

COUNTRY-LEVEL REPORT ON DRIVERS OF SELF-RADICALISATION AND DIGITAL SOCIABILITY

Belgium



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DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality

Country level report on drivers of self-radicalisation and digital sociability

Belgium

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Executive Summary

This report analyses Belgium Twitter debates and networks of right-wing and Islamist extremists to identify online resources supporting self-radicalisation and digital sociability. We combined digital ethnography and big data techniques to analyse a combined sample of 80 Twitter accounts including 38 right-wing extremists and 42 Islamist extremists.

For the right-wing extremist sample, we found anti-Islamism to be part of a broader set of negative attitudes towards immigration. Jihadist terrorism and violent crime committed by immigrants is extrapolated to suggest that the people of Belgium are at risk of being overrun by immigrants and the loss of identity, although there are differences in how this Belgian identity is understood between the Flemish and French speaking Walloon segments of our sample. For the Flemish segment, identity is found to relate to a Flemish heritage, which by its very nature is oppositional to Walloon heritage, but not vice versa.

Both segments of the sample employ the idea of a common race and a shared European cultural heritage that leads for instance to the identification with medieval crusaders. Identity is also defined by a negative stance towards the 'elite' embodied by liberal and progressive politicians, who in the eyes of the sample, fail to represent the will of the people and in their efforts to bring about change in society, damage the interests (and the financial resources) of ordinary people. For the right-wing sample, network analyses show strong connections within the sample, although the clusters are clearly differentiated along linguistic lines with the Flemish and Walloon parts of the sample forming their own clusters. After Dutch influences on the Flemish debate and French influences on the Walloon debate, we found the strongest influencers to come from US politics, with Donald Trump being by far the most mentioned.

For the Islamist extremist sample, we found a predominance of interest in religious rather than political issues. Many of the messages concerned the doctrinal, social, and psychological aspects of life as a Muslim. However, where political issues were discussed, they related to concerns about the treatment of Muslims worldwide, and the application of double standards, which meant Muslims are considered to be treated and judged unfairly (and often harshly) in relation to virtues such as freedom and democracy. Concerns are also expressed about ongoing conflicts involving Muslims, for instance in Syria and the Occupied Territories. There were no noticeable differences between the Flemish and Walloon segments of the sample. The Islamist extremist sample showed considerably less expression of militancy than the right-wing extremist sample. This may be due, at least in part, to surveillance efforts that have been particularly focussed on violent jihadist expressions, most notably as espoused by ISIS. The recent efforts to take down extremist material means that it is now difficult to identify any single, distinct form of militant Islamism on Twitter. The network analysis conducted on the sample showed disconnected nodes with limited interaction among these, as well as limited international influences.

1. Introduction

This report focuses on the processes of online self-radicalisation and digital sociability in Belgium by studying media participation on Twitter over the past decade.

1.1 The role of the internet in self-radicalisation in Belgium

Belgium has historically been a battleground for influences and ideas. Located in between France, Germany, The Netherlands, and close to the UK, Belgium has managed to absorb and integrate influences and ideas to create a unique identity. Yet, this identity also incorporates divisions. Belgium has three official languages, French, Dutch (Flemish), and German, of which the first two are dominant. This divisiveness of multiple national languages is a salient feature of Belgian social and political life. The social, cultural and political cleavages in Belgian society are not confined to language, however. Belgium also harbours strong divisions between the political left and right, between nationalist parties and supporters of international political unity (indeed, Brussels, the capital of Belgium, is considered by many as the de facto capital of the European Union) and between traditionalists and progressives. A key characteristic of Belgian society has been its careful management of these divisions in part through a complicated system of national, local, and international governance. Yet, the divisions have also energised strong political positions, even extremist positions.

Belgium has a prominent position in debates regarding both Islamist and anti-Islamist forms of extremism. European Islamist extremism has for instance been closely tied to the Brussels' area of Molenbeek from where many young immigrants, often of Maghrebi origin, travelled to Syria to join ISIS. The area has been viewed as a breeding ground for Islamist extremism, particularly after several of the most salient ISIS terrorist attacks, including the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the March 2016 attack in Brussels, were found to be committed by youngsters from Molenbeek. Belgium also has a tradition of far-right politics, particularly in the Flemish, Dutch speaking part of Belgium. The most visible manifestation of the Belgian far-right is perhaps the Flemish party *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish Block), which was enjoying a substantial wave of popular support when it was forced to disband following prosecution in 2004 for discriminatory statements made against immigrants. The *Vlaams Blok* disbanded and its members reunited in a party called *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish interest). Although *Vlaams Belang* is considered less extreme than its predecessor, it is still treated with suspicion by other political parties. In the French speaking part of Belgium, Wallonia, the socialist party has always had the strongest support base, reducing the salience of ultra-nationalism. However, in recent times, Wallonia has witnessed the emergence of the *parti populaire* under the leadership of Mischaël Modrikamen, a politician who has aligned with leaders of several nationalist parties (e.g. Wilders in the Netherlands, Farage in the UK) that have explicitly labelled Islam a significant threat to the nation, Belgium in this case.

Research that focuses specifically on Belgium as a place where online political debates may affect people is relatively scarce. Work by Pauwels and colleagues (Pauwels & Hardyns, 2018; Pauwels & Schils, 2016) shows that online exposure to extremist messages can promote political violence. Although this research was conducted in Belgium, the findings were meant to be of broader conceptual significance, and the specific Belgian context of online extremism was given only minor attention. According to some, the use of Twitter is much less widespread in Belgium than it is, for instance, in The Netherlands (De Gelderlander, 2018). This also has implications for understanding Belgian extremism as it is expressed on Twitter. As a result of the low use, we may have greater difficulty identifying true online communities that rally around specific political topics and current events.

This report analyses the debates and the actors involved in online Islamist and anti-Islamist discourse on Twitter in Belgium. Given Belgium's multilingualism, we often focus separately on French and Flemish debates.

Finding appropriate labels for our samples

In choosing the appropriate labels to describe our samples, we faced some peculiar challenges. The people behind the selected accounts would not necessarily think of themselves as having extremist or radical viewpoints. Also, although some of the messages of members of our sample may be considered extremist that does not mean that all messages are considered extremist. Extremism is to a certain extent in the eye of the beholder. But this introduces the challenge of using consistent labels to describe the accounts in our samples. We decided to use the label right-wing extremists (RWE) and Islamist extremists (ISE) with full awareness that these labels may not necessarily capture the content of what is expressed. Although we use these labels for the pragmatic purpose of naming the samples under investigation, we also critically reflect on whether we are actually dealing with truly extremist expressions.

1.2 Methodological choices

A three-month pilot study, conducted from September to December 2018, served to select a sample for Belgium of a total of 83 Twitter (TW) accounts and 15 Facebook (FB) pages for the two strands - right-wing and Islamist - radicalisation combined. The primary object of this initial step was to build a sample for the big data approach of the second phase of the investigation. However, in this report, we use the direct observation findings from this phase of the study and thus refer to the pilot study as the ethnographic or the direct observation phase.

Although 83 accounts were originally identified as constituting the material for the study, due to the suspension and deletion of accounts during the three-month scraping campaign that followed the pilot study, only 80 of the original 83 Twitter accounts identified could be retrieved. Deletion or suspension of accounts only affected right-wing extremist (RWE) accounts on Twitter, as the table below shows¹. In the general introduction, we explain this phenomenon through reference to two factors: difference in online moderation for each ideology - with Islamist ideologies heavily moderated and RWE ideologies barely moderated (up until recent bottom-down governmental campaigns in certain European countries); and recent crackdowns on RW extremism (Conway 2019). To be clear, while the table below suggests censorship affects the RWE, actual censorship faced by RWE is significantly less than that faced by Islamists over the past few years.

	BELGIUM							
	RWE				ISE			
	Personal		Forum (Facebook)	Total	Personal		Forum (Facebook)	Total
	F	M			F	M		
Pilot study	10	31	9	50	20	22	6	48
Final sample	7	31	N/A	38	20	22	N/A	42

Table 1: Overview of pilot and final samples

The type of pages selected on Twitter and on Facebook are of a different nature, as detailed in the general introduction. Twitter accounts can be considered as 'personal' profiles whereas Facebook accounts are 'pages', that is to say, public accounts rarely developed as personal accounts, and if so, personal accounts of public figures. Since the focus is on the mass of random citizens rather political

¹ The results in the Table 1 include the Twitter and FB pages.

leaders or organisations, analysis will solely be conducted on the basis of data and observations from Twitter.

Analyses conducted in this report make use of a mixed-method approach. We rely on the findings from the ethnographic phase of the study, as well as results from quantitative and qualitative approaches exploiting the massive amounts of data retrieved from the big data approach, led during the second phase of the investigation. In each subsection of the report, we present the method developed and the material used to conduct the analysis.

1.3 Structure of the report

This report considers primary drivers of self-radicalisation at the individual level in Belgium, which comprises one country case study of a total seven countries studied in this strand of the DARE research project. The report is divided into 6 sections.

This first, introductory section presents the national context of the report and explains how this context impacted the composition of the sample and the methodological choices of the study. The second section focuses on digital participation in self-radicalisation by examining the key characteristics of the sample. The quality of the sample is explored to establish whether or not it actually captures an online phenomenon of radicalisation. The levels and modalities of engagement in digital extremism are presented here. The third section furthers the study of self-radicalisation by understanding how each sample engages online through specific repertoires of action, and then considers internal and external labelling processes, contributing to the production of radical postures and identities. The fourth section interrogates what people are saying, what events are influencing what they say and who are the influencers. It considers the issues that justify resorting to radical ideologies, the events that trigger participation and the people who fuel online communication. The fifth section addresses how conversations are being conducted and who is engaging in these conversations. The concluding section summarises results and determines whether the material on Twitter represents a threat to national security interests and whether there are elements found online that could incite, stimulate or engage people to commit violent crimes. This section also draws out implications of the research findings for the wider academic field to which it is directed. In doing so, it discusses the theoretical implications of the research findings and states how these address the original research question set out in the general introduction.

2. Digital Participation in Self-Radicalisation

This section is dedicated to providing an overall description of the sample employed throughout the report to investigate radicalisation in Belgium. By analysing the characteristics of both samples as well as the time-frame studied, we will have a better understanding of the quality of the data and the phenomenon being studied in the Belgian case, specifically whether or not the samples in each case constitute online milieus or, on the contrary, users follow unrelated individual patterns of behaviour.

2.1. Distribution of samples: ideology, gender and language balances

As stated in the introduction, in Belgium, the combined sample of both strands of radicalisation consists of a total of 80 Twitter accounts.

2.1.1 Representativeness of gender

The overall sample has more males than females. 66% of the overall sample is male, 28% female, and 6% unspecified. The gender balance is more skewed towards male respondents in the RWE sample (consisting of 31 men, 6 women and 1 non-identified account) than for the Islamist extremist side (22 men, 16 women and 4 non-identified accounts).

2.1.2 Representativeness of radical ideologies

Both ideologies are almost equally represented in the sample: 48% of the sample covers right-wing radicalisation (i.e. 38 accounts); 52% Islamist extremist radicalisation (i.e. 42 accounts).

2.1.3 Language distribution

Regarding language distribution, 45% of the sample chose French as their default language (36 accounts), 40% chose Dutch/Flemish as their default language (32 accounts), 13% chose English 10 accounts), and 2 chose Arabic. The vast majority of the sample chose the French language as the default language of their account. Figure 1 provides an overview of the language distribution.

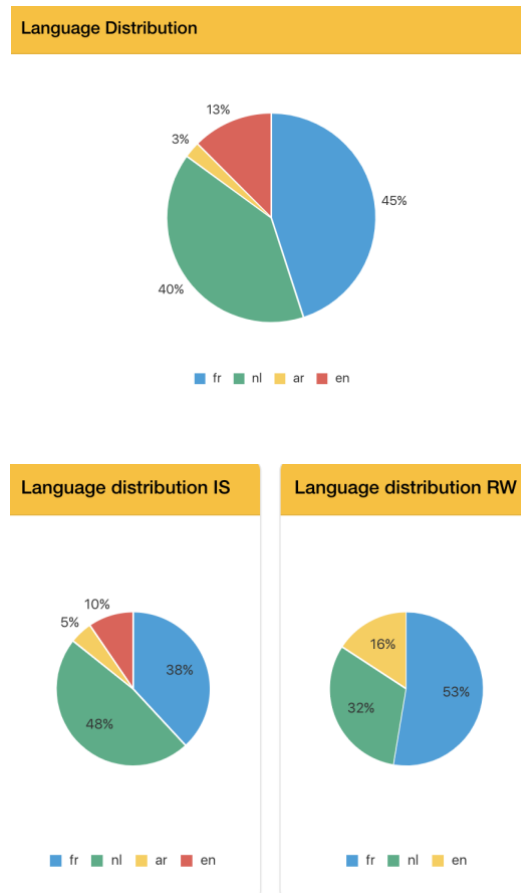


Figure 1: Overview of the language distribution

As a user, declaring one language over another affects the algorithm of the platform and may be an indication of what types of content a user wishes to favour on his/her timeline.

2.2 Time periods of participation

The data collection campaign on Twitter was designed to retrieve data from the beginning of any given account until the end of the data collection campaign, which ended on February 23, 2019. Knowing that Twitter was launched in 2006, and that theoretically accounts could have been scraped back into

the mid 2000's, it is interesting to note that the first tweets go back to 2009, 18 September 2009, to be exact².

2.2.1 Longevity of participation

We start by examining the longevity of social media participation of both the right-wing and Islamist extremist samples.

To have a better understanding of the time period of the general sample, Figure 2 and Figure 3 represent two timelines placed above one another. Speaking of activity in this context refers to tweets and retweets. The first timeline covers a shorter period of time, ranging from August 2017 to February 2019 than the second timeline, which zooms out and takes into account the whole range of tweets and retweets, going back to 2009. Within the first timeline, we can see a flat line of activity over several years, prior to 2017. Zooming out just confirms this.

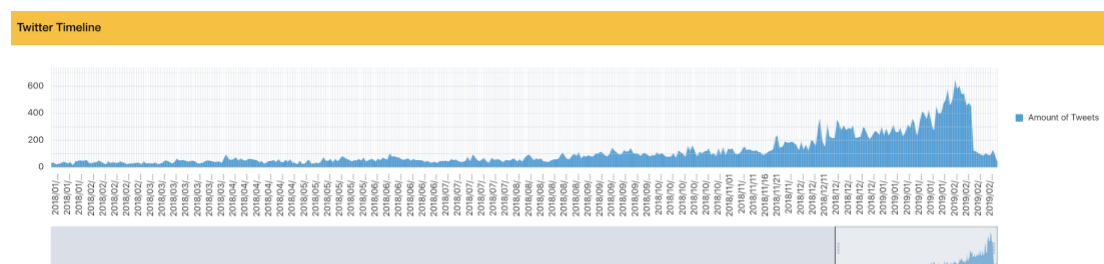


Figure 2: Twitter timeline of activity for the whole sample with a focus on the most recent years

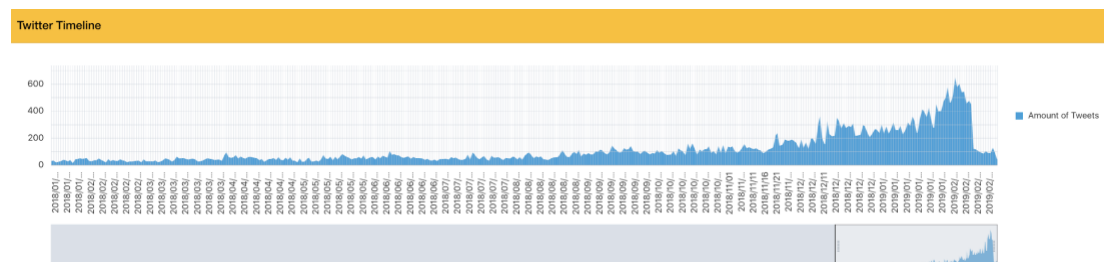


Figure 3: Twitter timeline of activity for the whole sample zooming out to get a better picture of the full period of time the sample covers

2.2.2 Focus on present day phenomenon

The accounts from the ISE depicted in Figure 4 are older than those from the RWE side depicted in Figure 5. The first tweet for the RWE sample is from 2009, but we can see higher frequencies of contributions in more recent years, making the sample even more recent and the trends reported in this report much more current for the RWE sample relative to the ISE sample.

² It is important to note that the date of creation of accounts, or how recently they had been active, were not a criteria of selection for the Belgian case. As stated in the General Introduction to the series of country reports, these were, however, criteria for other countries.

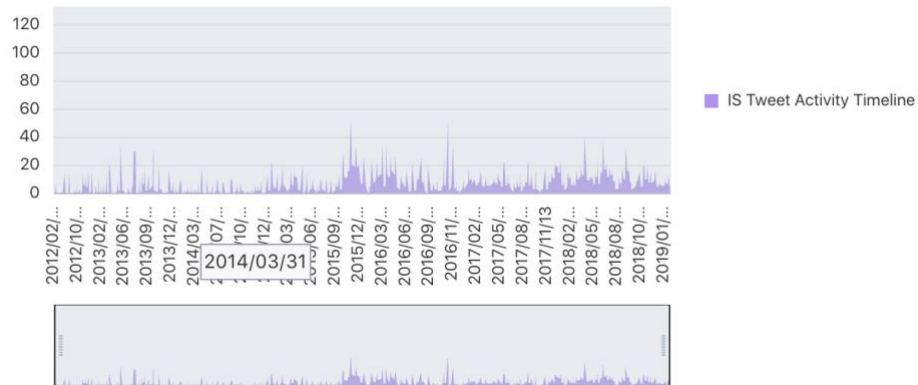


Figure 4: Timeline of the Islamist Twitter activity from 2012 to 2019

The broad view of the activity timelines shown above illustrates the fact the Islamist extremist content we are discussing in this report covers publications ranging from 2012 to 2019, but that activity picks up in 2015 and continues until December 2018.



Figure 5: Timeline of the right-wing extremist Twitter activity from 2014 to 2019

In the RWE case in the timeline above, activity is very low until 2017, meaning one or two accounts in our sample give us this broad view of activity from 2014 to 2016, but that the vast majority of accounts only start publishing content and/or are created as of 2017.

With respect to these observations, we can question whether, in Belgium, the use of digital public spaces like Twitter is an emerging and growing phenomenon for right-wing supporters and Islamists alike³. In a more general sense, taking both samples into account, we can conclude that users have, for the most part, only been active in recent years. This does not mean radicalisation did not take place online before this date; but if it did, the associated accounts were either deleted, suspended, and never came within the scope of our radar, never even existed, or, most likely, a mix of all of the above. For example, we know with certainty that many radical ISE accounts were censored over the years on major platforms such as Twitter, because they were considered to be active recruiting accounts as part of ISIS' digital political communication strategy. Such censorship measures are part

³ It is impossible to investigate this hypothesis further because the size of the sample does not allow us to have a broad view of dates of creation of accounts, and we do not have any way to access previously existing accounts that have since been banned or deleted by users.

of far broader counterterrorism strategies that also involve extensive military efforts and law enforcement. The ban on these accounts of course affects the content of the current study.

While the timelines may give the impression that radical accounts are a new trend, there is nothing that allows us to positively confirm this. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that the phenomena we are investigating are the ones we can access today, and not the phenomena present on the platform before the start of the survey in September 2018.

2.3 Volume of activity and patterns of participation

To understand the accounts we are using to conduct further analysis, we will consider the volume of activity of each sample and highlight levels of engagement as well as homogeneity of behaviours.

2.3.1 Volume of tweets/retweets and levels of engagement

The 80 Twitter accounts studied in this report represent a total of 36,456 tweets and 43,459 retweets for both samples. Tweets can be understood as original messages originating from a user, while retweets correspond to tweets created by another and shared by a user.

If we have a closer look at these numbers to identify the quantity of tweets and retweets for the ISE and the RWE accounts, the ISE sample represents 15,879 tweets and 11,766 retweets in our database, the RWE sample is composed of 20,577 tweets and 31,693 retweets.

Regarding the ISE sample, we can note that a smaller number of accounts are responsible for a greater number of original content. Users within this sample appear to have produced more content (ISE, n=15,879 TW from 42 accounts; RWE, n=20,577 TW from 38 accounts), possibly because people from this sample have been around longer or because the frequency in posting is more important. In the latter case - i.e. higher frequency in tweeting - the level of users' online engagement could be more important. Level of engagement is estimated based on the frequency of publication in original content, i.e. tweeting.

We can also note that the ISE sample contains slightly more tweets (15,879 TW) than retweets (11,766 RT) while the RWE sample contains about 50% more retweets than tweets (20,577 TW compared to 31,693 RT). This may imply that the users within the ISE sample are poorly connected to one another. What we could be looking at is individual patterns of behaviour instead of strong commitment through digital participation. This hypothesis could prove to be accurate as the lack of an online connected milieu - who share and spread a community's content - would help to explain the difference between the number of tweets and retweets, just as much as it would shed light on the low number of retweets for the ISE.

2.3.2 Homogeneous vs scattered patterns of behaviour

If we take a closer look at each form of radicalisation with respect to the proportionality of the number of accounts and user behaviours, the sample from the right-wing side is composed of users who tend to be active online, or at the very least, have produced a rather large number of tweets, with 50% of the total number of tweets between 556 and 2,261 tweets. The same cannot be said of the ISE sample. We have a sample that, on average, participates less, with 50% of the total number of tweets being between 34 and 805 tweets.

