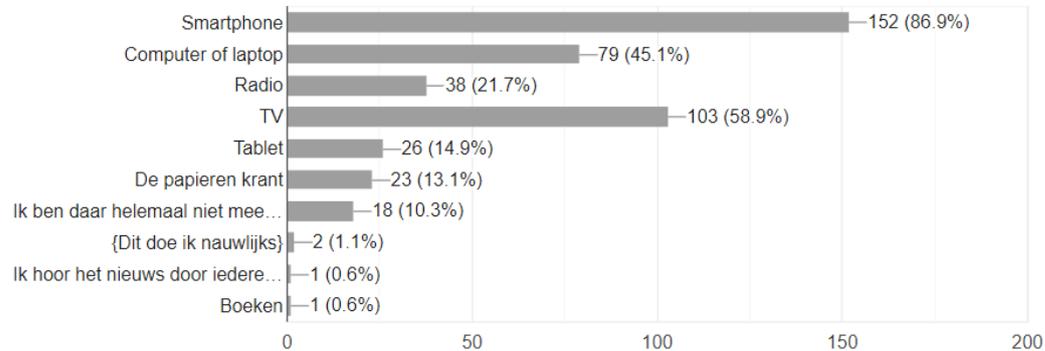

Nieuwsconsumptie

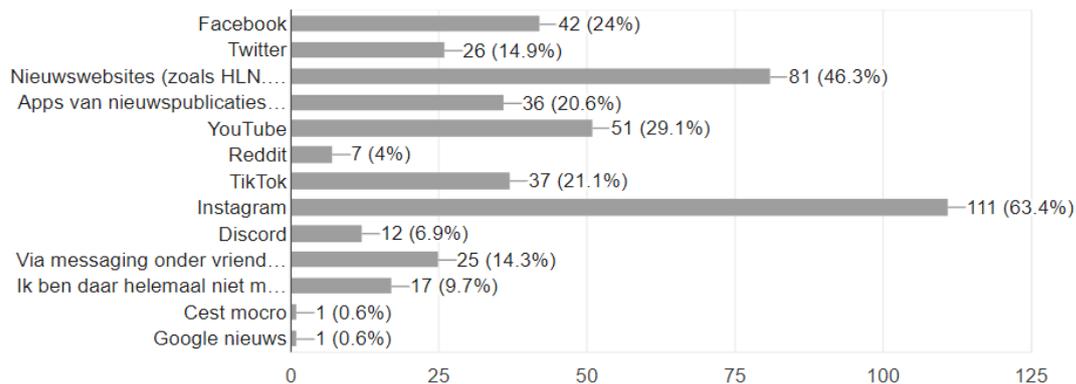Beantwoord de volgende stellingen. 1 is helemaal niet, 5 is helemaal wel

Welke bronnen gebruik je om nieuws te raadplegen? Je mag meerdere kiezen.

175 responses

Bron	Aantal
Smartphone	152 (86.9%)
Computer of laptop	79 (45.1%)
Radio	38 (21.7%)
TV	103 (58.9%)
Tablet	26 (14.9%)
De papieren krant	23 (13.1%)
Ik ben daar helemaal niet mee…	18 (10.3%)
{Dit doe ik nauwlijks}	2 (1.1%)
Ik hoor het nieuws door iedere…	1 (0.6%)
Boeken	1 (0.6%)

Welke websites of apps gebruik je om nieuws te raadplegen? Je mag meerdere kiezen.

175 responses

Website/App	Aantal
Facebook	42 (24%)
Twitter	26 (14.9%)
Nieuwswebsites (zoals HLN…	81 (46.3%)
Apps van nieuwspublicaties…	36 (20.6%)
YouTube	51 (29.1%)
Reddit	7 (4%)
TikTok	37 (21.1%)
Instagram	111 (63.4%)
Discord	12 (6.9%)
Via messaging onder vriend…	25 (14.3%)
Ik ben daar helemaal niet m…	17 (9.7%)
Cest mocro	1 (0.6%)
Google nieuws	1 (0.6%)

Controleer je wel eens hoe betrouwbaar een artikel is? Je mag maar één optie kiezen.

175 responses

- Altijd: 11.4%
- Soms: 51.4%
- Nooit: 37.1%