More importantly, the RWE sample contains users with a homogeneous behaviour, especially in comparison with the ISE sample. This becomes clear if we examine the table below. Figure 6 shows a box-and-whisker plot⁴, or a boxplot, representing the distribution and the dispersion of a full dataset.

⁴ This visualisation provides information on how the overall sample is composed with regard to the lowest and the highest number of posts for a single account within the whole sample: what the median level of posts is; how dispersed or homogenous the material is; and whether accounts respond to a similar pattern or not.

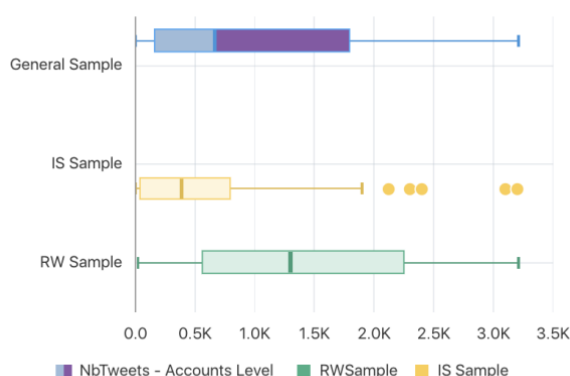


Figure 6: Box-and-whisker plot, representing the distribution and dispersion of the dataset

When examining the ISE boxplot side-by-side with the RWE boxplot, the RWE sample is gathered, while the IS sample is spread apart. It must be noted that the more the surface of the rectangle is spread out, the more the dispersion of values is important. In the case of ISE accounts, it appears that a few accounts publish a lot (i.e. the yellow dots), while a significant proportion do not. Also, the more the rectangle is left-skewed, the smaller the activity is and vice versa. In the case at hand, the IS boxplot is clearly left-skewed, while the RWE boxplot is right-skewed.

In short, analysis conducted via the boxplot shows that, on the one hand, with the RWE sample, the dataset contains similar type accounts and the sample is rather homogenous. On the other hand, the ISE accounts are more diverse, heterogeneous and possibly poorly related to one another. Based on these findings and the previous analysis above, it appears that the ISE sample cannot be understood as a single pattern of behaviour but a wide range of individual practices and digital activities.

Considering that the study carried out for this report was conducted after large banning campaigns had taken place on major websites, the absence of a clear-cut ISE phenomenon does not come as a surprise. Yet, these conclusions tend to show that we are studying a sample that does not in itself represent an actual phenomenon, but rather brings together a wide range of activities and possibly different formats of participation. Thus, the sample must be seen, itself, as constructed through the research process. Additional analysis in the report should allow us to determine how relevant it is to study Islamist extremist radicalisation from an online perspective, when the target of the study is patterns of behaviour as a whole.

2.4 Modalities of participation and levels of integration

Drawing on what has been established above regarding patterns of behaviours, we will now explore modalities of participation to see how people are taking part in the online scene. To do this, we continue looking at how people are using Twitter but turn our attention to whether they are expressing original content (a tweet), sharing an idea (a retweet), simply publicly approving of someone else's contribution (like) or spreading content (share). Understanding how users contribute will also improve our understanding of the levels of engagement for each form of radicalisation, and provide additional information on whether we are dealing with online milieus or individual patterns of behaviour.

2.4.1 Statistical distribution of tweets/retweets and levels of integration

We examined the difference in volume between tweets and retweets for both samples and saw that samples contained a similar number of tweets - around 20,000 tweets each (ISE, n=23,554 TW; RWE, n=21,056 TW) but very different levels of retweet activity; the retweet activity for the RWE sample was 50% higher than for the ISE sample, with an overall volume of activity two times higher.

Figure 7 shows the statistical distribution of tweets and retweets for each sample. On the left hand side there is a picture of the tweet activity (boxplots on the left) and on the right-hand side there is a snapshot of the retweet activity (boxplots on the right).



Figure 7: Boxplots of the distribution of tweets (left) and retweets (right) for both samples (top), the right-wing (middle) and Islamist (bottom) extremist samples

We mentioned that modalities of participation in terms of tweeting or retweeting are a way to understand levels of engagement. By retweeting rather than tweeting, people are less exposed and more disengaged. In that respect, RWE would seem less connected than ISE. However, if we put these results back into the context of typical Twitter use patterns, re-publishing content rather than generating original content is a normal pattern of behaviour for users on this platform. The fact right-wingers retweeted more than they tweet does not tell us much about levels of engagement. Given that retweeting is typical behaviour, it is more relevant to question the low number of retweets by the ISE. We suggest this could be related to a low level of integration into a digital milieu. Indeed, spreading other contributors' content would demonstrate an inflow just as much as an outflow of information, illustrating a manner to be connected to others online, and attentive to what is taking place within their networks. Instead, it would seem ISE users are not particularly receptive to their digital environment or strongly impacted by what others are expressing. While we still need to document this claim, we can note here yet another finding that tends to demonstrate the low level of integration of members of the ISE sample.

2.4.2 'Likes' and levels of integration

The overall volume of likes for samples illustrates another form of media participation. Liking content is even less engaging than retweeting but still shows a manner in which participants can actively contribute to the existence of digital milieus. Figure 8 shows the boxplots of liking distribution for the RWE (on the left) and ISE (on the right).

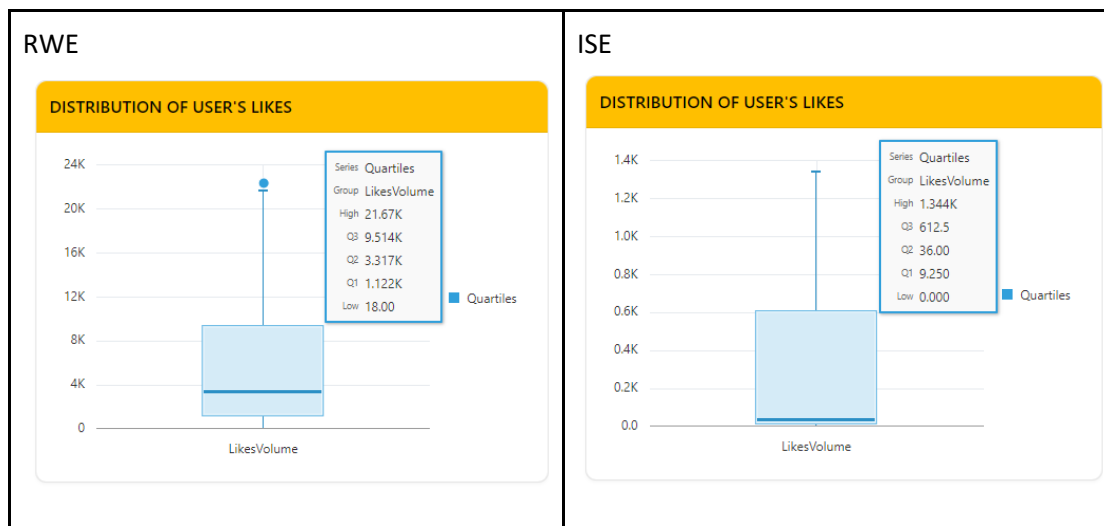


Figure 8: Boxplots of liking distributions: right-wing (left side) and Islamist extremists (right side)

As the boxplots above allow us to observe, likes are strongly disproportionate between ISE and RWE samples. On the left, RWE sample shows that 50% of users like between 1,122 and 9,514 tweets, for a median value of 3,317 tweets liked. On the right-hand side, 50% of the range of likes of the ISE sample is between 9 and 612 tweets liked, with a median value 36 tweets liked. These figures confirm that ISE activity is mainly output (meaning internet use is directed at a general audience) rather than interactive (meaning such use is aimed at exchanging or building reciprocal relationships with others). Overall the inflow of information is strikingly low - even on its own without any comparison to the RWE milieu - to the extent where inflow of information seems non-existent for a number of accounts in the ISE sample. The median value of 36 tweets liked suggests users do not tend to like content published by other users.

2.4.3 Followers/followings and levels of integration

Finally, as indicators of modalities of participation that can help us evaluate online engagement, we consider the number of followers (see Figure 9) and followings (see Figure 10) for each sample.

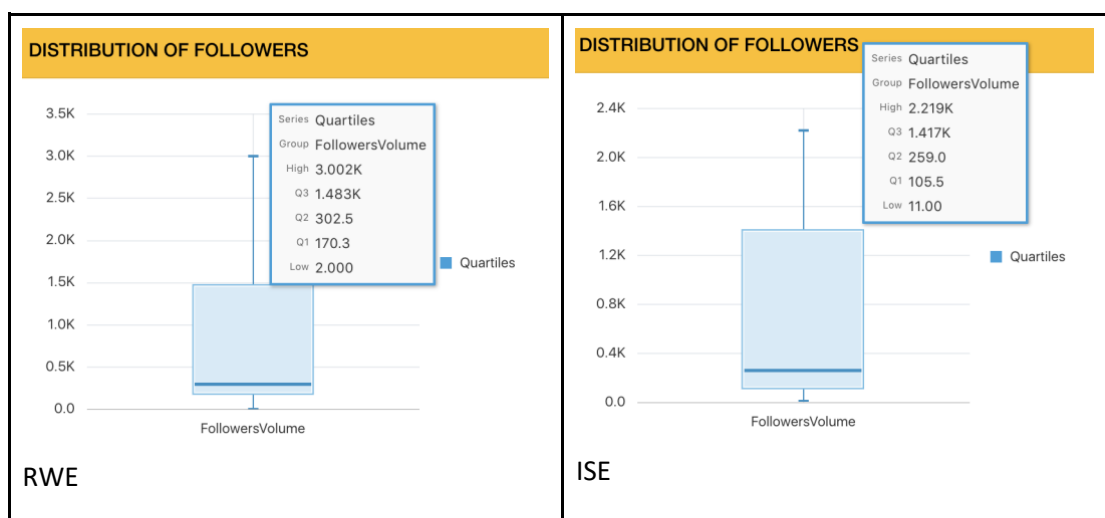


Figure 9: Boxplots of the distribution of followers for both samples: right-wing (left side) and Islamist extremists (right side)

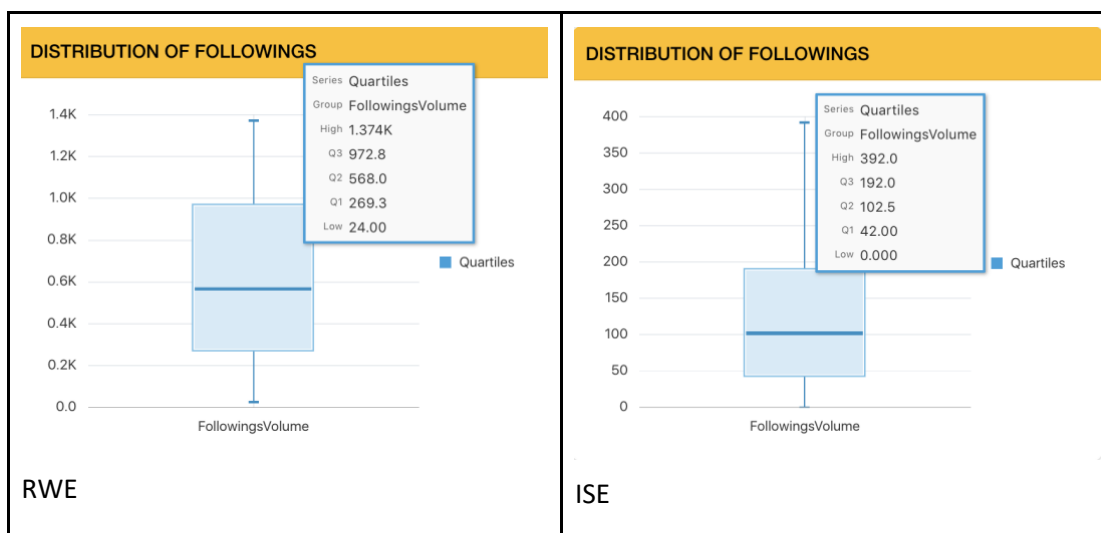


Figure 10: Boxplots of the distribution of followings for both samples: right-wing (left side) and Islamist extremists (right side)

For the RWE, the median level is around 302 followers and 568 followings. For the Islamist extremists, median values are significantly lower - 74 followers and 102 followings. Followers and followings are good indicators of whether people have any echo when they post or if they are well-connected. They can also help pinpoint strategies of communication. For example, are users trying to get their message 'out there'? Or simply using Twitter to monitor domains of interest and therefore, not interested in the connectivity potential of the platform? Without going into great detail on who people are following, this indicator tends to confirm the argument to date: if the users of the ISE sample demonstrate online engagement in publishing original content, they do not use Twitter to take part in an online milieu. They may express themselves publicly but for the most part, they lack any actual visibility and have low levels of followers. The levels of followings and followers for the Islamists seem to indicate we are dealing with a sample of active contributors but without a strong echo. In comparison, the RWE sample presents as a highly connected group of individuals with a strong level of participation.

2.4.4 Integrated vs disconnected contributors

Given the findings outlined above, we can describe the ISE sample as users who are disengaged from a larger online community and rather individualistic in their participation activities. This finding allows us to claim that Islamist contributors do not appear to support or engage in active participation of radicalisation, at least not in a collective manner. These conclusions for the ISE sample do not apply to the RW milieu. In the latter case, we find, rather, the existence of an online milieu where strong activity of liking other people's tweets, following one another and spreading content all suggest the sample of RWE users are engaged in sharing flows of information and reactive to online content viewed and received.

3. Staging and framing identities

In Section Three, we study the fashion in which the groups stage their identity as radicals or extremists and/or are framed by others as such.

Drawing on labelling theories, cutting across symbolic interactionist and Cultural Studies theories, in this section we situate the phenomenon of radicalisation on the stage of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962) as a co-produced phenomenon. In so doing, we consider radicalisation – into both right-wing and Islamist extremism - as the by-product of conflicts of symbolic representations and relationships of power between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social movements (Fraser, 2005; Macé, 2006). The semiotic and material boundaries of the notion of a Belgian right-wing or Islamist extremist scene

are shaped by social actors – mainly institutions, e.g. politicians, journalists, scientists, representatives of civil society – who take part in situated relationships embedded in struggles for power and domination.

From this perspective, the samples studied in this report are viewed as radical not only based on the tweets they publish or the identity they portray, but also by virtue of the ways in which people react to their media participation, and in as much as the contributors themselves perceive their contributions as radical. Participation in arenas of debate such as Twitter is only radical insofar as it is framed as such by the users themselves and observers (Becker, 1963). One's social identity as a radical is thus co-produced through external and internal labelling processes. This approach to radicalisation reminds us that radical ideologies are not a set of characteristics, but a process of interaction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements, strongly dependent on the context and the situation of the symbolic productions.

Studying how users stage their identities on the internet, as well as how their media use is framed by outsiders, is important given the internet has profoundly impacted the political landscape. The advent of 2.0 digital technologies, as a result of their participative nature where content is user-generated, has redefined the boundaries of the public sphere (Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone, 2013). In this setting, creating an online profile conveys both ideological and political messages (Castells, 2002). Access to political representation through media arenas, namely websites like Twitter facilitates the legitimisation or modification of interpretative frameworks, which in turn endorse or transform various legislative and institutional arbitration. The rise of participatory media and the use of social media have reconfigured the recourse to legitimacy that certain actors could claim, so much so that new forms of resistance or dissent are taking shape on the web. The internet has magnified the availability of radical ideas (Dean et al., 2012; Shirazi, 2012; Torok, 2013) and now harbours counter-narratives promoting tolerance, support, acceptance, and mobilisation towards extremist ideology (Warschauer, 2003).

Understanding processes of radicalisation on the internet thus entails contemplating whether contributors participate on Twitter through specific repertoires of action and if so, how these uses are framed. It supposes detailing how users stage their identities through general self-presentations to ensure their affiliation to a style recognisable by others as part of an extremist movement. It implies considering how much those stigmatised acknowledge the label they have been given and endorse it for themselves. Finally, it supposes determining by what means and in what terms labelling is carried out by outsiders.

3.1 Expressing political and religious opinions

This section analyses the main forms of media participation encountered during the ethnographic phase of the study. Within the frame of social movement theories, a format of participation can be understood as a repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1993), a mode of action (Castells, 2015; Earl and Kimport, 2011) or a repertoire of action (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Tilly (1993) defined repertoire of contention as an action carried out in common on the basis of shared interest. To be heard on a certain issue or achieve visibility for a cause, activists have a set of various collective, protest-related tools and actions that they perceive as legitimate to pursue in order to achieve their goals of visibility. Traditionally, these actions may include negotiations, petitions, poster collages, boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins, riots, hostage-taking, sabotage, destruction, etc. Applied to the web, the notion of format of participation refers to the fashion in which one uses a social media account to engage in the public sphere to defend a cause by conforming to a collective style (Chadwick, 2007; Theocharis et al. 2015; Figeac et al. forthcoming; Park, 2013). Studies have shown how digital resources and social media websites have become modes of action (Castells, 2015; Earl and Kimport, 2011) allowing random citizens, social movements, activists or grassroots organisations to politically participate online, for example, by organising and coordinating protests more efficiently through social media tools (Bennett, 2003). Studies show that interactions on Twitter become a political tool

that can be used toward several ends: taking part in political communication, mobilising people to participate, and organising the actual actions of the social movement (Theocharis et al., 2015; Park, 2013).

In relation to radical movements, it is well-established that RWE and ISE organisations alike use platforms to rally their audiences, engage new recruits and build a larger political movement (see the introduction section of this report). Indeed, digital tools allow collective action rationales to emerge and random citizens to take matters into their own hands by providing the means to engage in political action (Norris, 2002). However, it is less clear how bottom-up movements take shape through individual actions and engage in politically collective action enabling them to defend radical ideologies through specific formats of participation without specific direction from political organisations in a hierarchically descendant fashion. The study presented here contributes to the field by describing and comparing formats of participation retrieved for each sample. It shows that, although both samples engage in online activism aimed at triggering social, cultural or political change (Meikle, 2014), the far right employs very classical forms of activism, while the ISE sample uses Twitter in a less conventional manner, using the platform for recognition and publicity, to promote leaders and faith-based brands rather than investing in the public arena and conversational features of the arena.

Considering participation formats in this section has the added value of illustrating the reasons for selecting each sample. While each sample employs a different repertoire of action, on a more general level, they can both be considered to use the internet to express political opinions indicating possible attitudinal radicalisation but falling short of the endpoint of the support for violent extremism.

Drawing on the material retrieved through digital ethnography during the pilot phase of the study as well as analysis of issues discussed in tweets, interactions between users and the 'about' section of accounts, we can characterise the format of participation used by each sample. This is supplemented with a quantitative analysis of the links contained in the tweets in the big data sets. Throughout Section 3, where tweets/retweets are reproduced, twitter handles or names used or illustrations provided, the material reproduced has been edited to ensure names of Twitter users from our sample are removed or altered such that the original accounts cannot be identified. Icons and banners are reproduced only if they are generic or frequently used; no images that could identify unique Twitter users are included. Where Twitter handles or names are reproduced to illustrate the ways in which users present themselves, alterations have been made to the names ensure that the user accounts are not identifiable.

3.1.1 Right-wing extremism (RWE): classical forms of media activism

To identify what type of format of participation the Belgium RWE sample is using to participate online, we will focus on how they are using their accounts and how they explain their participation. We will see that five main elements distinguish these accounts.

Engaging in activism to support anti-Islam and anti-immigration ideologies

This repertoire of action is structured around the gathering of individuals who use Twitter to express their political opinions and promote their views in the public sphere. Beyond the fashion in which the sample exploits Twitter, we can consider that we are dealing with a distinct repertoire of action for the RWE sample because of the common thread linking these accounts to one another. This thread pertains to the way people use their accounts to engage with a series of ideologically oriented topics.

Accounts are set up to engage in political activism opposing immigration and/or Islamisation of Belgium culture. Although this is not surprising given this characteristic was also a criteria for selection of accounts for the study, it nonetheless constitutes an objective indicator that is common across this group of users. Anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses are abundant and at the very core of the Belgium sample. Below we illustrate this with examples of both anti-Islam and anti-immigration posts retrieved from the selected accounts (Plate 1 to 7):

A tweet states: *'Salafism strikes again! A new Islam shop with all sizes and colours opens in Antwerp'*

Brussel vandaag 🇳🇱 begrafenis van een salafistische imam. Afgezette straten. Mannen en vrouwen gescheiden. Bus omgeleid en extra politie ingezet. De seculiere samenleving in Molenbeek anno 2020...

Traduire le Tweet



Plate 1

In this tweet, above the image, it is stated: *'Brussels today. Funeral of a Salafist imam. Streets closed and men and women separated. Buses rerouted and police deployed. Secular society in Molenbeek in 2020...'*

Fransen zingen hun VOLKSLIED door het VRIJDAGGEBED heen!



Plate 2

The caption of the video reads *'French singing the national anthem to spite Muslims during Friday prayer'*

'Moslims voelen zich onprettig bij schaars geklede mensen op h/ strand.' Het omgekeerde geldt natuurlijk ook...

Traduire le Tweet



Islamitisch raadslid wil halaalstrand: 'Moslims voelen zich onprettig bij schaars ... Een naaktstrand? Dan ook een 'halaalstrand' in Den Haag. Tenminste, als het aan Parisj van de Eenheid-raadslid Arnoud van Doorn ligt. Volgens de omstreken ...

Plate 3

Above the news article, the caption reads: *'Muslims feel uneasy with people wearing little at the beach. The contrary applies as well'*



السلام عليكم يا فتاة من اللباس



What?



Plate 4

In this picture we can see a man saying something in Arabic and a woman asking 'what'. The response to her question appears to be physical violence and an imposed head scarf.

Opvang voor #IS peuters 🤖👶

Traduire le Tweet



Plate 5

The caption reads: *'Kids' daycare'*

Islam is the ultimate incel religion:

- irrational outbursts of violence
- autistic beliefs that often contradict themselves
- denigration of w*men out of sexual frustration
- promise of e-girls for being martyred for their fandom

Plate 6

A tweet on how the user defines Islam as irrational, violent, contradictory, sexist, and so on.

De diversiteit slaat toe! Salafistische @AlbaseerahBe #islam-stichting opent winkel in #Antwerpen Boerka's in alle maten en kleuren te koop!

Traduire le Tweet



Plate 7

The text states: 'Diversity strikes! Salafist foundation opens a store in Antwerp. Burqas in all sizes and colours for sale.'

Observations of tweets and self-presentations show that the extreme right sample are employing their accounts to combat Islam and immigration in Belgium. They employ Twitter to express personal opinions to discredit immigration and/or Muslims, claiming that Belgium has been invaded by the Otherness of foreigners with their cultural and religious ways. This symbolic category of 'others' is described as foreigners who do not wish to adapt to the Belgian ways but instead intend on pursuing their culturally foreign lifestyles. This is illustrated by the three examples below (Plates 8 to 10). In the first example, the tweet is linked to a picture of Putin with a saying that is attributed to him. The tweet reads, above the picture, 'Well said, Mr Putin!' Then next to Putin, it says: 'Mr Putin advises Muslims to live in Saudi Arabia or Iran, where their radical beliefs are viewed as the norm. You cannot impose your rules in a culture that is not your own'. In the example below this one, the tweet states: 'those in favour of Islam, of its organisations and ideology, are not welcome in our home. Some may have Belgian papers, with the left wing's complicity, but they will forever remain foreigners in our country' (Plate 9).



Plate 8

Les partisans de l'islamisme, de ses organisations ou de son idéologie n'ont pas leur place chez nous.
Ils ont pour certains les papiers belges, avec la complicité de la gauche, mais ils resteront toujours étrangers à notre pays.

Plate 9

Fear is expressed that foreign immigrants seek to impose their ways and beliefs on the Belgian people and that this will bring violence to the country or simply exterminate the white race (Plates 10 and 11). In the first example (Plate 10) below, the tweet reads: 'After genocide with machetes, genocide with swords, genocide by burning land, genocide by steel, genocide with gas, genocide with bullets, we had to wait for the 21st century to invent genocide by mankind - we eradicate mankind by submerging under a mass of humanity. In the second one (Plate 11), we can read: 'Nigeria: a new

video from ISIS. A young man kills a Christian prisoner with a bullet to the head. Remember this when your State decides to bring terrorists' kids back from Syria!

Après le génocide à la machette, le génocide au sabre, le génocide à la terre brûlée, le génocide aux fers, le génocide au gaz, le génocide par balles, il revenait au XXI^e siècle d'inventer le génocide à l'homme — on submerge sous des masses humaines les peuples à éradiquer.

Plate 10

Nigeria : Nouvelle vidéo de Daesh. Un jeune enfant tue un chrétien d'une balle dans la tête. Souvenez-vous en quand votre Etat ramène des enfants de terroristes depuis la Syrie !



Young boy executes Nigerian Christian prisoner in ISIS video
A video has emerged purportedly showing the execution of a Nigerian Christian by a young boy from an ISIS-affiliated terror gro...
© dailymail.co.uk

Plate 11

Below are four additional examples of tweets expressing the sentiment of invasion, typical of this format. In the first instance, the plate shows, on the left, the cover of one of Belgium's most famous comic books 'Tintin au Congo' (Tintin in the Congo). On the right side, we see asylum seekers on a rubber boat with the derogatory title 'Le Congo chez Tintin' (The Congo at Tintin's) (Plate 12).



Plate 12

In this second example, the image shared through tweets references the threat of Islam for Belgian society as a force ready to erupt and break through the cracking walls of Christianity to flood society, and ultimately drown individuals (Plate 13). Next to it, the example of another image showcases the increasing involvement of immigrants in Belgian (local) politics, especially where left-wing parties are concerned (Plate 14). The comment above the names states: 'Little surprise. Elections in Brussels in 2014 (Socialist Party). Yes, you are really in Belgium' (image n°):

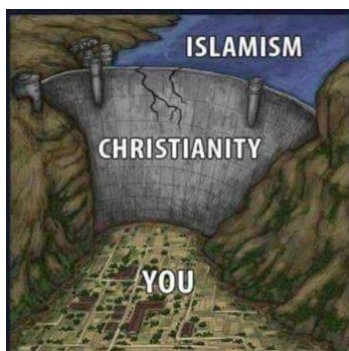


Plate 13

Petit souvenir
Elections de Bruxelles en 2014 (parti Socialiste)
Oui , Vous êtes bien en Belgique :-)

n° 3 : Emir Kir	n° 27 Ahmed El Ktibi	n° 54 Myriem Amrani
n° 7 Fadila Laanan	n° 28 Souad Razzouk	n° 55 Ibrahim Dönmez
n° 8 Mohammed Daif	n° 29 Emin Ozkara	n° 57 Ahmed Quartassi
n° 10 Sfia Bouarfa	n° 35 Abdallah Boustani	n° 59 Ahmet Gjanaj
n° 13 Rachid Madrane	n° 42 Yasmina Nekhoui	n° 61 Hava Ardiclik
n° 19 Jamal Ikazban	n° 43 Mohamed Errazi	n° 63 Abobakre Bouhjar
n° 20 Fatiha Salidi	n° 45 Mohamed Lahli	n° 65 Mado Mfuni Lukanda
n° 22 Nadia El Yousfi	n° 47 Mounir Laarissi	n° 67 Talbia Belhouari
n° 25 Mohammed Azzouz	n° 51 Ahmed Laaouej	n° 70 Mohamed Ouriaghli

Plate 14

A final example makes reference to the alleged difference between Islam and the West in the treatment of women. Comparing the fictitious Gaza sur Seine with Tel Aviv sur Seine, the text reads in English 'This reminds me... geographically close, but according to the Islamic Calendar, Muslims are still 1400 years behind' (Plate 15).

Ça me rappelle ce visuel...
Géographiquement proches..
Mais selon le calendrier hégérien les mahométans auront tjr 1400 ans de retard 🤔



Plate 15

All these examples portray the manners in which anti-Islam and anti-immigration discourses are spread on Twitter. They are constitutive of the way in which the Belgium far right milieu uses Twitter to express their political views and combat Islam as much as immigration.

Strong men combating unfair treatment: nostalgia for the past and alienation in the present to make Belgium great again in the future

Another common trait of this format relates to nostalgia for the past, sentiments of alienation in the present and declarations regarding modern-day decadency. These sentiments are tinted with hopes for a better future, where past values would be restored. The narrative counterpart to this general portrait of the breakdown of society is one of a saviour able to make Belgium great again, a saviour most often embodied in the figure of a strong man.

Images circulating within the milieu share the common perception that Belgium is not the country it used to be. Belgium has lost its way and its greatness. In the two pictures below for example, past and present-day societies are contrasted in order to highlight how modern times are failing. In the first example, the caption above a picture of before and after, states: 'It's hard to believe that class, decency, and good manners were once the norm in everyday life'. On the left, a picture in black and white from the past, where people are peacefully strolling in an attraction park. On the right, a picture of Black people in a fist fight in an attraction park (Plate 16). The second example, (Plate 17) is a tweet that claims: 'we've been lied to. Western values have never been. (...) In fact, 99% of Westerners throughout history would have found these things repugnant.'

It's hard to believe that class, decency, and good manners were once the norm in everyday life.



Plate 16

We've been lied to.

Western values have never been:

- Gay Rights
- Degeneracy
- Unbridled Individualism
- Consumerism
- Racial Egalitarianism

In fact, 99% of Westerners throughout history would have found these things repugnant.

Plate 17

Such claims of decadency are often linked to expressions of alienation and nostalgia. Primarily, people are nostalgic for a past sense of strong national identity and unity. Typically, one can find images such as the one below, expressing desire to return to a time when society was better:



Plate 18

If the 'decency' mentioned by users is under attack due to immigration as suggested by the sample, participants also factor in other reasons - notably weak leaders, corrupt government officials and policies favouring cultural differences, as well as policies putting Others' and/or the elite's interests first. Decadence is due to the left 'leniency', having crafted policies that favour mollycoddling, handouts, and access to social welfare for the undeserving, not to mention the fact they opened the door to a flood of immigration.

+de 20 % des élèves mahométans estiment légitime de prendre les armes pour défendre leurs religion !
Les "mesures" anti-radicalisation dans les lycées gérées par une gauche Immigrationniste ne sont que vaste fumisterie !

Plate 19

Plate 19 takes a jab at the left-wing, stating:
'More than 20% of Muhammad's pupils would engage in war to defend their religion! The 'de-radicalisation' measures in high schools managed by lefties are pure BS!'

The suggested breakdown of society can lead to alienation, sentiments of victimhood or double standards that justify the rise of the far right in Belgium and beyond. In the example below, the picture extracted from a tweet explains that if you're white, a Westerner and a man, society is telling you everything is your fault. Hurt pride explains the attraction of the far right (Plate 20). Next to this typical

expression of victimhood is an example of a user sharing a sentiment of double standards (Plate 21). In respect to the announcement of a new show created by Netflix in which Jesus Christ is supposedly gay, the user on Twitter comments: *'Today, we can't criticise headscarves or the Prophet Muhammad without being treated as an Islamophobe, but on the other hand, with no complex whatsoever, we make Jesus into a gay man.'* Two emojis thumbs down. *'Freedom of expression is for everyone or no one!'*



Plate 20

Aujourd'hui, on ne peut critiquer le voile ou le prophète Mohamed sans être taxé d'islamophobie mais on peut, sans complexe, illustrer Jésus en homme gay. 🍌🍌
La liberté d'expression doit être pour tout le monde ou pour personne ! 🍌



Plate 21

These claims capture a wider suggestion that accounts are being used to take action and publicly defend a cause - whether it is to recapture Belgium's greatness or reverse an *'invasion'* phenomenon - and thus, rectify something *'wrong'*. They are being used to engage in political combat, a combat that is embodied by strong men, presented as modern-day saviours. In other words, while accounts are tinted with sentiments expressing the breakdown of society, they are just as much structured by their narrative counterpart; a possible solution to escape indecency. The solution is embodied by strong men who will provide a strong nation. Illustrations of these strong men can take the form of simple statements such as *'white heterosexual male who royally doesn't give a shit about progress and political correctness'* in the above section (as is the case for one person in the RWE Belgium sample). This strong men phenomenon can be represented as an image of a man with large muscles (see Plate 22) or conveyed through the image of warriors such as in the picture of crusaders below (Plate 23) accompanied by a tweet that reads: *'me and the boys if the Islamic school in Gent is opened after all.'* (Plate 23)



Plate 22



Plate 23

In sum, accounts are used to combat the present-day political situation to bring change upon the Belgium nation. Twitter is therefore being used by this far right milieu for its communicative and expressive functions, in line with the top forms of digital activism (Theocharis et al., 2015; Figeac et al., *upcoming*; Park, 2013).

Pro-European sentiments to promote the unity of a white race and counter the national divide between Flemish and Walloon?

The third trait that embodies extreme right Belgium media activism on Twitter is the recourse to Pro-European sentiments, or more accurately the lack of a clear-cut sense of nationalism. Users express their attachment to Belgium, but a handful also express their aspiration for Flemish separatism. To say that Belgium nationalism is flourishing is therefore impossible, unless considering that what unites this sample is sentiments of white pride that translate into the defence of an idealised white European state. Indeed, alongside the ideologies of pro-Flemish separatism and pro-Belgium nationalism from the French-speaking Belgians, is a unified front when it comes to defending a white skin coloured Europe. Nationalist sentiment is found among the RWE sample in examples such as that captured in Plate 24.



Plate 24

However, Flemish separatism is also very much part of the scene (see Plate 25). Within the sample of Flemish extremists, we can find many statements capturing support for an independent Flanders. In the example below, the image shows a banner stating 'My father was an eastfronter, and as a Flaming, I am proud of it'. An 'eastfronter' is a Flaming who fought on behalf of Nazi-Germany in Russia during the Second World War. Underneath this image is the text: 'The flaming does exist, as I have witnessed the past weeks on Twitter. But only to be cursed at. Everything negative is caused by Flamings, for everything else, we are Belgians. It is tough, I know. I can hardly understand it myself.' (Plate 26)



Plate 25

De Vlaming bestaat wel, heb ik hier de laatste week mogen zien op Twitter.
Maar enkel om verrot te schelden. Al het negatieve in dit leven w
veroorzaakt door Vlamingen, voor al het andere zijn we Belg.
Het is moeilijk, ik weet het, ik kan amper zelf nog volgen.

2 5 32

Plate 26

Separatist tendencies are supported by the myth of a Flemish 'volk' (people) trapped in an artificial entity known as the Belgian nation (De Witte, 1998). In Flemish nationalist propaganda, French-speaking Belgium is the part of the nation that has never managed to properly integrate themselves by learning to speak Dutch fluently, living segregated lives in exclusive dwellings at Flemish taxpayers' expense. However, as noted above, within this sample, such sentiments are found alongside those that defend Belgium and express attachment to the country as a nation.

These paradoxical dynamics shape how the Belgium extreme right milieu relates to nationalism. As Mielants explains:

'Belgium's colonial experience, together with the relationship of the Dutch-speaking majority towards the French-speaking minority and the influx of immigrants from the 1960s onward – both of which are said to have abused the generosity of Flemish taxpayers – have created a particular dynamic of identity politics and nationalism that is as much exclusive as it is inclusive (Verbeeck, 1998; Ceuppens, 2003).' (2006: 322)

It would be easy to argue that Belgian nationalism relates only a part of the Belgium extreme right scene, being absent from the pro-Flemish nationalist milieu. This is certainly true to some extent, and captures what Mielants indicates as exclusive dynamics. However, to leave the analysis at that would ignore a topic that unites Flemish and Walloons, namely an attachment to Belgium (for most) and the defence of a pro-white European nation (for all).

One of the striking features of the Belgium sample is the high level of support received for messages promoting white pride. The support for white pride can be expressed through hashtags using phrases such as #whitepride or #whiteisbeautiful, or simply by means of images, like the two below (Plates 27 and 28). Participants use the concept of white race to present themselves as detailed in Section 3.2.1.



Plate 27



Plate 28

It is not uncommon to come across statements claiming that the white race is of the utmost importance to users as in this message in the comment section of a tweet, which reads: *'Peter, miscegenation makes me feel sick, it's worse than Islamism for me, but try to be more subtle about the topic; social network sites are precious for us.'* (Plate 29)

Pierre je vomis le métissage, c'est pire l'islamisation pour moi mais essaies de faire ça plus subtilement, les réseaux sociaux nous sont utiles.

Plate 29

If these messages promote the idea of a 'pure' white race, messages of white pride are aligned to pro-European ideals. Europe is represented as a land that is threatened by 'mixing' and invasions'; it must be safeguarded from other races to ensure the continuation of the white race. The three illustrations below exemplify such radical ideologies (Plates 30-32). The first simply shows a white maiden and insists on the fact blood and heritage trump any other factor when it comes to belonging to a country (Plate 30). The second illustration - entitled *'How Europeans disappeared'* - sums up many discussions within the far-right Belgium milieu (Plate 31). It is designed to illustrate the threat posed to the white race by factors such as mixed-race marriages, polygamy and lack of birth control, which mean white people will be 'outbred' by 'Others'. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of husbands, only wives, implying the intended audience is men. Those meant to identify with such discourse, prolonging observations about manhood within the RWE Belgian sample. The last example (Plate 31) expresses the defence of pro-white European space by promoting the implementation of 're-immigration' policies (Plate 32). Above the cartoon of a Gaul booting a pig draped in Muslim clothing with a Taliban turban on his head, out of Europe, we can note the hashtags *#RemoveTheKebab*, *#WhiteEurope* (Plate 32).



Plate 30



Plate 31

#RemoveTheKebab #Europe #WhiteEurope



Plate 32

A final example illustrates the understanding of the issue as one of competition between incompatible 'civilisations' or 'races' - as suggested in *Clash of civilisations* theories (Huntington, 1996) made widely popular since September 11 2001. This leads defending Europe to be portrayed as a means of preventing the threat of the extinction of the white race (Plate 33). The tweet below, written in English, explains that mixing will exterminate 'my people', i.e. the 'white people'.

Asians, Africans, and Arabs are allowed to keep exclusive territories at will but Whites are not. Whites across the globe must be chased down by #Diversity.

The mixing that will eventually happen will ONLY get rid of my people, White people. twitter.com/mooby_doo/stat...

Plate 33

It is important to understand that the prism through which Europe is being described by the Belgium sample is related to cultural traits, not a political or an economic state. The will to protect the white race represents a cause Belgians can unite behind, representing a common stake, despite ongoing internal historical identity political struggles.

The defence of a white Europe is even more significant given that pro-European sentiments are not ordinarily expressed on extreme right scenes in Western countries, which tend to be characterised by anti-Europe attitudes. This reinforces the claim made here that defending Europe is a way to move beyond the internal division between Walloon and Flemish by uniting around the idea of a white European nation.

Media activism thus serves the Belgian extreme right to promote a particular form of 'national' unity, underlined by inclusive and exclusive dynamics, overcome by uniting around white pride and pro-European discourses in relation to the attachment to a Belgium nation.

Participation as means for reclaiming a common cultural, religious and racial background

Notwithstanding the peculiar national context of Belgium, reflected in the internal struggle between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians in the Belgium RWE sample, the accounts reveal a shared practice of using media activism on Twitter to defend a common 'heritage'. This heritage referred to in the accounts analysed is the claim to a Christian Belgium, white skin colour and/or a shared history related to a shared land or territory.

A survey circulating within the sample (Plate 34) illustrates how a narrative portraying national identity and politics as the by-product of blood, land and heritage circulates among them. The survey offers several options as to what defines belonging to a nation; responses, which exclude the possibility of naturalisation or assimilation as a means to claim belonging to a country. Only a common background testifies the horizon of affiliation. In this sense, the survey is clearly directed.

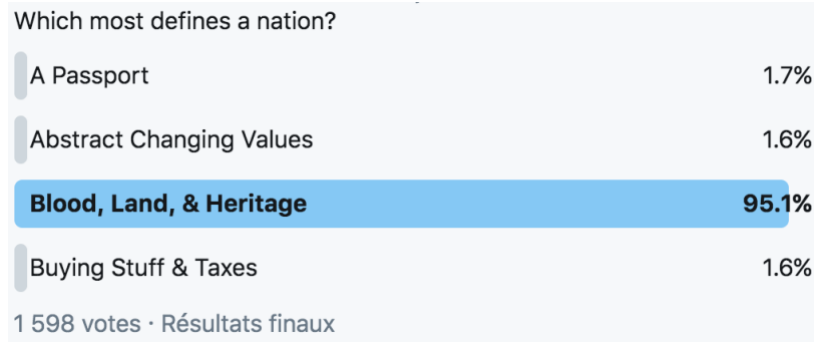


Plate 34

Along these lines, many accounts boast that Belgium has always been Catholic - or at least Christian - simplifying the long history of the Belgian land. They promote Christianity in a simple fashion, by professing faith, as in the examples below:



Plate 35



Plate 36

Likewise, many contributors to the extreme right milieu state that the skin colour of the Belgian population is white (as noted already above). Finally, references abound to remind one of the historical roots of the country, especially in relation to the Roman-Gaul and Christian crusaders during the Middle Ages. This appears mainly in the self-presentation sections of accounts and so is dealt with in Section 3.2.1.

In short, Belgium is portrayed as a non-Muslim faith-based country in which people do not have darker skin tones, past colonialism does not constitute a part of Belgium's history and/or provides no hold on present-day immigration and/or contribute to understanding issues of integration. This general portrait of Belgium's heritage promotes the idea that Belgium's past greatness has been soiled by the changes brought about through mixing with other populations. This is illustrated in Plates 37 and 38.



Plate 37

Gardez-les, on n'en veut pas. De toute façon le métissage est une erreur (je me modère je suis sur twitter) à combattre bien avant l'islamisation dans les priorités.

iky @iky2fois · 26 janv.

Les métisses qui respectent pas leur parent blanc j'sais pas comment vous avez été éduqués mais c'est à revoir

[Afficher cette discussion](#)

Plate 38

In response to a tweet, a user comments: *'Keep them, we don't want them [people of mixed race]. Mixing races is an error anyways (and I'm moderating my discourse, I'm on Twitter); it must be fought before anything else, even islamisation.'*

These claims for national unity pertaining to a common cultural background, go hand in hand with re-migration discourse. The two examples below capture this type of message that can be commonly observed in the comment sections of tweets (Plate 39 & 40).

Retour au bled et vous n'aurez plus à vous plaindre 🇸🇩



Feiza Ben Mohamed @FeizaBM · 19h

Il faut saluer la prouesse. La meuf est invitée sur un plateau TV pour avoir dit « votre dieu je lui mets un doigt dans le c** » et « votre religion c'est de la merde ».

Quel pays magnifique 🇸🇩 twitter.com/qofficiel/stat...

Plate 39

The comment to the tweets states: 'Go back the Bled and you won't have to complain anymore'



Plate 40

This picture is stamped on many messages and signals to the user that they perceived to be potential candidates for imaginary re-immigration policies through the sentence: *'you are first in line for re-migration.'*

If this feature emphasises the political nature of this repertoire, what differentiates these accounts from 'ordinary' political stances attacking minorities is the degree of radicalism, which is shared across these accounts and is explored in more depth below.

Transgressive postures aimed at spreading fear and radical ideologies on the web

The four features presented up until now emphasise the political nature of this form of media participation. What differentiates these accounts, however, from 'ordinary' political stances criticising minorities is their reference to radical ideologies tinged with violent extremism.

In line with the DARE research focus on radicalisation, in this study we targeted accounts that met a number of criteria (see General Introduction) indicating adherence to or promotion of radical ideologies. One criterion of particular importance was the call for violence. In the case of the RWE sample a large number of accounts met this criterion, or at the very least, shared explicitly violent content targeting minorities or immigrants. For example, while browsing through accounts there was an abundance of imagery and texts that openly stigmatise migrants and/or expressed radical opinions in terms of how to treat Islamists and/or minorities (as described above).

In addition to this type of content, there is also more violent material that we could consider as outright violence. The Belgium RWE milieu shares large amounts of amateur camera videos, capturing scenes of real-life violence; typically a white/ elder/ child or teenage/ woman/ police figure, being assaulted by one or a group of people of colour, either 'Arabs' or black people (Plates 41 to 45).



Plate 41

'This is taking place on the street David Siqueiros' #scum #saintdenis. It's a video in which we can see a large group of men running after a police car that seems to be fleeing the scene.



Plate 42

'A black man brutally assaults kids by kicking them in the head @statepolice' This post denounces child abuse by a black man of a child.

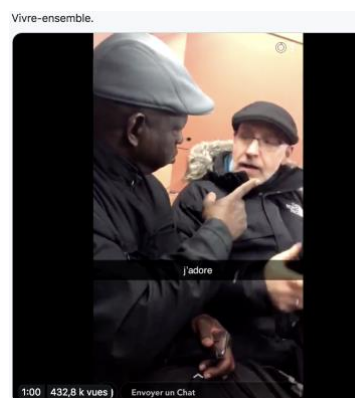


Plate 43

The caption of this video reads 'living-together'. It shows two men arguing on the underground. The black man on the left-hand side of the frame ultimately stands up and starts hitting the white man on the right side of the frame.

• Wanneer een blanke man de overhand krijgt in een gevecht 1 op 1 met een Hyena,
• Hyena vriendjes helpen uiteraard gewoon mee.
• Deze culturen worden aangemoedigd om agressiever te zijn.(met de paplepel ingegoten.



Plate 44

The caption above reads: *'When a white man is winning the fight man-to-man with a hyena, of course the horde of hyenas step in to help. Those cultures are encouraged to be more aggressive.'*

Un jeune Français blond se fait casser les dents « sur le coran ».
Ce quotidien qui ne fait jamais la Une des médias politiquement corrects
#SleepingGiants #Westhoffen #BlackBlocs



Plate 45

The caption of the video claims: *'a young blond French man has his teetbroken 'on the Qur'an'. The type of everyday event that is never part of the politically correct media coverage'.*

These videos represent a particular format within the more general repertoire of action examined. Even though the size of the Belgian sample is too small to confirm this, it would seem that the accounts that promote this type of material are primarily accounts held by men. To document this impression, we would need to isolate such accounts from those gathered, collect additional accounts and conduct an in-depth analysis of their content to understand better the relationship between representations of violence and the gender of account holders. At this stage, however, it is possible to suggest that, by sharing these episodes of ordinary violence in a repetitive way, the users behind these accounts may seek to instil fear under the pretext of sharing warnings concerning the breakdown and decadent state of Belgian society as a result of the ‘invasion’ of ‘foreigners’. A final remark regarding these videos is that they display and expose fellow Twitter contributors to violence, more than promote the use of it.

Moving away from this particular use of Twitter within the more general repertoire of action consisting in participating in Twitter to spread far right ideologies via media activism, we can observe how violence becomes an undertone to this repertoire of action. Typically, users share explicitly violent content targeting minorities or immigrants (Plates 46 to 48).



Here in the cartoon on the left (Plate 46), the driver intent on suicide, shouts the now infamous ‘Allahu Akbar!!!’ to denote the scene depicts a terrorist attack. The victims, meanwhile, are pictured uttering phrases cautioning against tackling radicalisation head-on: ‘do not feed the fire of hatred; do not make generalisations; do not give in to the far right’s discourse; it’s a troubled young person; let’s not forget that we colonised his country; it’s just an isolated case of an unstable man; he was manipulated by the system.’

Plate 46

L'islam sous simulacre de "mariage" autorise la pédophilie, cette enfant sera violée, une esclave sexuelle sous les "mashaallah" de sa famille. Soyons islamophobes.



Plate 47

Above a video showing the celebration of a wedding between a young girl and a young man. The caption states: *'Islam under, a simulation of marriage, legitimises paedophilia; this child will be raped, a sexual slave under the 'Maa sha'Allah' [God has willed it] of her family. Let us be Islamophobes.'*

The tweet divided into two pictures reads: *'how we view Muslims'; 'how Muslims perceive us'.*



Plate 48

Violent extremism targeting forms of Otherness, particularly immigrants and Muslims, maintains a narrative that marks the urgency of the threats faced by Belgium when it comes to the spread of Islam and immigration.

3.1.2 Islamist extremism: microblogging to serve a high power

If the RWE accounts openly contribute to political debates to push their views and their agenda, the same cannot be said about the ISE accounts. Rather than getting involved in general politics, these accounts focus on preaching's, religious lifestyle tips, scriptures and sermons pertaining to a Muslim way of life. Accounts are not turned towards spreading like-minded news or engaging in direct communication but instead are employed in an outbound manner, to broadcast religious ideological material. We will see that this format serves to publicise religious beliefs, without resorting to violent content, nor expressing political views in a fashion similar to the RWE sample. This does not fully eliminate the activist dimension of this repertoire of action, nor does it negate its extremist nature.

Preaching, delivering faith-oriented lifestyle tips and broadcasting religious scriptures

The leading feature of the media activity of this sample is that Twitter users share their belief system. This format of participation is centred around praising Allah and sharing religious views. People's explanations of their use of Twitter, in the 'about' section, cluster around faith or a particular spiritual leader as underlying how the account is employed or how one's voice will be broadcast through this social networking site. Justifications resemble a generic saying, an excerpt from the Quran or messages directed towards an audience:

'The Salif should strive to walk in the footsteps of the salaf as Salih'

'One who treads a path in search of knowledge has his path to Paradise made easy by Allah! Riyadh us-Saliheen'

'There is no god except Allah. Muhammed is his messenger'

It is also evident that this repertoire of action allows contributors to offer different sorts of religious-based information, like scriptures or (original or leader-based) preaching. Accounts provide guidance and educational resources. The use of Twitter in this manner sets up the social media platform to be a space to access lifestyle tips to support personal beliefs attached to occasional practical advice on how to properly practice one's faith. Guidance may come in the form of images, written messages in tweets as well as live preaching broadcast through Twitter (Plates 50 to 53).

Een oud manuscript van Sahih al Bukhari, geschreven met een duidelijke Marokkaanse handschrift. Het manuscript staat opgeslagen in Parijs.

Traduire le Tweet



Plate 50

Above the image, the tweet reads: 'An old manuscript from Sahih al Bukhari, written in clear Moroccan handwriting. The manuscript is stored in Paris.'

💎 Sommige mensen doen overal moeilijk over en willen niks over het hoofd zien. De Profeet ﷺ zei: "Het Hellevuur is verboden voor ieder meegaand, zachttaardig, toegankelijk en makkelijk (persoon)." [Tirmidhi] Neem een voorbeeld aan de volgende uitspraak van Ibn al-Jawzi...

Traduire le Tweet

Ibn al-Jawzi رحمه الله zei:

Fouten over het hoofd zien blijft één van de beste karakter(eigenschappen) van de nobelen. Want de mensen maken van nature overtredingen en fouten. Wanneer een persoon zich bekommert om iedere overtreding of fout, dan zal hij moe worden en zal hij anderen vermoeden. De intelligente persoon is degene die niet iedere kleine of grote (kwestie) met zijn familie, geliefden, vrienden of bureau nauwkeurig onderzoekt. Vandaar dat Imām Ahmad رحمه الله zei: "Negen tienden van goed gedrag is: het over het hoofd zien (van fouten)"

At-Tahdhīb van Al-Mizzī 19/23 | www.ahloelhadieth.nl

Plate 51

The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

"Straighten your rows [narrator: he said this three times]. By Allāh! You either straighten your rows or Allāh will create division between your hearts."

[Aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥah (v. 1 p. 71 no. 32) of al-Albānī]

Plate 52

An example of how tweets are used to express guidance

Smoking marijuana/cannabis = Prayer will not be accepted for 40 days! Ibn Taymiyah: "Whoever becomes intoxicated through an alcoholic beverage or intoxicating marijuana...their Prayer, which is obligatory upon them, is not accepted until they repent for forty days." Majmū v34

Plate 53

An example of how tweets are used to share tips for day-to-day living

In Plate 54, a sermon from the former Imam of the Al-Haram Mosque in Mecca, Shaykh Ṣāliḥ Āl as-Shaykh, is shared in a tweet, so followers can listen to him talk live:

[NIEUW] Wanneer je verdrietig of ongerust bent...

Shaykh Ṣāliḥ Āl as-Shaykh

Traduire le Tweet



Plate 54

Above the video, a caption presents the title of his talk, i.e. 'Martyrdom Operations Constitute Suicide'

Most accounts target men and women alike. However, some are set up in a more gender- oriented fashion (Plates 55 and 56). Some accounts are specifically designed to fit the needs of a particular gender. Plate 55 offers an example of how an account explicitly solicits women rather than men:

Het huishouden wat een vrouw thuis verricht is iets eervols...



Plate 55

The caption above the image reads: 'What a woman does in a household is something grand, although some may think it is something small'. This is in line with the text in the image itself promoting an ideologically tinted perspective of womanhood

The Prophet cooked his own food, cleaned his own clothes, and took out his own trash, your wives are not your maids, ya ikhwaan, ...

Plate 56

This tweet on Plate 56 is directed at men and defines more specifically a woman's role in a household to suggest that men should respect women.

In sum, the primary way the ISE sample uses accounts is to offer spiritual guidance based on scriptures and preaching. By participating in this fashion, tweets are outbound; they do not call for a conversation. Twitter is employed as a tool to help other believers align their lifestyle with their faith. At first glance, this form of media participation does not appear to have any political ground or stake. Microblogging would solely be carried out to serve a higher power and share the good news of Islam.

Using Twitter accounts as a storefront: communication strategies to promote religious branding and associated products

The use of social media goes above and beyond simply expressing religious beliefs. It is also a communication strategy that promotes brands of faith and associated digital influencers. Social media is used as a marketing tool in many areas of life outside the spectrum of radicalism. The promotion of

religious beliefs - and associated schools, philosophers, individual gurus or digital influencers - observed in the Belgian sample, aligns with this more general digital communication strategy trend. The majority of the accounts within the Belgium sample are set up for the sole purpose of reeling users into a more or less hidden agenda of promoting a brand, a product and/or ideological stances. This is the second feature of this format of participation.

We can find examples of schools using Twitter to promote religious scriptures and sermons with the clear intention of showcasing what they do locally, and thus using Twitter as a platform to generate an audience and bring attention to their activities. In the first example below, a local Mosque promotes a previous speaking event (Plate 57); in the following example, the tweet shares information about a series of conferences (Plate 58). In the last message, an account boasts the religious teachings of a spiritual leader whose teachings they are sharing that day and explains the Imam's résumé in detail (Plate 59).



Plate 57

Above the video of the inside of a Mosque, a quick explanation of the scene to promote the local faith-based educational activities of the school of thought

Here's the Summer Conference Schedule:

SALAFIPUBLICATIONS - SUMMER CONFERENCE 2019		
THE SALAFI MASJID, WRIGHT STREET, BIRMINGHAM, B10 9SP		
<i>"Muslim Unity, Splitting of the Ummah & the Methodology of the Scholars of Hadith"</i>		
FRIDAY 19TH JULY 2019		
13:30	Khutbah by Shaykh Sālim Bāmīhriz.	Shaykh Sālim Bāmīhriz
17:00	Advice of al-'Allāmah Zaid bin Hādī Rahīmāhullāh for the Student in Remaining Upright & Grounded.	Abu Mu'adh Taqweem
18:15	Shaykh Sālim Bāmīhriz Live in Person.	Shaykh Sālim Bāmīhriz
20:30	The Hadith: "My Ummah will split into 73 sects..."	Abdullah Lahmami
SATURDAY 20TH JULY 2019		

Plate 58

This tweet shares the programme for an upcoming conference



Plate 59

It is important to understand that beyond schools of faiths, or Mosques, there are also single individuals who promote their own interpretation of faith and create enough of an online audience to become an influencer. Typically, such influencers within the ISE Belgium sample offer day-to-day

lifestyle tips, publish self-reflective or inspirational blog posts, summed up in a single quote, and offer organisational advice on how to stay committed or reach personal development goals in relation to faith (see Plates 60 to 64).

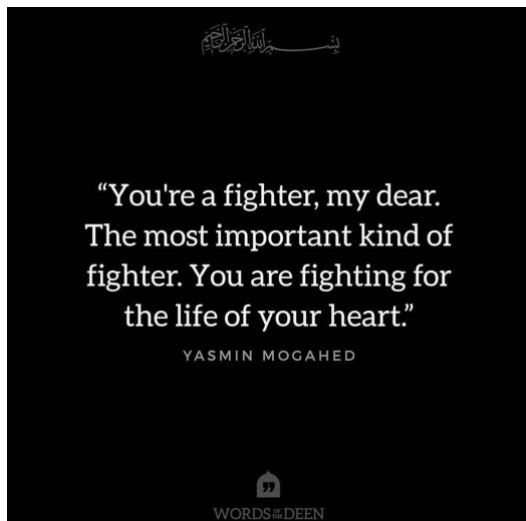


Plate 60

We all make mistakes ♥ Just keep trying



Plate 61

Our problems are handpicked for us. Our obstacles are given to us to teach us how to climb. That tidal wave you experienced last week--it was sent bc u need to learn to swim. The most difficult people and situations in our life are designed by Allah to develop us.

Plate 62

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَا لَكُمْ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ انْفِرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
اتَّقَلْتُمْ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ ۚ أَرْضَيْتُمْ بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ ۚ فَمَا
مَتَاعَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ

"O you who have believed, what is [the matter] with you that, when you are told to go forth in the cause of Allah, you adhere heavily to the earth? Are you satisfied with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But what is the enjoyment of worldly life compared to the Hereafter except a [very] little." (9:38)

Plate 63

Keep striving & don't give up!

The soul is occupied with one of two things:

1. Knowledge or ignorance
2. Righteous actions or evil

Ibn Taymiyyah said:

"It was stated: 'If you do not busy the soul with the truth, then it will busy you with falsehood.'" Fatawa (8/223)

Plate 64

In this sense, microblogging to promote ideologically oriented faith material is a means to build an audience in order to pursue personal (or institutional, in the case of a school) fame as well as notoriety as a digital influencer. Influencers not only promote ideology or offer entertainment; they may also sell associated products such as books, speaking events and tours during which internet users can meet the online influencer they have been following, possibly admiring at a distance. For instance, one of the users in the ISE Belgian sample tweets: *'Join my upcoming IR tour this month Insha Allah.'* In this respect, employing this repertoire of actions possibly procures public interest and wealth.

In a more detailed example below, we can see how a user crosses over several platforms to broadcast their views and share their message with a simple Twitter account. The account featured below publicises the existence of another digital space, in the case at hand, a blog. This appears in the about section of the profile, highlighted in blue here in Plate 65. This link leads to Plate 66, a blog, a collection

of podcasts, series of webinars and online courses, books that are sold through the platform, and so on (Plate 66).



Plate 65



Plate 66

This communication strategy was described by Younes Johan Van Praet in an article entitled *'The Emergence of 'Traditional' Islam in French-Speaking Muslim Cyberspace. The Processes of Selection, Translation and Reception of Two Malikite Sages'* (2018). The author studied how two online preachers and Islam influencers within the French-speaking twittersphere staged their identity and framed their teachings to ensure digital visibility. He shows that the communication strategy of the two men corresponds to what he calls *'educational entrepreneurs'*; these influencers have a new 'offer' - one consisting of tweets, YouTube videos, blogs posts - based on 'traditional' material, i.e. classical religious material. In using online platforms such as Twitter, these preachers also conform to modern day communication strategies to showcase their material with a visual identity specific to their 'brand' for example in order to produce legitimate and identifiable marketing products, i.e. teachings. These strategies serve a larger purpose than self-promotion, or the possible financial retributions we mentioned in passing. The author Van Praet also underlines the larger impact these strategies have on the adoption of faith. First, we observe a mix between latest IT strategies and old-traditional conservatives. Secondly, and more importantly, this repertoire could supposedly have an impact on the type of faith being adopted at-large:

It is a question of preparing the ground, of creating expectations through the digital staging of a discourse around the 'good' modalities of transmitting it, of valuing the charismatic figures of traditional Islam reborn as ad-Dedew and al-Kamalî and, finally, the popularization of a heritage of specific works which constitute the stages which the learners will have to follow within the educational structures. These initiatives are crossed, as we have seen, by strong competition, accentuated, what is more, by the efforts deployed on an international scale by al-Azhar University which appealed, in particular on the occasion of several congresses, including that of 2016 in Grozny in Chechnya, in a counter-offensive against Salafism aimed at reaffirming traditional Ash'arite, Madhhabic and Sufi Islam (Pierret, 2011). This new militancy of traditional actors seems, through numerous dissemination networks that we have partly described here, to reach French-speaking Muslim cyberspace, and to force a large part of Salafism to adapt. (Van Praet, 2018: 146)

The internet then becomes a vehicle for affiliation. However, as we will detail later, given the nature of these accounts, discourses are exempt from violent extremism and/or do not express violent intent.

General affiliation to Quietist Salafism

Beyond microblogging to promote one's faith and/or a product, another element that characterises the way the ISE Belgium sample uses Twitter is the affiliation to a specific denomination of faith, namely Salafism. As Amghar explains, Salafism is not specific to Belgium but part of 'reislamisation' dynamics in Europe. In his words:

Since the end of the 1980s, a new form of religiosity has emerged among young people of North African, Turkish or Indo-Pakistani origin, some of whom were born in Europe. This new variation of Islam was first of all largely the result of 'reislamisation' movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the 1990s also saw the emergence of another movement in the 'reislamisation' dynamics in Europe: Salafism. (Amghar, 2007: 38)

This represents the third feature of this repertoire.

We can identify affiliation to Salafism within the Belgium sample by browsing through the accounts and paying attention to (screen/user) names, short descriptions in the 'about' section, header or profile pictures, like the following examples (from an 'about' section of user pages) illustrate (Plates 67-69):

"Tawheed is the Cure for Every Sickness | Saeed Rhana" by At-Tarbiyah South Florida via [#speakr.com/user/tarbiyahs...](https://speakr.com/user/tarbiyahs...)

Traduction in Tawhid

Plate 67

A user shares a tweet from an Imam in the United States mentioning the role of the tawhid in faith-based practices.



Plate 68

The image presents the work of Tafsir al-Baydawi, a popular Sunni Quranic work composed by Al-Baydawi, a 13th century Muslim scholar.



Plate 69

The text reads: The basis by which heart and souls are purified is the tawhid, reciting one of the core Salafi beliefs.

In these sections, we can identify references to Salafism through mentions of the concept of tawhid (Plates 67, 69), or well-known Muslim scholars (Plate 68), famous within the Salafi movement.

If Salafis share a puritanical approach to the religion intended to abstain from religious innovation by strictly replicating the model of the Prophet Muhammed, the Salafi movement represents a diverse community. Within the movement, there are three main branches: Quietist (also known as predictive or purist (Adraoui, 2015); Jihadist; and political (also known as traditional ethical activism (ibid.)). In opposition to the Jihadists, Quietists are apolitical and nonviolent. Pockets of radicals, harbouring positive sentiments towards jihadism, are part of the Belgian landscape, but the format of participation we are discussing here appears to be in line with the general Belgian Muslim situation insofar as this format of participation mainly captures the media practices of Quietist Salafists. Indicators of this affiliation can be found in tweets, through mentions of well-known Salafist Quietist preachers, or in apolitical statements on matters of government, which is typical of a Quietist Salafist posture, as the excerpts from tweets above exemplify.

Matters are not always as clear-cut as might be suggested by the discussion so far. However, we did not observe support for well-known leaders or movements supporting violent extremism; quite the contrary as will be shown later in this report.

Absence of claims to violence for political means

The fourth feature of this format of participation is the fact that none of the Twitter accounts openly manifest violent claims or share violent content in the name of religious faith and ideologies. This does not mean that users do not aspire to Sharia-ruled states or that the messages in which they support their beliefs are not in breach of Belgian laws. Simply, contrary to the RWE sample, violent type content is not employed to express political aspirations, and it is not at the core of digital expressivity.

Contributors within the ISE sample are clear about the lack of support for radicalisation, to the extent that they argue against terrorism or radical forms of political Islam. They denounce infamous political figures or organisations supporting any type of radical Islamism, explaining how such activities are misguided and go against Islam (Plates 70 and 71).

#Terrorists #Khawarij #ISIS reject the
Imāms: Ibn Bāz, Ibn Uthaimīn & Al-Albānī,
just as their forefathers rejected Ahmad,
Shāfi'ī & Mālik.

Plate 70

2 grands terroristes parmi les plus grands criminels actuels ont pu être éliminés en l'espace de deux mois:

- Le guide "suprême" de #Daesh Al Baghdadi
- Le guide "suprême" des milices chiïtes Suleymani

Ces 2 groupes terroristes vont à leur perte..

Plate 71

The tweet reads: '2 infamous terrorists amongst the greatest criminals were eliminated in the last two months: ISIS' supreme guide Al Baghdadi; supreme guide of chiïtes milices Suleymani. These 2 terrorist groups are done.'

There are offers of educational resources to help identify violent extremist groups and affiliated tendencies. The example below is a poster shared in a tweet, which promotes a live webinar offered to Salafists to help them unmask the 'ISIS propaganda machine'.

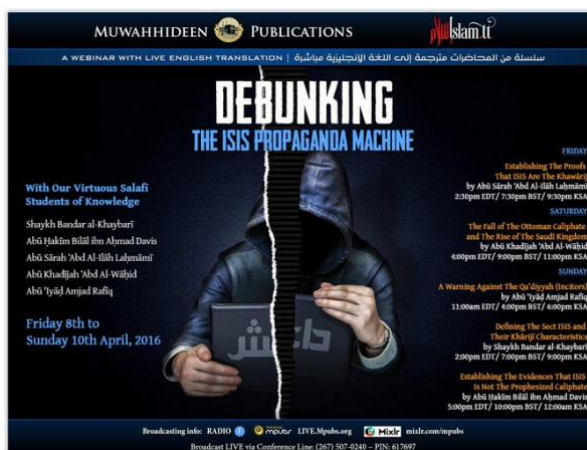


Plate 72

In a final example, we can see in the 'about' section of a user's profile that the contributor adopts the extreme opposite position to one of violence, by engaging online to fight jihadism. As he writes in his profile: 'I'm an engineer and a man of Islamic faith, loyal to the righteous ways of the Sunnah. I'm here to fight Jihad with my own soul, helping to wage a war against pro-ISIS accounts here on Twitter day in and day out.'

3.2 Staging identities

Although the nature of this study precludes the collection of extensive personal data regarding people's age, level of education, or profession, information pertaining to social identity could still be

recovered. By speaking of social identity, we make the claim that people, consciously or not, stage their identities to present themselves to their audience (Goffman, 1959). They display signs that enable others to situate them on the social scene, for example, through their dress choice or expression of some kind of cultural taste. Online interactions are coloured by these identity performances (Turkle, 1995; Markham, 1998; Sunden, 2003; Thomas, 2004), allowing us to capture these social markers to characterise the social identity of each sample.

To be more precise, in this study we examine how people perform their social identities. As Judith Butler explains, identity is not just a social construct pertaining to external and internal labelling processes (see section 3.3). It is a kind of performance; a show we put on, a set of signs we wear, as if it were a costume or a disguise (Butler, 1990). This performance can be identified through the observation of general ‘style’ (Hebdige, cited in Glevarec, 2008) specific to each stream of radicalisation where ‘style’ is understood as something that ‘is meant to be *said*, it is a *saying* that is opaque, a *saying* that the researcher must decode, assuming actors are adopting a same posture’ (Glevrac, 2008: 76). A style gives us an understanding of how people perceive themselves as well as how they wish to be perceived by others as belonging to a group and, in this sense, it serves to express one’s affiliation to a group of peers. Embracing an overall style successfully, with the relevant codes, is essential to convey resistance to dominant representations, and thus spread a counter-hegemonic narrative of sorts. In the case at hand, we could assume to find a narrative of political extremism as we have already established in the last subsection on repertoires of action. Such tendencies will be further detailed at the level of self-presentation indices.

Below, we move from considering Twitter as a place where people can mobilise specific repertoires of action to pursue political goals, to the employment of an ethnographic approach to study the social identities that are forged through individual accounts.

On Twitter, identities are expressed through emoticons, systematic use of vocabulary, expressions or hashtags in the ‘about’ section. They are also articulated through profile pictures and profile banners or in the choice of handle names and usernames. This data is drawn on here to study self-presentations and determine how users portray themselves on the public stage of Twitter, and if the way they stage their social identities reveals a common style pertaining to radicalisation. Particular attention is paid to the use of common signifiers, that is to say, the use of the same qualifiers – be they symbols, icons, verbal expressions or hashtags. These common signifiers show how people unite online and how they co-produce a collective identity. The findings also help demonstrate the existence, or not, of an online milieu.

3.2.1 Right-wing extremist self-presentations: Support for radical ideologies in profiles

Findings on how individuals are representing themselves, what they are sharing with their audiences and to what extent their self-presentations support processes of radicalisation are summarised in Table 2 below.

The terms ‘Twitter handle’, ‘username’ and ‘name’ are sometimes used interchangeably. The Twitter handle and username are the same thing; they appear in the URL bar and come after the ‘@’ sign in the ‘about’ section of a user’s profile. It is unique to the account and no two people can have the same one because a Twitter handle/username links your account to an online domain of sorts. On the other hand, the name of an account does not have to be unique and can be used by a wide range of users. More importantly, it can be changed throughout the lifespan of the account and therefore is not such a commitment or as irreversible as handle/username. A lot of Twitter handles and/or names are names created to fit the intended uses of the account. If the accuracy and authenticity of names and usernames are dependent on the person behind the account and the way they intend on using their account, it is also highly related to the website itself. As Cardon explains, social media networks are exploited in different manners and there is a spectrum of authenticity, from the most made-up accounts to most authentic profiles, depending on websites (2010). LinkedIn, for example, at one end of the spectrum, is one place in which people provide accurate information about themselves. A place

like Twitter is in the middle of this spectrum; people can very well decide to make up names and handle names without any ill intent, simply to reflect personal stances or areas of interest, for example. It is important to keep in mind that fake identities and made-up handle names take nothing away from the authenticity of the person's media participation. As we have said above, self-presentations - and this goes for every way people name themselves - are a reflection of how people wish to appear in society, and as such, are messages that should be taken seriously.

RWE Twitter handles/ names

1. Reference to Belgium (history)/ nationalism

Nationaliste

Chef des Éburons

2. Reference to Flemish nationalism

Flemish nationalist & traditionalist, with emoticon showing crossing swords

Flemish nationalist

3. Far right political affiliation/ allegiance

Fascist Nationalist

The right (wing/way)

Xenophobe from the ultra right

4. Social marker: white skin colour

The white man

White pride

RWE 'about' section

Location

Gallia Belgica

Emoticons

Belgium flag or symbols including crossing swords, and image of a lion.

Religious Christian icons, including churches and crosses.

Hashtags

#TEAMWHITE

#ThePeopleFromBE

#TeamPatriotes

#ItsOkayToBeWhite

#christianophobia

#TeamPatriote

Expressions

1. Patriotism, cultural heritage, nationalism, pro-right

a. Pro-Belgium

'Defend our values'

'Preserve our heritage and our cultural patrimony'

'Belgium patriot'

'Patriot, nationalist, son of an immigrant and assimilated. Love my culture, love my country.'

b. Pro-Flemish

'Flemish nationalist'

2. Anti-establishment also understood as anti-politically correct

'Conservative & politically incorrect'

'White heterosexual male who doesn't give a shit about progress or politically correct talk'

3. Catholic

'Roman Catholic'

'God despises cowards'

4. Engaged in an ideological war

'Me, Belgium crusader, vows to eliminate all cosmopolite scum that are destroying Europe!'

'Mobilizing the forces of pro-White against the forces of anti-White!'

5. Anti-Islam

'Anti-immigration, anti-islam'

'Allah does not exist'

RWE profile pictures and banners

1. Actual pictures of the real person behind the account

Although users often utilise pictures of themselves, these are not reproduced here to preserve anonymity.

2. Historical references: Roman, Gauls and medieval times



Plate 73

A military and historical reference with a Medieval armour



Plate 74

Roman Legion Flag depicting an eagle holding a fasces set inside of a laurel wreath. Each of these symbols has been adopted by various elements of the far right.



Plate 75

Ambiorix, with Catuvolcus, prince of the Eburones, leader of a Belgic tribe of north-eastern Gaul (Gallia Belgica)

3. Patriotism, cultural heritage, Belgium nationalism



Plate 76



Plate 77



Plate 78

Flags of Wallonia and Flanders side by side

Belgium's coat of arms is composed of a golden lion against a black shield, with the royal crown resting on top, and the motto Unity creates strength on a ribbon below. Directly behind the shield are crossed sceptres

4. Transnationalism/ Pro-Europe/ Pro-White



Plate 79

5. Christianity

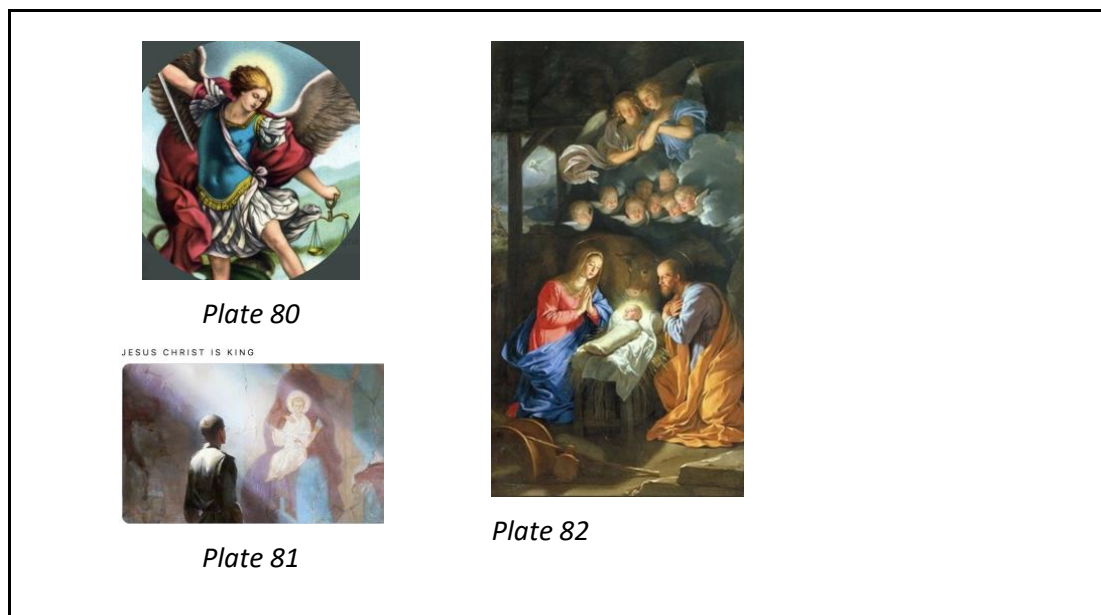


Table 2. Summary of right-wing extremist self-presentation findings

We will start by briefly commenting on each one of the separate areas of the Twitter accounts that were showcased in the table above.

Regarding **contributors' names**, it is important to note that only a handful of people from the sample publish their real name. Instead, people use pseudonyms. As one user explains, pseudonyms are the 'ultimate enabler of free speech'.

In analysing the pseudonyms chosen by users, four main types appear. These are:

- i) Personifying their country, i.e. Belgium, possibly through historically popular Belgian figures mainly chieftains, kings or religious references, from the Roman era to the end of the Middle Ages, in order to frame their identity;
- ii) Expressing, on the contrary, separatist sentiments, by personifying their regional identity; this tendency is exclusive to the Flemish. No Walloons within our sample express similar sentiments. Given the small size of the sample for the RW Belgium case study, it would be unwise to make any firm conclusions about the workings of separatist movements in Belgium beyond noting that, amongst the Dutch-speaking element of the extreme right Belgian milieu, people express their affiliation by means of attachment to regional identity.
- iii) Reflecting explicit political allegiance to right-wing extremism but without any mention of actual leaders and seldom, if any, mention of political parties. Users identify a vague notion of 'ultra right' or 'fascism' for example, highlighting the importance of capturing right-wing extremist tendencies within the larger scope of extremism-s - the insistence being on the 'S' in extremism, here. As the sociologists Gimenez and Voirol (2017) explain, the contemporary French political landscape of right-wing extremism is witness to a variety of 'extreme rights' and this observation seems to apply to the Belgium context too. However, this comparison with the French scene suggests *not* only a similar multiplicity of RWE movements in Belgium but also the absence of clear political identification to any institutional organisation. This suggests the Belgian RWE milieu is even more fragmented than its French counterpart.
- iv) Distinctive mentions by the users to a social marker, specifically 'white' skin colour. The use of this social marker places the Belgium sample on the spectrum of racism.

The choice of the first type of pseudonym expresses positive sentiments with people, using the name of their country to express their attachment and emphasise their patriotic inclinations. Sometimes,

users portray their historical heritage through references to the Roman era and/or the Gauls to communicate traditional right-wing radical ideologies.

The second type of pseudonym also demonstrates participants' pride in their regional origins - as Flemish Dutch-speaking Belgians – but in doing so marks a political divide within the contemporary Belgian state. Thus, in this case, historical heritage and origins are more significant for identity formation than the present-day political situation.

The third type identified amongst users endorses extreme right radicalism, without claiming an affiliation or allegiance to a leader or a party. As stated above, expressing social identity in this way emphasises a lack of institutional association, apparently confirming sociological observation suggesting that Western countries are affected by a lack of faith in institutions accompanying a general movement towards individualisation (e.g. Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994; Castells, 2015). This might suggest that engagement is somewhat ambivalent – a passive engagement akin to 'clicktivism' (Shulman 2009; Morozov 2009). While this is a possible conclusion, we also find strong feelings linked to RWE ideologies in the sample, illustrated in the self-characterisation of one user as a '*xenophobe from the ultra right*'. This leaves little doubt about the user's allegiance.

The fourth and final type of name employed by the sample to personify themselves online is characterised by a reclamation of power by using skin colour as a strong social marker to define themselves. Self-labelling in this way can be understood as an act of racism that goes against the laws and regulations governing the social media platform. In any case, political affiliation is straightforward and is unmistakably in line with a general RWE style.

On Twitter, people can specify a username and a handle name, giving them the liberty of choosing separate labels to identify themselves. Yet the RWE references mostly figure in the screen name section of the page rather than the handle names of the account. This could be explained by the fact that a handle name cannot be changed without giving up the account altogether; handle names are linked to a domain of sorts. The screen name, on the other hand, can be changed as often as the user wants without affecting the overall content of the account and past tweets published. Regarding the '*about*' sections of pages:

Emoticons are not employed often within the sample to frame users' identity. For those who do use them, they serve to support a series of institutions, in particular, symbols representing the Belgium nation (the Belgium flag or items from this flag, like swords or a lion in reference to the coat of arms of the flag) and allegiance to a Christian faith.

As we can see here, emoticons are used to generate self-presentations structured around national identity issues and religious beliefs. The first type of emoticon strengthens the tendency of users to define themselves based on national references and their perceived historical heritage. They provide a means to show one's affiliation, allegiance and cultural background and indicate how they perceive Belgium and what defines it.

Expressions on a user's page in the biography section may be famous sayings, a statement regarding how they intend to use their account or a few words on the position they adopt in society. In this area of their accounts, the most common ways people present themselves involve patriotism, cultural heritage, nationalism, national heritage referencing the Gauls, pro-right-wing extremist postures and either pro-Belgian or pro-Flemish tendencies; Anti-establishment statements also framed as anti-political correctness; Catholicism; engagement in an ideological battle; and anti-Islam sentiments.

The themes generally align with the ones we previously presented in this section on self-presentations. They also match the repertoires of action discussed in Section 3.1.1). However, the first theme can be sometimes couched in separatist tendencies.

Anti-establishment positions go beyond simple distrust of elected politicians, discourses about double standards or disconnection between the People and the elite. Statements raise the issue of political correctness and praise frank, blunt and, arguably, rude public figures, such as President Donald Trump.

As for engagement in an ideological war, people express what they perceive to be an ongoing battle against threats posed to modern society. While the content of these references are similar to the other themes discussed above, the use of the terminology of ‘war’ and ‘battle’ gives these types of reference an added urgency and sense of being engaged in a battle to defend a cause.

In the *emoticons* part of the page, there are main topics such as the Belgium flag or symbols and Religious Christian icons. Among the icons, strong patriotic sentiments and identitarian discourses, in line with those discussed above, are in evidence. Catholicism appears here also, confirming what has been suggested already, that Christian faith seems to be a strong component of how people self-identify in Belgium.

Finally, the *hashtags* centre around: Patriotism, Christianity, and whiteness of skin. The consistent appearance of references to white skin colour throughout this section (as well as in Section 3.1.1) demonstrates how central skin colour is to the RWE sample. It seems to constitute one of the main foci of identification of the sample

Drawing on findings outlined so far, we suggest that social identities constructed online by users in this sample centre around the following topics:

- Patriotism and nationalism;
- Belgian cultural and historical heritage, closely linked with Christianity;
- Whiteness;
- Anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments.

We will see later that at least the first two of these themes differ from the core themes discussed within the tweets themselves. In this respect, repertoires of actions as well as self-presentations shed a slightly different light on the RWE Belgium than would have been visible through a study of content of tweets alone. In particular, patriotism and ‘whiteness’ are topics that only appear clearly in this section of the report.

3.2.2 Islamist extremist self-presentations: support for religious fundamentalism

As established above, researchers were unable to clearly trace accounts on Twitter that openly supported radical ideologies related to Islam. We stressed the fact that Islamist accounts could possibly showcase religious fundamentalism, and as such could be categorised as political extremism. Below we detail the ways in which participants within the ISE sample stage their identity. We will then question whether these presentations can be understood as a means for self-radicalisation and/or if they provide a sense of unity, as in the case of right-wing extremists discussed above. Table 3 summarises the ISE self-expressions.

ISE Twitter handles/ names
<p>1. Plays on the word Allah</p> <p>‘XXXAllah’</p>
<p>2. Gender specific names</p>

'umm' [mother] or 'abu' [father] + real first name (or first name adopted after adoption of faith/ baptism)

'Being a Salafi Woman'

3. Teachings and lifestyle blogging

'He who is a messenger among the illiterate ones, reciting to them His Verses, PURIFYING them, and TEACHING them the Book.'

ISE 'about' section

Mention of other social media platforms

'Follow me on YouTube'

Expressions are all directed at faith and often gender specific:

1. Devotion in serving Islam, Allah and/or religious fundamentalism

'Islam is my religion. Paradise is my goal'

'Thank you Allah for allowing me to be among your servants'

'islam islam islam'

'Allah works in His timings not ours. Make dua then be patient. And what's best for you will come to you'

'May Allah's peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'

2. Salafism movement and associated trends

'Sunnah according to the concept of Salaf'

'Directly from the mouth of the Sunni community to understand the righteous predecessors'

'Calling people to engage in the unity of Allah (tawhid) and broadcasting Salafiyah Dawah, the proper understanding of Islam'

3. Counter-hegemonic discourses

'Free'

'Resistance'

'Counter-propaganda'

ISE profile pictures and banners

1. Resistance/ Sign of a counter-hegemonic movement



Plate 83

This banner replicates a counter-response that emerged in the wake of the terrorist attack of the French Journal *Charlie Hebdo*, where staff members were massacred during an editorial meeting. People would unite around the expression 'I am Charlie' (*Je suis Charlie*). In response, a movement emerged to defend the terrorist acts, with the expression 'I am Mohammed' (*Je suis Mohamed*) or 'I am Bachar' (*Je suis Bachar*) to stress that fact that the Journal, while publishing drawings of the Prophet, had committed blasphemy and been disrespectful to the Muslim community, and therefore had been brought to justice by the perpetrators of the attack.

2. Affiliation/ Religious

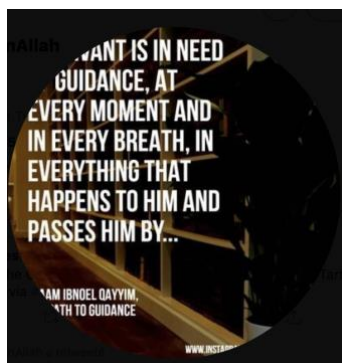


Plate 84

3. Brand name



Plate 85

Plate 85 is the image of a logo of a religious website, which according to its slogan provides 'authentic knowledge about Islam' along with a number of links to associated media accounts

4. Preaching/ Teachings



Plate 86

5. Femininity & Gender distinction



Plate 87

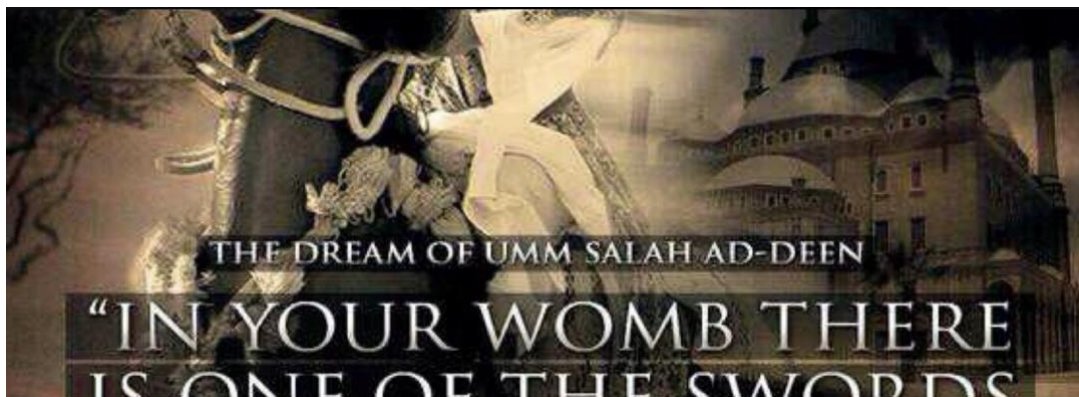


Plate 88

6. Paradisiac landscapes & expressions (gender oriented)



Plate 89



Plate 90



Plate 91

Beautiful landscapes or nature-related pictures, possibly with scriptures from central figures of the Muslim faith printed over the paradise-like place are used in the pictures above (Plates 89, 90, 91).

Table 3 - Summary of Islamist extremist self-presentation findings

ISE accounts are distinguished from the RWE sample in their lack of detail. In the 'about' section, they do not deploy emoticons, use few expressions to characterise themselves and are not very expressive in general. Likewise, this sample does not necessarily offer a clear picture of a collective entity. Nonetheless, there are a few common denominators that relate to the type of participation format engaged in by this sample and these are considered below in the course of commenting on each area of the Twitter accounts detailed in Table 3.

Regarding *contributors' names*, it is important to point out that no one within the ISE sample publishes his/her real name; they are thus more conscious of retaining privacy than the RWE sample. Instead, people use pseudonyms. Pseudonyms tend to be based on: References to Salafism, gender-oriented names, educational material and general orientations.

The names employed by users are within a small range of references, all of which demonstrate allegiance to Islamic faith, with a particular emphasis on Salafism. It is difficult to determine with certainty if Salafism appears in the sample more than other religious denominations because it is prevalent on the web, because it reflects tendencies offline, or possibly, both or neither. But the prevalence of Salafism that shows up here is also apparent in the other sections of the profiles.

More often than not, names specify the gender of the person running the account. We will see that gender is not so much an objective characteristic in this setting but that contributors use it in order to highlight belonging. Recognising a gender is a way for the people within the sample to demonstrate they are actively practising the faith they profess and the principles this faith sets out. Thus, choosing a gender name allows the demonstration of adherence to gender norms and principles of the way they interpret the Islamic faith.

In a handful of *'about'* sections we collected as part of the sample, there is a direct *reference to another account on different social networking sites*, in particular on Spreaker and/or YouTube. We cannot read too much into these indicators other than they are evidently a part of the conversations that takes place online, being conducted in less public and more remote arenas than Twitter.

Expressions on a user's page in the biography section are either a statement regarding how they intend to use their account or a few words on the position they adopt in society and/or on Twitter. The three main ways people present themselves in this section of their accounts relate to devotion in serving Allah and/or religious fundamentalism, adherence to the Salafist movement and associated trends, promotion of counter-hegemonic discourses.

The analysis of the semiotic material in participant profiles sheds new light on two aspects of the way faith is practiced currently, that is to say, with the help of online tools and spaces. These are: religious references in relation to Salafism, and gender specific accounts.

The analysis of semiotic material used to represent oneself in profiles showcases the centrality of 'purist' - also known as 'quietist' - Salafism. Salafism is a component of the religious and political field of Sunni Islam. This branch of Salafism upholds its difference by proclaiming to lead a puritan lifestyle of high standards, based on what it claims to be the prophet Muhammad's and the pious predecessors' examples (Adraoui, 2015, 2017; Bonelli and Carrié, 2018; Sfeir, 2017).

References throughout different sections of pages display ostentatious obedience to this particular denomination. For example:

- Reference to al-Hijra ('salutary migration'), presented as the emigration towards lands of faith allowing the practice of one's belief to the fullest, far from both infidels and roadblocks instituted by non-Muslim majority countries like France;
- Al-Tawhid ('rightful and proper understanding of divine unity') - an expression capturing the very purpose of Muslim revelation. Believers claim Salafism is the only way to carry out 'authentic' preaching as it is based on the necessary return to the religious sources of the Quran, the example of the Prophet (al-Sunnah) and the ways of the early Muslims (al -Athar);
- Mentions of Saudi Arabia where Sunni Islam is practiced and favoured.

While directly related to Salafism, gendered ways of presenting oneself and gendered practices are a distinct and significant dimension of the material employed to create digital identities among the sample. This is evident in several sections of the profiles and demonstrates one of the underlying ways in which Salafism is expressed and practised in contemporary settings. As Marquardt and Heffelfinger explain, Quietist Salafism upholds principles of immunity; the only way to be physically and morally pure is to isolate oneself, in the image of the first Muslims whose physical and moral integrity had been endangered by Meccan dignitaries (Marquardt and Heffelfinger, 2008).

Gender practices are, again, a way to regain power over the private sphere often perceived as violated by an intrusive state, and therefore, a way to retreat into a moral community in response to this displacement (Parvez, 2011). Wearing a veil, refusing to speak to men, or letting them follow one's account are all ways to emphasise the spiritual posture of a person. Succeeding in setting up an account protected from negative influences helps achieve the overall goal of serenity, providing alignment with the supposed will of a higher power.

If gender practices are enforced by both genders in the Belgium sample, women are particularly vocal in this area, contradicting the popular belief that segregated practice is enforced by men or that women are simply a victim of man's vision of womanhood. This conception of womanhood plays into a more general vision of purity, by emphasising the spiritual conditions necessary to achieve such a goal. In other words, we can conclude that gender practice is used to further advocate the proper way to practice religious beliefs. Segregation, it seems, represents a stance against the immorality and impurity of Western society as well as reinforcing a sense of belonging.

3.3 Co-production of content through framing

To understand how radicalisation is co-produced, we consider the internal and external labelling processes upon which radicalisation relies. We ask whether people openly refer to themselves as radicals and whether they are also categorised as such by others. By conducting such analysis we can account for the manner in which online material is produced as one outcome of framing processes.

Howard Becker (1963) demonstrated that labelling is a two-step process. First, to be able to be a part of a group or a category of people, one must acknowledge the label for oneself and by oneself. Secondly, others have to label the person in a similar manner. Being considered as a radical is the result of a two-fold process: an *endogenous* process consisting in self-labelling; and an *exogenous* process consisting in labelling someone from the outside. Approaching radicalisation from this angle reminds us that radical ideologies are not a set of characteristics, but a process of interaction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements, strongly dependent on the context and the situation of symbolic productions.

3.3.1 Embracing the labelling of 'radical'

In Section 3.1, we saw that people adopted a style that helped identify them on the social scene of the Twitter media arena. In this section we focus more specifically on material relating to users' acknowledgement of their portrayal as radicals. This analysis shows that, in the case of both the RWE and the ISE samples, self-recognition of otherness, self-labelling as a person with radical ideologies and the open adoption of an oppositional figure, are all components that help construct the respective milieus as radical. The findings reported here draw on direct observations carried out during the pilot study phase of the study.

Right-wing extremism: from a transgressive posture to perverse effects of publicly acknowledging extremism

Embracing extremism by adopting a transgressive social position

External labelling processes identified in the study of the RWE sample are summarised in Table 4.

RWE self-definition as a radical
<p>Self-recognition of Otherness/Framing as radical</p> <p><i>Politically incorrect</i></p> <p><i>I'm going to put 'fascist' in my handle name because that's your only argument</i></p> <p><i>The one and only xenophobe for the ultra-right</i></p> <p>Self-labelling as a fascist</p> <p>- Location</p>

Gallia Belgica

- Name

facho (in the name of the user)

Expression

Right-winged because of love

Xénophobe from the ultra right wing

No need to call me a fascist, I don't accept compliments

Those who seek to control thought, first control the words to express them

RWE 'us' versus 'them'/ Construction of an oppositional profile

1. Us vs. them discourses

Lefties, hipsters, etc... improve your insults, it's tiresome... many thanks!

Anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-everything actually

Completely cut off from anything remotely politically correct, I judge, I generalise, I stigmatise and I sleep well at night

2. Resistance to being categorised/ by others

**Merci de ne pas m'associer à une
idéologie préconçue pour prétendre
connaître toutes mes pensées**

Plate 92

The text states: 'Thanks for not ascribing to me an ideology preconceived to claim to know my every thought'

3. Recognition/adoption of an oppositional posture

I refuse to walk in line

There's the sheep and then there's us

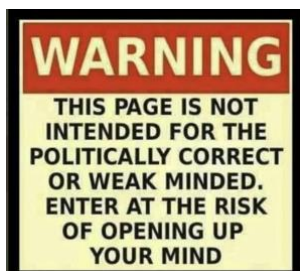


Plate 93

Embracing the label of radicalisation

Use of the banning by ‘Sleeping Giants’ (see below) as a sign of belonging

Table 4: External labelling processes

As we can see here, the far right sample frames itself as transgressive rather than radical by creating an oppositional social position and embracing the manner in which outsiders label the group.

This suggests the interactive nature of the coproduction of labels. The use of the label ‘right wing extremist’, ‘fascist’, ‘conservative’ or other labels noted in Table 4, may thus reflect the way in which our sample acknowledges others’ perception of their social identity, rather than the positive appropriation of the label.

As Gimenez and Voirol state (2017: 13):

‘if certain parties or movements claim one of the above-mentioned categories, in particular nationalism or conservatism, the ‘extreme right’ category is seldom, if ever, mobilized by the actors to self-define themselves. These are exogenous categories whose uses are part of disputed spaces, so much so that they are often more rhetorical than actual ideological tools (Godin, 2012). The circulation, the assignment, the appropriation and the struggles related to these categorisations are not trivial, and they can reveal dynamics characteristic of the extended public sphere; but they also have a strong explanatory potential for the development of these groups and movements.’

In this respect, labelling has a performative function. By designating people as extremists through debates in the public sphere, one favours the development of movements of extremism, or at the very least provides a resource for opposition and transgression.

How labels can be flipped to support radicalisation

As noted in Table 4, the extreme right discuss an entity called Sleeping Giants. Sleeping Giants, originally US based, now international, is an activist organisation that defines itself as ‘a campaign to make bigotry and sexism less profitable.’¹ Founded in response to the 2016 US presidential election, during which Donald Trump shared links from his alt-right source, Breitbart, while blasting what he deemed ‘fake news’, Sleeping Giants brings brands’ attention to their complicit funding of hate movements through advertising on their site. Detecting racist and bigoted ads and bringing attention to companies’ hosting on their website is a means for this activist group to demonetise far-right blogs and/or groups that were granted scale and legitimacy by tech giants by allowing them to plug into their ad networks². The organisation appears in the Belgium extreme right milieu because they are said to have disrupted some of their activities by denouncing accounts, but more commonly are mentioned in conversations to rally and bolster affiliation and belonging.

Plate 94 provides an example of how Sleeping Giants provokes recognition of affiliation among extreme right Belgian Twitter users and, by so doing, reinforces the very ideological movement the activist organisation intends on weakening. An initial tweet from a Belgium user, in which he/she posted a screenshot of the fact Sleeping Giant had blocked them, invites other users to speak up if they have been blocked. It reads: ‘*who is not blocked by the underwear thingy?*’ [‘Sleep’ is phonetically identical to ‘slip’ in French, which means underwear, thus the play off the expression ‘sleep’/‘underwear’]. The instigator asks participants to retweet the message if they have also been blocked, or simply like the message if they have not been blocked (Plate 94). The message triggers a thread of conversation, including 69 replies, commenting on whether users belong to those labelled

¹ https://twitter.com/slpng_giants

² <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/09/04/sleeping-giants-breitbart-and-brand-safety-its-not-our-job-police-your-ads>

and stigmatised as contributing to hate speech or not, with many humorous inputs in the conversation, and some more serious remarks. All in all, users flip the label and embrace their stigma to reinforce their collective identity as we will demonstrate below.

The initial tweet we are using for the sake of the example here collected some 150 retweets; in this context, that also means 150 accounts had been blocked by Sleeping Giants. It received some 250 likes, meaning that they acknowledged the message but had not (yet) been banned from accessing the account in question.



Plate 94

Among the different reactions, we can note those claiming they had been blocked and showing it with a screenshot, or simply expressing it through a comment to the original tweet. For example, one user writes: 'Me too, proud of being banned.' Another one says: '*Blocked with 47 followers... I'm a real threat, haha, I am obviously a real heavyweight in the Twitter game.*' (Plate 95)



Plate 95

There are those who play with the whole idea and ridicule the démarche from the left-wing activist organisation, saying they feel left out, hurt or different from their group of peers and online friends. In the post below, for example, next to the picture of a crying cat, we read: 'It's so shameful! I'm not even blocked. And now, here I am, I look like an idiot in front of my friends, or even worse, a progressive. I feel stigmatised.' (Plate 96)



Plate 96

In the same vein, there are those mocking the whole campaign and intentions behind the activist organisation. One user claims that not having been blocked is most definitely a sign that he has failed

in his life, using humour as a sign of belonging and supporting the group of pairs, while laughing at the very activity of stigmatising this like-minded group of individuals (Plate 97).



Above the screenshot, proving that the user posting has not been blocked, the caption reads: *'34 years-old and I'm not blocked by @slpng_giants.fr So @sfoucart, @isabelleaporta blocked me, but not them?! I think I've failed in my life....'*

Plate 97

Some users take this whole discussion one step further by either denouncing Sleeping Giants' activities to the CNIL (*Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés*, or National Commission for Computing and Liberties), the organisation in charge of protecting personal data, accusing Sleeping Giants of committing an act of infringement of freedom of speech, or by contacting Sleeping Giants directly to ask them to block them too. Three examples illustrate these two trends. In the first example, a user comments *'me I've been waiting, but in the meantime, I asked them to block me to uphold my e-reputation.'* Another contributor claims that she also made a direct request and phrases her request as follows: *'Hello, considering that I support @Valeurs [a far right French journal] but that I'm not blocked, my followers think I am a lefty insider... Please block me to restore my honour. Best wishes.'* The third example below is outraged to discover that such an organisation targets ordinary citizens. She states: *'we must denounce them, they're the ones that should be blocked, not us! the @CNIL permits personal data collection, now?'*

Finally, there are those who flip the label and stigmatise Sleeping Giants by describing them as the extremists, as the examples that follow illustrate. In one tweet, the user claims: *'They've existed since November 2016. Sleeping Giants is an extremist organisation that uses intellectual terrorism to intimidate and blackmail. They do not tolerate points of views different from their own. Their numerous account blocks, for no reason, is proof of that. They must be fought.'* Another user commented: *'It's the mark of those who don't think like sheep'*, making the fact of being blocked, a sign of prestige. *'I've blocked them, prevention is better than the cure'*, yet another participant chimes into the conversation.

By taking part in this discussion, users simultaneously express recognition of stigmatisation while empowering themselves by flipping the label. Being blocked by Sleeping Giants is a way for the Belgium RWE milieu to embrace the stigma of propagating hate speech, or more generally speaking, appearing as a 'proud extremist' from the right-wing, thus flipping the narrative to their advantage. In this way, they reclaim the label originally alienating them and, by so doing, empower themselves while strengthening the movement and generating a sense of togetherness.

This phenomenon is a good example of the shift from offline propaganda and rumour-type communication strategies to the current online communication strategies characterised by disinformation and fake news power struggles taking place within public arenas online and opposing narratives and counter-narratives being engaged in a push-and-pull ideological tug of war, made technically possible by ICT opportunities.

It is also a good example of how it is possible to flip a label to reclaim power. It is an example of how labelling generates the very phenomenon it is meant to denounce. In the present situation, what initially started out as a campaign to eradicate and disempower digital hate speech leading to radicalisation, achieved the exact opposite. The campaign within the Belgian far right milieu reinforces

the very process it was meant to denounce, as those targeted by the organisation reclaimed the label for themselves and become empowered by the attention received through this process.

ISE do not embrace the label of radical

While we set out to observe these phenomena for both samples, since the ISE sample does not discuss political extremism, we were able to identify them only for the RWE sample. However, among the ISE contributors, we did capture signs of awareness of being perceived as radicals or dangers to society as, for example, in their discussion of situations of victimisation and discrimination (see Section 3.1.2).

An example of this was the observed use of the expression ‘Al-Ghurabaa’ to describe themselves in the ‘about’ section, which relates to how one feels perceived by wider society as strange, out of place or different. Another person, who set up an account for someone they claim was wrongly imprisoned, claims that a fellow Muslim was *‘convicted and arrested for telling the truth. They accused him of several counts of incitement to hate and inciting public violence and recruiting for Jihad. #nottrue’*. In other words, users are aware of being labelled in public discourse, but they do not support their labelling as radicals. On the contrary, they denounce them.

As we saw when discussing condemnation of violent extremism in section 3.1.2, the content retrieved seems to indicate that the contributors in the ISE sample oppose jihadism or extremism by, for example, through denouncing ISIS and various forms of Al-Qaeda. This topic comes up in ordinary tweets as well as in ‘about’ sections.

Simply put, RWE and ISE Twitter accounts do not equally embrace the label of radicals. In the case of the ISE sample, labelling tends to be a by-product of external labelling processes.

3.3.2 External framing processes

In this section we consider how external labelling processes might support the production of radicalisation. In contrast to previous sections in this report, we do not analyse ISE and RWE samples separately since the factors affecting how each group is co-produced as a group of radicals overlap and inform one another. Institutional accounts, moderation procedures and online interactions between anti-Islamist and Islamists are all contributing factors for both groups.

The selection of Twitter to carry out an investigation on radicalisation was supported by framing of Twitter by journalists, scientists and politicians as a means for facilitation of radicalisation (Weimann 2004, 2016; Mantel 2009). Scientific, journalistic and political accounts have helped shape the idea that online spaces are ‘at risk’ places (Brown & Pearson, 2016; Calo, Hartley, 2019; Conway, 2019), with Twitter being one of the most discussed platforms (e.g. Ghajar-Khosravi et al. 2006; Bertram, Ellison, 2014; Baldauf et al. 2019; Crosset et al. 2019).

Here we investigate the reality behind such discourses by considering how external labelling processes have produced far right and Islamist audiences on Twitter. First, we tackle how moderation guidelines from authorities and service producers support the configuration of audiences. Then we examine how moderation affects the RWE sample in practice by taking a closer look at our own data, recognising that major campaigns have been conducted in recent years to take down sensitive content from Islamist extremists (Conway et al. 2017). Finally, we discuss how the dynamics between anti-Islamists and Islamists on the Twitter platform, and the ongoing vertical power struggle over narratives, affects users within the public arena studied here.

General moderation principles operating online

One of the first factors that co-produces radicalisation on Twitter is *moderation* (Chen, 2014; Roberts, 2019; Newton, 2019). Moderation can be vertical, typically on the basis of interventions from the website administrators and/or policy framework. Content moderation can also be horizontal, typically from user to user. In any case, by targeting specific types of profiles and accounts, moderation operations signify to the users their deviant behaviour. Labelling given to users and accounts out of bounds of the ‘conditions of use’ is not without side effects. Before exploring the role of moderation

on processes of radicalisation on the web in more depth, it is essential to keep in mind the general principles operating behind moderation of social network sites, shaping what can be found online.

Most social media websites operate on the basis of ‘publish first, moderate afterwards’ (the opposite of how newspapers function, for example). A considerable amount of online content must thus be moderated (pornography, paedophilia, rape, killings, etc.). This volume of content in need of moderation affects what/how moderation is done. In addition to the structural effects of social media websites on digital content, policy framework impacts material circulating on the web too.

In recent years, websites such as Twitter have received immense pressure to moderate extremist and terrorist-type content - pro-jihadist publications in particular - from government and associated actors, including the (former) Obama Administration, the U.S. Congress in the form of legislative proposals, and the European Union in the form of a ‘code of conduct’.

However, what ultimately stays on the web relies on applying policy AND interpreting policy. Interpretation of policy is done by Commercial Content Moderation workers, i.e. workers responsible for judging what is acceptable and thus what should be removed. These tens of thousands of workers follow orders from private companies and more generally act upon linguistic competency, laws governing the website’s location of origin, experts in user guidelines and other platform level specifics concerning what is allowed cultural knowledge about the location of origin of the audience (Robert, 2019).

While some parts of the content/accounts may actually remain within the realm of legality, the moderation system makes it impossible to finely and always properly select what is potentially legal/illegal, leading to wholesale prohibition. Usually, what can be observed is a major ‘cleansing’ in a whole ideological area. Cleansing trends have definitely hit Islamist ideologues. This process of ‘cleansing’ has hit Islamist ideologues disproportionately, such that it appears that ‘double standards’ are applied in relation to Islamist and right-wing extremists (Conway et al., 2017). As Bodo reports in an article from 2017, Twitter has suspended over 500,000 accounts since the middle of 2015 (2017). Suspensions notably affected ISIS and its sympathisers: a study measuring takedown of online terrorist material found that ‘pro-IS accounts faced substantial and aggressive disruption, particularly those linking to official IS content hosted on a range of other platforms’ (Conway et al., 2017: 5). That being said, over the past year or so, right-wingers have also started to be more heavily moderated, although by no standard to the same degree (Bodo, 2017; Wahlstrom and Tornberg, 2019).

As an external process targeting individual actors, moderation is a strong factor shaping online communities and laying the groundwork for RWE milieus and, arguably, the absence of an ISE milieu on Twitter. Below we explore how moderation - understood as external labelling processes that translate into material practices - supports participants’ sense of belonging to a group of right-wing radicals.

How discrimination, victimhood and sentiments of wrongful imprisonment generate radicalisation

When discussing how Twitter users from the extreme right-wing embrace the labels of radicals, we saw that they did so by engaging in oppositional postures, relying on ‘us’ versus ‘them’ discourses. In the section on repertoires of action (section 3.1), we also noted similar discourses. Through these discourses RWE contributors simultaneously generate two categories of people: ones they identify with, that is to say, people who share anti-Muslim, anti-Islam, anti-immigration ideologies; and oppositional groups including Muslims, Islamists and immigrants. Through attribution of labels of Otherness, the Belgium right-wing extremist sample produces a category of people that they sometimes equate with ‘dangerous terrorists’, sometimes ‘invaders’, sometimes ‘animals’. These labelling strategies support the idea that those who practice an Islamic faith are radicals, without further regard to the way in which they are simplifying social realities. The reverse side of such mechanisms is the discourse about unfair treatment within the ISE Belgium sample.

During the ethnographic phase of the investigation, we observed that references to unfair treatment of Muslims appear in conversations or self-presentations such as by one user who portrays herself as ‘*supposedly a dangerous Muslim.*’ In framing herself in this way, she attests to a situation of discriminatory labelling.

Another contributor, by expressing sentiments regarding a situation abroad, attests to the fact that this sentiment of discrimination goes beyond national considerations, and brings together a global sense of unity related to stigmatisation of Muslims and unfair treatment of believers. The user retweets a message from the United States illustrating a situation of common discrimination and captions the retweet with ‘*Live and let live #stopthehate #endwars*’ (Plates 98 and 99):

1/2 Today I took my family to eat @Applebees in Norristown, PA. Sadly we were harassed the whole time by a man who appeared to be intoxicated. After calling us terrorists and approaching our table in an aggressive manner - where my children were eating - the manager came and

Plate 98

2/2 ...amazingly asked us to leave the restaurant along with the transgressor. How can this maltreatment be tolerated in society?

Plate 99

In a similar way, the ISE sample expresses sentiments of oppression in relation to conflict zones and/or wars in which Muslims are involved. For example, users evoke the Israel-Palestine situation as a source of oppression (Plates 100, 101).

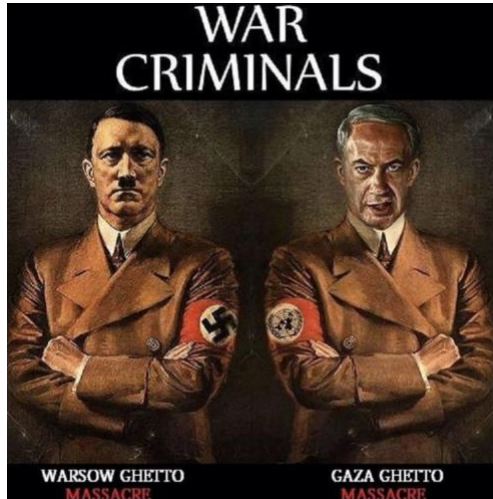


Plate 100



Plate 101

While there are a number of posts that denounce Muslim oppression, and even more messages denouncing the overall sentiment of the stigmatisation of Muslims, this discourse is taken a step further by a handful of users within our sample. We can observe accounts asking to free infamous political personalities or Salafi preachers framed as radicals, imprisoned for using hate speech in the public sphere in Belgium (see Plates 102 to 107).

#freesheikomar

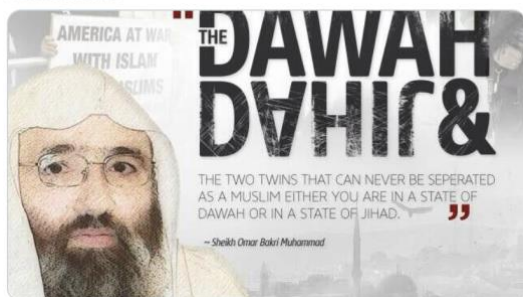


Plate 102

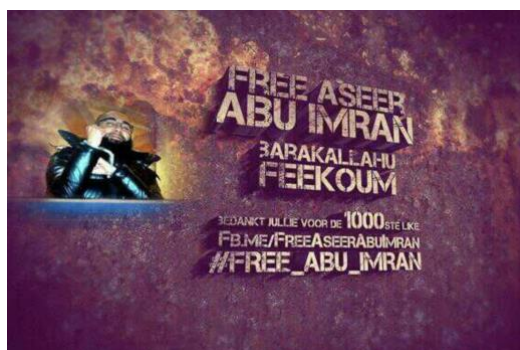


Plate 103

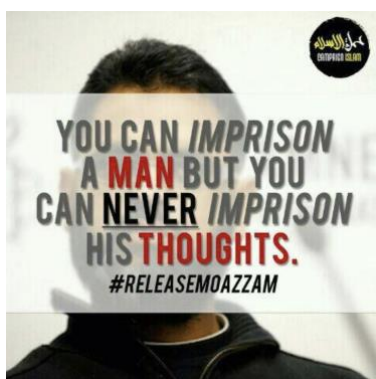


Plate 104

Let the world know u will not rest until all bars are broken, all shackles are removed & all our Muslims prisoners r freed! [#Free_Abu_Imran](#)

Plate 105

He was imprisoned for calling for Allaahs Shariah, we cannot let that call fade away

Plate 106

#FreeSheikhOmarBakri #FreeAbuHamza #FreeAbuQatadah
#FreeMuslimPrisoners #FreeAhlusSunnah



Plate 107

Within the cluster of these threads of conversations, participants express their adherence to their spiritual leaders and express worry regarding the possibility of also being under threat themselves. As one contributor exclaims: 'Yo community, wake up! Today they arrest our scholars.... Tomorrow it will be us! [#FreeMuslimPrisoners](#)'.

However, it is important to note that this general movement on Twitter towards freeing 'wrongly imprisoned' radical preachers is related to posts back from 2013. In that respect, taking an online stand against Islamist Salafist preachers, believed to have been wrongly imprisoned, seems to be a movement from the past. However, the wider theme of victimhood and/or discrimination towards Muslims, appears to remain part of an ongoing online conversation, structuring this format of participation within the ISE Belgian scene.

4. Key themes and influencing factors

In this fourth section, we consider the key question of whether, and if so in what way, the internet is a driver of self-radicalisation. It does so by exploring key themes and influencing factors in online discussion through posing the questions: What events influence what people are saying? And who are the influencers? It answers these questions through the analysis of three dimensions of internet discussion: content; events; and influencers. As each of these questions require a different approach, methodological issues are addressed in the introduction to each subsection.

4.1 Content

To identify the main themes discussed among users in the Belgian samples, we analyse the lexical material - specifically the tweets and retweets - collected online. First, findings from the analysis of the lexical corpus as a whole are presented, identifying the main conversations for each stream of radicalisation. This is followed by an examination of the structure of discussion to determine what topics are closely linked to one another and which discussions are possibly peripheral. Finally, we consider the potential gender specificity of the themes identified in order to determine which topics are most discussed by men rather than women, and vice versa.

Belgium has three official languages: French, Dutch and German¹. The corresponding lexical corpus thus consists of several languages. To determine the key themes for each sample, we employed an automatic computer-assisted programme, Iramuteq. At this stage of development of the Iramuteq software, it was unable to complete a multi-linguistic analysis; in other words it cannot analyse several languages at the same time. Each language must be dealt with separately and analysis completed only on one language at a time. Correspondingly, the three levels of analysis noted above are reported on separately, first for the French-language corpus, then the Flemish-language one.

4.1.1 Themes

The first analysis undertaken was a discourse analysis based on a descending hierarchical classification involving a succession of bi-partitions conducted using a factorial analysis of correspondences. It was undertaken using the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983, 1990) implemented using the free software IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2014, Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012). This method makes it possible to identify the themes that compose a corpus.

Extreme right themes for the French speaking part of the Belgium corpus

For the RWE sample, the results are presented below in dendrograms that segment the online conversations into clusters, highlighting the main lexical themes of the corpus for each of the French speaking, and then the Flemish speaking Belgians. The dendrograms provide information on the overrepresented lexicon in each cluster (i.e. the more a word is situated at the top of a branch, the more it is overrepresented in the cluster).

For the French-language RWE corpus, we selected a classification of 14 themes to generate the dendrogram that appears below (see Figure 11).

¹ As the German speaking population constitutes only 1% of the Belgium population and did not feature strongly in the data collected, analysis is confined to the French and Flemish language corpuses.



On the extreme left side of the dendrogram, the very first category is related to French politics (2). It mainly deals with right wing political leaders, primarily Marine Le Pen, the leader of *Rassemblement National* (previously the *Front National* (FN), i.e. the main far right political party in France) but including other figures such as Marion Maréchal Le Pen, also from the same political party and a direct family member of Marine and Jean-Marie Le Pen. The majority of all the other politicians mentioned are leading figures from the right-wing to centrist parties. In addition to discussions about the main political figures in France, debates centre around upcoming elections in 2022. The discussion captures direct conversations with reporters on Twitter who specifically cover right-wing extremist news in Belgium (e.g. Joëlle Meskens). While this lexical cluster appears among the top fourteen topics

discussed within the sample, it only represents 2.6% of the material collected online. We can therefore consider this thread of discussion as minor within the whole spectrum of online discussions in the Belgian RWE milieu.

From left to right, the next category is related to European policies and politics (9) bringing together messages of support for foreign leaders - such as Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orban - and countries, where the far right is rising - for example, Austria, where the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ*), a right-wing populist, national-conservative political party, is one of the leading parties. But over and above the premises of a transnational right-wing extremist scene, this cluster primarily deals with migration policies. The category captures talks about the Marrakesh conference during which a non-binding migration pact (better known as the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) agreement) aiming at regulating the treatment of migrants worldwide, took place. Approved in July 2018 by all 192 member states of the United Nations, except the United States, the talk within this cluster focuses on the US position as well as the Hungarian position, since both countries refused the deal; Hungary, led by the government of Viktor Orban who has always been openly hostile to a non-European immigration, announced a week after the approval at the United Nations, that Hungarians were pulling out of the global pact on migration. It is important to note that this agreement has particular ramifications for Belgium. Indeed, it led to divides amongst the national political parties as the government party N-VA (New Flemish Alliance, *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*) opposed the treaty while the three other government parties (i.e. OpenVLD (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats, *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*), CD&V (Christian People's Party, *Christelijke Volkspartij*) and MR (Reformist Movement, *Mouvement Réformateur*) supported the bill. The divides were so great that the N-VA opposing the agreement left the government, bringing down the three other parties, and ultimately causing the collapse of the Belgian government altogether on 18 December, 2018. However, what dominates the conversations in this cluster is anti-immigration sentiments and talk about policies surrounding migration policies, rather than conversations about the collapse of the Belgium government. This may well be explained by the fact that day-to-day news prevails over more in-depth conversations on Twitter, as is evident in Section 4.2.1. It may also be explained by the fact that the deal is depicted as a by-product of globalisation tendencies and held against the European Union as yet another example of the reason why the EU is bad for ordinary citizens. This cluster highlights one of the main threads of discussion that fuelled the online scene during the time period of our investigation. The crystallisation of tensions surrounding migration policies provides us with an example of what unites people online. In the case at hand, people come together to combat treaties favouring any form of foreign migration.

From left to right of the dendrogram, the next category includes significant discussion of employment struggles but also captures a lot of sentiments of resentment towards the rich and upper classes, and is thus named 'social classes and financial struggles'.

Cluster 10 has 'Le Peuple', 'the people' as its most represented word. This label is the title of a French language Belgian magazine run by politician Modrikamen. This cluster has many references to the ordinary person who struggles to get by in daily life, contrasted to the billions (i.e. 'milliards') that are available by and for the elite. There are references to 'work' (*'emploi'*) and unemployment (*'chômage'*).

Cluster 8 primarily involves discussions on the American presidential elections. The most salient words relate to Donald Trump, but we also see references to Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Somewhat lower on the list (which again primarily involves names) we also find Farage and Bolsonaro.

Cluster 3 involves discussion of Belgian politics, and in particular the Walloon politician Mischaël Modrikamen and his party Parti Populaire (People's Party).

2. Far right topics (Clusters 7 & 13)

An online influencer within the extreme right digital circles of Twitter posted a video that caught the attention of a significant number of users and generated around 5,000 retweets within a few days. The video portrayed a young woman - a journalist, according to the original tweet - reporting on an anti-immigration demonstration in Chemnitz, Germany, that took place in the days following the killing of a German citizen by a foreign national. The video shows the woman getting into an argument with several protesters and became controversial, making headlines in France. This was because, firstly, it captured a raw and live sentiment shared by many far right supporters but also because it was subsequently labelled as fake news. The claims of 'fake news' arose because the woman in the video was actually an anti-racist activist, combating the far-right, and not a journalist as the original tweet implied. Moreover, the subtitles in the video misrepresented what the activist was saying - at one point she evokes how Germany is doing well and for that reason has identity issues. The translation instead suggested that the activist claims that the Germans 'act badly' towards refugees. The fact that the video was misrepresented opened a gateway for controversy, between, on the one side, observers and mainly journalists commenting on how the far-right narrative distorts what took place to show the media as acting in a didactic fashion. On the other side, within the RWE milieu, the video was used to promote their ideas and debunk the media narrative according to which protesters from that demonstration were angry Nazis. In this particular instance, the sample employs this video to denounce double standards as well as media outlet's compliance with immigrants and unfairness in portraying their point of view. Users underline the fact that hard-working lower-class citizens are invaded by disrespectful immigrants who disregard women and create a climate of fear, and yet roam the streets freely. They insist on the double standard between their own treatment and the treatment of refugees. From their perspective, immigrants' behaviour would never be tolerated from a national citizen. As an example, the question of sexism is used; verbal harassment of women in the street, it is claimed, is accepted or even denied when it is perpetrated by immigrants whereas anyone else would be arrested for such behaviour. Likewise, users claim that the video supports complaints that RWE users are framed as a mad mob of Nazis and express their own feelings of being victims of media coverage.

Cluster 13 discusses social norms surrounding race gender and sexuality. The primary theme in the debates on these issues is that the emphasis on race and gender equality is taken too far. Most of the tweeters in our sample experience measures to bring about race and gender equality as restrictive and expressing the position of an elite of politicians, civil servants, and teachers who impose their standards, and in so doing, encourage a counter response.

3. Current events (Cluster 1)

Cluster 1 exclusively concerns words related to Christmas holiday traditions

4. National and international security topics (Clusters 11, 12 & 5)

The fourth group of clusters primarily concerns national protests in the form of the yellow vests movement (Cluster 4), discussions on Islam and Muslims in relation to Christianity and Judaism (Cluster 11), discussions on war in Cluster 12 (particularly related to WW1 and Syria, with reference to the 'armistice' and 11 November, in the first case, and to Syria and Assad, in the second case. Cluster 4 concerns references to brutal violence and also includes reference to immigrants (i.e. 'Afghan'), thereby linking the threat of violence to immigrants.

Far right themes for the Flemish-language part of the Belgian corpus

The results of the lexical analysis of the Flemish-language corpus in the Belgian RWE sample is shown in Figure 12. The analysis resulted in four thematically organized groups of clusters, with one standalone cluster (Cluster 1) that contains references to the (social) media outlets (articles, newsletters, knack.be, Instagram). Clusters 11, 12, and 6 deal with political issues as they shape the debate in Flanders; political issues that relate to the yellow vests. Clusters 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10 are also dealing with other, more specific public debates. Cluster 2, 13, and 5 deal with topics that are typical

for the far right: Islamisation, conspiracy and EU-influence. Cluster 14, 15, and 7 each describe news sources (*Scepter*, *Telegraaf*, and *Nieuwsblad*) and each contain reference to brutal violence. Each of the thematically organised groups of clusters are addressed in greater detail below.

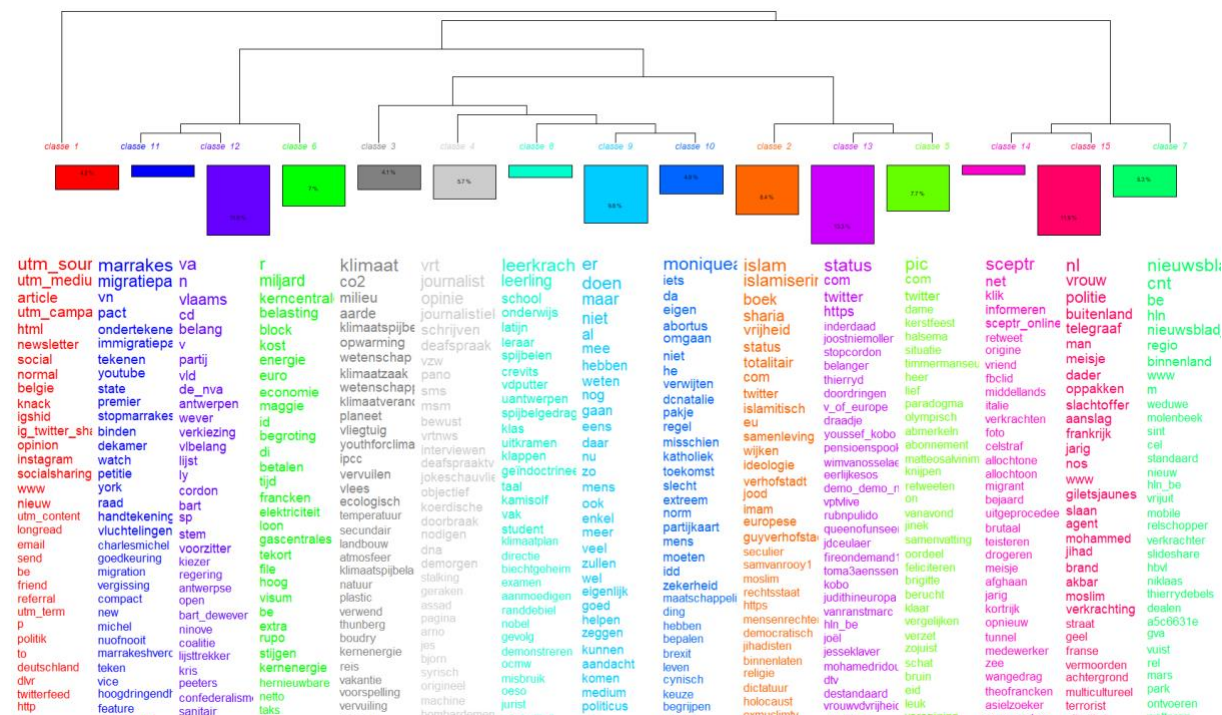


Figure 12: Flemish RWE themes

1. Political issues on energy and globalisation

Clusters 11, 12, and 6, contain references to political issues that were salient at the time the twitter messages were collected. Cluster 11 has many references to the Marrakesh agreement, also known as the ‘migration pact’. Cluster 12 contains the names of the dominant Flemish political parties including ‘Vlaams belang’ (Flemish interest), ‘N-VA’ – (New Flemish Alliance), and ‘SP’ (Socialist Party). Cluster 6 contains references to the cost of living and economic affairs (e.g. ‘kost’ (‘cost’), ‘economie’ (‘economy’) and ‘begroting’ (‘budget’). In addition, we find words related to energy including ‘energie’ (‘energy’), producers of energy, ‘kerncentrale’ (‘nuclear plant’) and ‘electriciteit’ (‘electricity’). Cluster 11, 12, and 6 respond to the rise in energy prices as a result of government taxation and also show indications of an anti-globalist movement aiming to protect the people of a nation or community against the effects of globalisation, including mass immigration.

2. Public debates

Clusters 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10 also deal with political issues, although for some of these clusters, the exact issue is more immediately apparent than for other clusters. In particular, Cluster 3 contains a collection of words that all deal with the issue of climate change; ‘klimaat’, the first word, translates as ‘climate’, and virtually all the other words such as ‘co2’, ‘milieu’ (‘environment’), and ‘aarde’ (‘earth’) relate to this topic. Cluster 4 almost exclusively contains reference to journalism. ‘VRT’ is the Flemish Belgian public broadcasting cooperation, and we also find ‘journalist’, ‘opinie’ (‘opinion’) and VRT television programmes such as ‘De afspraak’ (‘The appointment’) and ‘Pano’. Cluster 8 contains references to education, with ‘leerkracht’ (‘teacher’) as the first word, then ‘leerling’ (‘student’) and then ‘school’. Inspection of the twitter messages reveals a discontent with the current schooling system that imposes a particular version of society on its pupils. The word ‘geindoctrineerd’ (‘indoctrinated’) is also part of this cluster. A particularly discussed incident in this context concerns the publication of a video showing a teacher calling Dries van Laerhoven, the leader of ‘Schild and Vrienden’ (a Flemish alt-right group), a ‘randdebiel’ (‘retard’). Cluster 9 is non-descriptive with little

reference to substantively relevant words. Cluster 10 contains references to ‘*abortus*’ (‘abortion’) and ‘*katholiek*’ (‘catholic’) next to evaluative words such as ‘*extreem*’ (‘extreme’) and ‘*verwijten*’ (‘blame’).

3. Far right topics

Cluster 2, Cluster 13, and Cluster 5 show indication of high order similarity. Cluster 2 contains Islam and ‘*Islamisering*’ (‘Islamisation’) as its most prominent words, in addition to words that put Islamisation in the context of a choice between ‘*vrijheid*’ (‘freedom’) and ‘*totalitair*’ (‘totalitarian’). Cluster 13 contains many Flemish and Dutch names associated with the alt-right or far-right. Joost Niemoller appears within this cluster - a Dutch journalist known for his questioning of mainstream accounts of societal event for fuelling conspiracy theories. We also find the designation ‘*belanger*’ (‘someone belonging to *Belang*’, i.e. Vlaams Belang, the Flemish populist party), and the name of Wim van Osselaer, the first secretary of this party. Cluster 5 contains a mixture of words and names that primarily refer to political figures and situations in neighbouring countries. For instance, we find here the name of the left-wing mayor of Amsterdam ‘Halsema’ and the term ‘*abmerkeln*’ – referencing the call to oust Angela Merkel.

4. News sources and brutal violence linked to immigration

A fourth collection of clusters (Cluster 14, Cluster 15, and Cluster 7) share in common that each has a news source among its most salient words: ‘*Scepter*’ for Cluster 14, the Dutch newspaper ‘*De Telegraaf*’ for Cluster 15, and ‘*Nieuwsblad*’ for Cluster 7. *Scepter* describes itself as independent and focusing on the ‘hard themes’ that are allegedly ignored by the mainstream media. *De Telegraaf* is the most widely read newspaper in the Netherlands and is typically linked to a right-wing editorial position. *Nieuwsblad* is a leading Flemish newspaper. All three clusters make reference to ‘rape’ (‘*verkrachten*’) in the list of words and include references to migration (although Cluster 7, the ‘*Nieuwsblad*’ cluster, has considerably less references to migration than Cluster 14 and Cluster 15). Together the three clusters under this theme show the news sources that run stories that associate brutal violence with immigration and Islam.

Taken together, the Flemish right-wing tweets involve a reflection on Belgian politics that on the one hand concern everyday issues such as the cost of living and topical societal issues such as migration, energy costs, and climate change. There is a concern with the way schooling and media impose a particular ‘politically correct’ version of current developments on children and citizens. There is also a concern about Islamisation, which is partially attributable to the primacy of anti-Islamism as a selection criterion for tweets. A separate theme concerns the link of specific incidents of brutal violence to migrants and immigration.

Islamist extremist themes for the French speaking part of the Belgium corpus

The themes identified as composing the Islamist extremist corpus were arrived at through a discourse analysis based on a descending hierarchical classification using the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983, 1990) as outlined above. Figure 13 shows the results of the cluster analysis performed on the French-language Islamist Extremist sample.

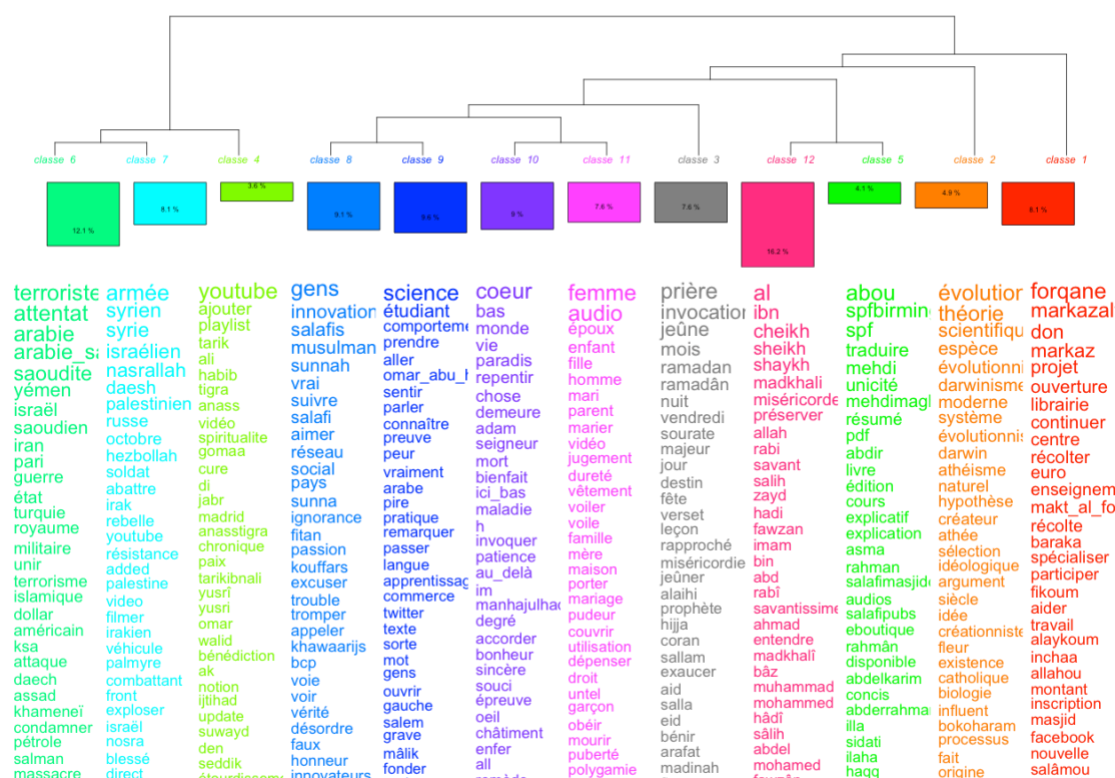


Figure 13: Thematic categorisation of ISE discourse

The cluster analysis shows two main themes. Clusters 6, 7, and 4 comprise one theme dealing with the topic of fighting in the Middle East. Clusters 8, 9, 10, 11, 3, 12, 5, 2, and 1 concern different aspects of life as a Muslim.

1. Fighting in the Middle East

Cluster 6 on the left of the graph has many references to terrorist attacks. We see that the first word is 'terroriste' ('terrorist') and the second word is 'attentat' ('attack'). Next to reference to attacks or war in general, we see the Middle Eastern national actors involved including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Israel, Iran and Turkey. We also see reference to the US ('américaine' and 'dollar'). Cluster 7 also contains reference to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, in particular, in this case, the Syrian conflict, with the actors involved. Next to the Syrian conflict there is also reference to Lebanese Hezbollah leader Nasrallah. Cluster 4 is predominantly a list of Arab names although 'YouTube' is the dominant word. It is likely that this cluster reflects a discussion of individuals who have been involved in the conflict in the Middle East and whose stories are portrayed on YouTube.

2. Various aspects of religious life as a Muslim

The second theme reflects various aspects of religious life as a Muslim. Cluster 8 contains reference to 'gens' ('people') and 'innovation' but, above all, to 'Musulman' ('Muslim'), 'Sunnah'. The words 'vrai' ('true'), 'suivre' ('follow') and 'aimer' ('love') reveal the attitude conveyed by many of our sample towards Islam and Salafism in particular. Cluster 9 contains reference to knowledge, with words such as 'science', 'étudiant' ('student') and 'connaître' ('knowing') next to other academically relevant terms such as 'parler' ('talk'), 'sentir' ('feel'), and 'preuve' ('test'). Cluster 10 has reference to emotional life and events that could trigger emotional experience. The first word is 'coeur' ('heart') and other words include 'paradis' ('paradise'), 'repentir' ('repent') next to triggers such as 'mort' ('death') and 'maladie' ('disease'). Cluster 11 contains gender and family relationships with reference to 'femme' ('woman') and 'homme' ('man'), 'enfant' ('child') and 'marier' ('marry'). Cluster 3 has reference to Islamic religious practices such as 'prière' ('prayer') and 'Ramadan'. Clusters 12 and 5

identify sources of (Salafi) influence. We see influential scholar Madkhali prominently in Cluster 12, and the (French language) Salafi Publications of Birmingham ('spfbirmingham') as a source in Cluster 5. Class 2 contains many references to discussions on Darwinism, while Cluster 1 has '*forqane*' as its primary reference; Markaz-al Forqane has been an influential library in the Brussels area of Molenbeek.

Islamist extremist themes for the Flemish speaking part of the Belgium corpus

The effectiveness of the grouping of the Flemish Islamist twitter messages was undermined by the relatively low number of tweets. In Figure 14 below, we see the results of the analysis, which yielded 7 clusters which fall into two broader groups of clusters and a stand-alone cluster (Cluster 1). The first group contains Cluster 2 and Cluster 7, the second group consists of Clusters 4, 3, 5 and 6. None of the clusters contain references to political or current affairs.

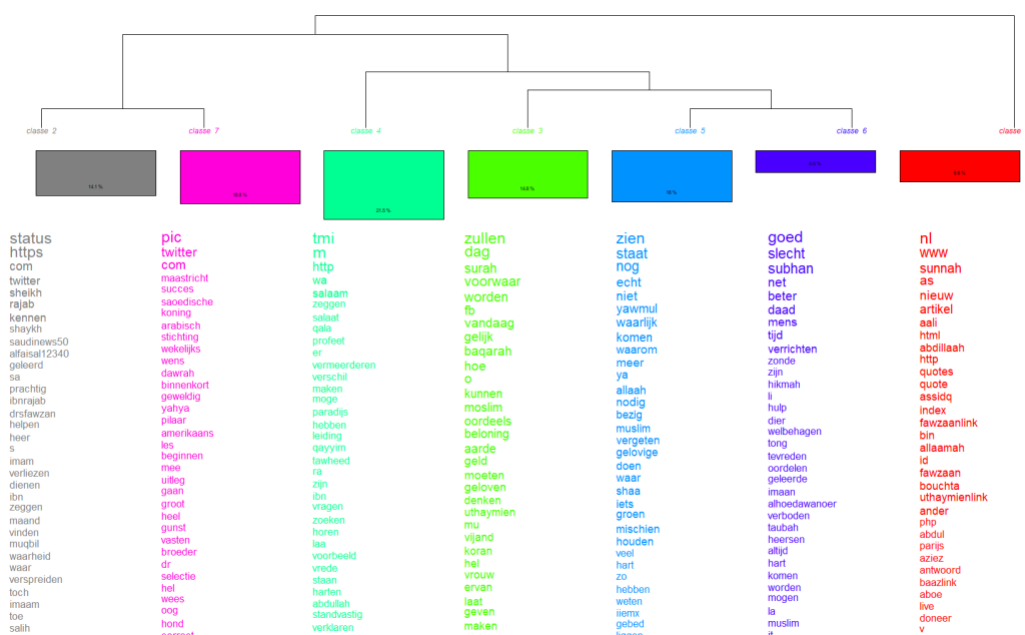


Figure 14: Thematic classification of Islamist extremist themes

1. The first group of clusters

Cluster 2 contains references to Arabic language sources of religious information. *Saudinews50* and *Alfaial12340* stand out as resources for this type of information. Both transmit messages in Arabic. Cluster 7 has a very limited set of words that are associated with it. The Dutch town of Maastricht is perhaps the most salient. Given the limited set of words, any interpretation regarding the thematic significance of this cluster can only be highly speculative.

2. The second group of clusters

The second group of clusters also seems to bear little conceptual coherence or direct relationship to current affairs, let alone processes of radicalisation. Cluster 4 has '*salaam*' as the most salient word, which is depicted both in original Arabic wording, as well as in the Flemish '*vrede*' ('peace'). Cluster 3 holds the word '*Baqarah*' referring to one of the essential Surah's of the Quran. Cluster 5 has '*alaah*' as substantive words, but otherwise lists very few words that permit substantive interpretation. Cluster 6 has '*subhan*' as a salient word, presumably used in conjunction with Allah as to indicate '*subhan Allah*' ('glory be to God'). At the top of the list of this cluster are the words '*goed*' ('good') and '*slecht*' ('bad'), highlighting the moral nature of the content of this cluster.

3. Stand-alone Cluster 1

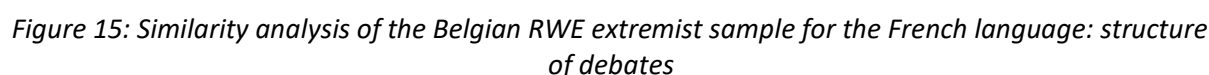
Cluster 1 appears to be relatively independent in terms of content from the other clusters. The most salient word in this cluster is ‘Sunnah’ that together with the word ‘as’ forms ‘As Sunnah’, the name of the influential mosque As Sunnah in The Hague, The Netherlands.

4.1.2 Lexical proximity and relationship between themes

The analysis presented in this section maps the dendrograms presented in the section above and can be considered as a similarity analysis or a network analysis of co-occurring words. This is not a word cloud, but a graphic representation of lexical clusters in that the words are neither selected by the analyst according to what they mean nor selected at random; they are bound by their co-occurrence and their position in regard to one another. The size of the font is proportional to the importance of the words in the corpus. The colours represent communities identified automatically. This graph is made from the lexical clusters that form each of the categories presented in the dendrograms above, so it provides another reading, more focused on lexical proximity and relationships between topics. It constitutes another way of looking at the conversational material collected on Twitter, focusing on how themes are articulated with one another in relation to interpretative communities.

Structure of conversations for the Belgian French speaking far right

Figure 15 below is based on the Belgium French-language RWE dendrogram discussed in detail above. It is generated by selecting the 700 words that appear most frequently in the corpus, keeping only nouns and verbs. The spatialisation layout used is called Fruchterman-Reingold; this algorithm helps emphasise clusters of discussions. The coloured areas of the graph were generated by means of the Louvain method, i.e. an algorithm specifically designed to detect interpretative communities and extract them from large networks.



Structure of conversations for the Belgian Flemish speaking far right

Figure 16 below is based on the radical-right dendrogram discussed in detail above. Figure 16 was generated by selecting the 700 words that appeared the most in the corpus.

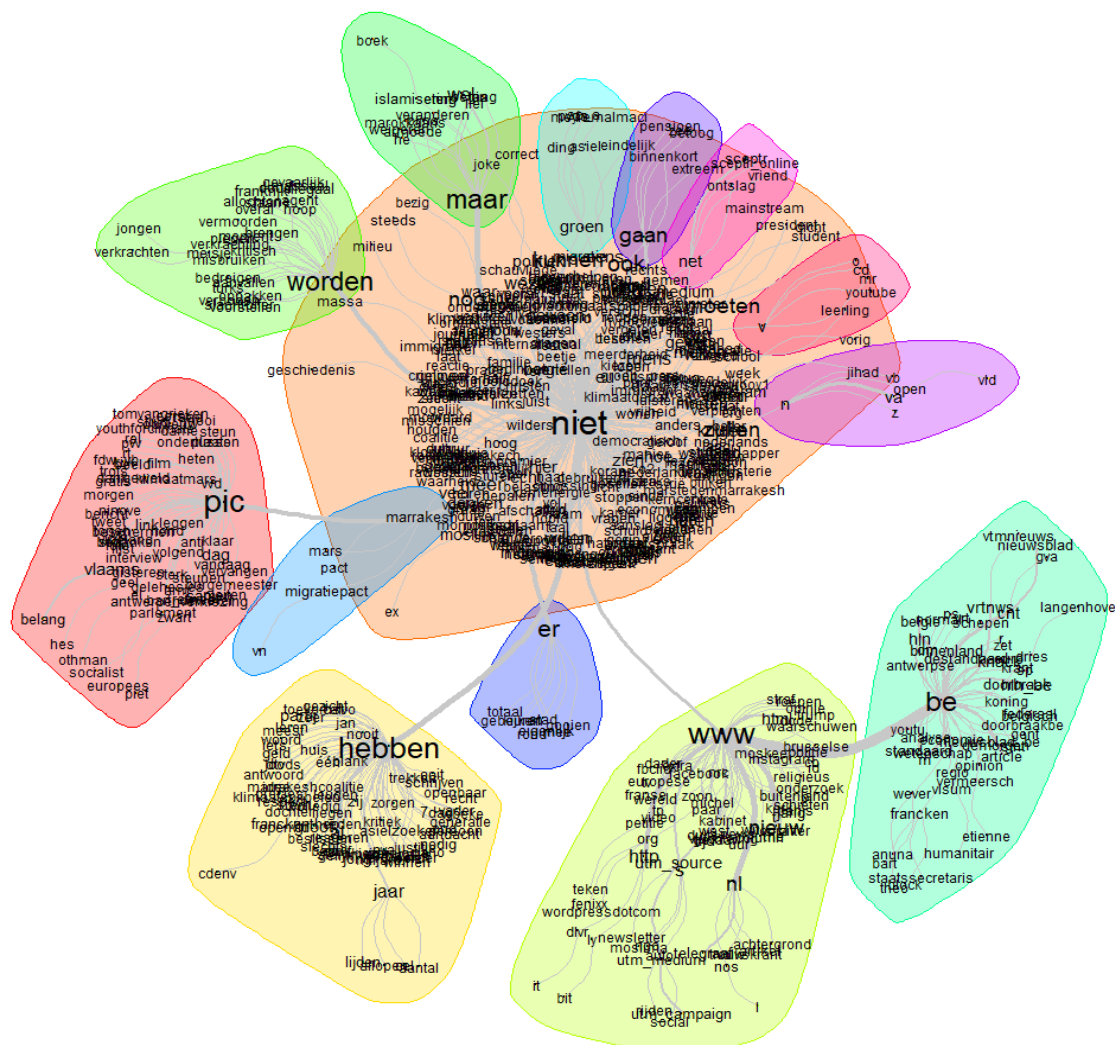


Figure 16: Similarity analysis of the Belgian RWE extremist sample for the French language: structure of debates

The word 'niet' ('not') appears to take a central position. This may be reflective of a generally negative sentiment. Broader themes that show overlap with this general orange cloud are: the blue cloud that contains references to the 'migratiepact' ('migration pact') and 'marrakesh'; the red cloud that contains reference to the left, for instance 'socialist'; the light green cloud on the top on the left side containing reference to violence, in particular 'vermoorden' ('to kill'), 'verkrachten' ('to rape') and 'bedreigen' ('to threaten'). Moving clockwise, the slightly darker green cloud has 'islamiseren' ('Islamisation') as the most salient word. Again, moving clockwise, the smaller turquoise, purple, violet, red, and purple clouds contain few words that would contribute to a substantive interpretation. Underneath the orange cloud, one can find a green cloud with the central word 'be' (the acronym for Belgium) with many words associated with Belgian politics, including names of political figures ('Francken', 'Etienne', 'Wever') and news providers ('Nieuwsblad', 'Vrtnews'). The light green cloud to the left of the darker green cloud just discussed has reference to a 'moskee' ('mosque') and religious issues ('religieus'), and to European affairs ('Europese'), but overall it is difficult to pinpoint any thematic unity within this cloud. The same is true for the yellow cloud, with 'hebben' ('to have') as the central word. Within this cloud, the Flemish Christian Democratic Party ('CD en V') stands out, and the word 'jaar' ('year'). Few other words within this cloud provide markers for substantive interpretation.

Structure of conversations for the Belgian French speaking Islamist extremists

The similarity analysis depicted in Figure 17 is conducted on the basis of the ISE French-language dendrogram presented above. It is composed of thematically connected words, but only a couple of words stand out. Since the size of the font is proportional to the importance of the words in the corpus, the boldest words can be understood as being of high significance to interpret the lexical clouds.

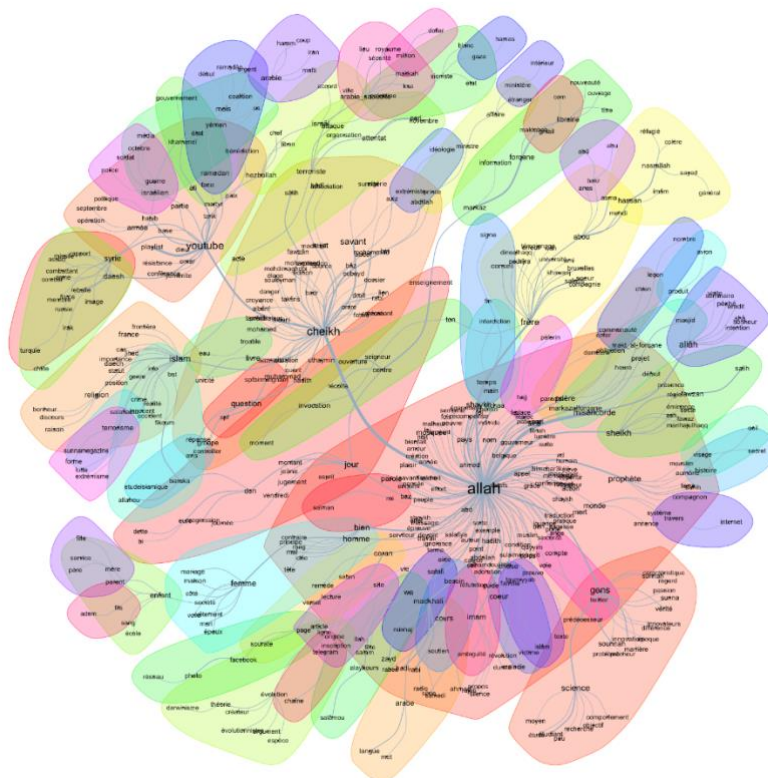


Figure 17: Similarity analysis of the Belgian Islamist sample for the French language: structure of debates

The main message to be discerned from this graph is that (perhaps not surprisingly), the central connector in the Islamist debates we have been investigating is 'Allah'. In the graph, the word 'Allah' has numerous references to smaller clouds, each collecting a very limited number of words within each cloud. This may suggest that in the Twitter debate we investigated, Allah is the connector in an otherwise very thematically scattered conversation (if there even is a conversation). The only word that is also clearly visible is the word 'cheikh'/'Sheikh' in English, is an Arabic reference to a revered authority. This word also connects to 'Allah'.

Structure of conversations for the Belgian Flemish speaking Islamists

Figure 18 below draws on the Islamist dendrogram discussed in detail above. As with the dendrogram analysis just reported, the lexical proximity analysis shows a colourful palette of words, but there is little to use as a marker to demarcate substantive themes within this graph.

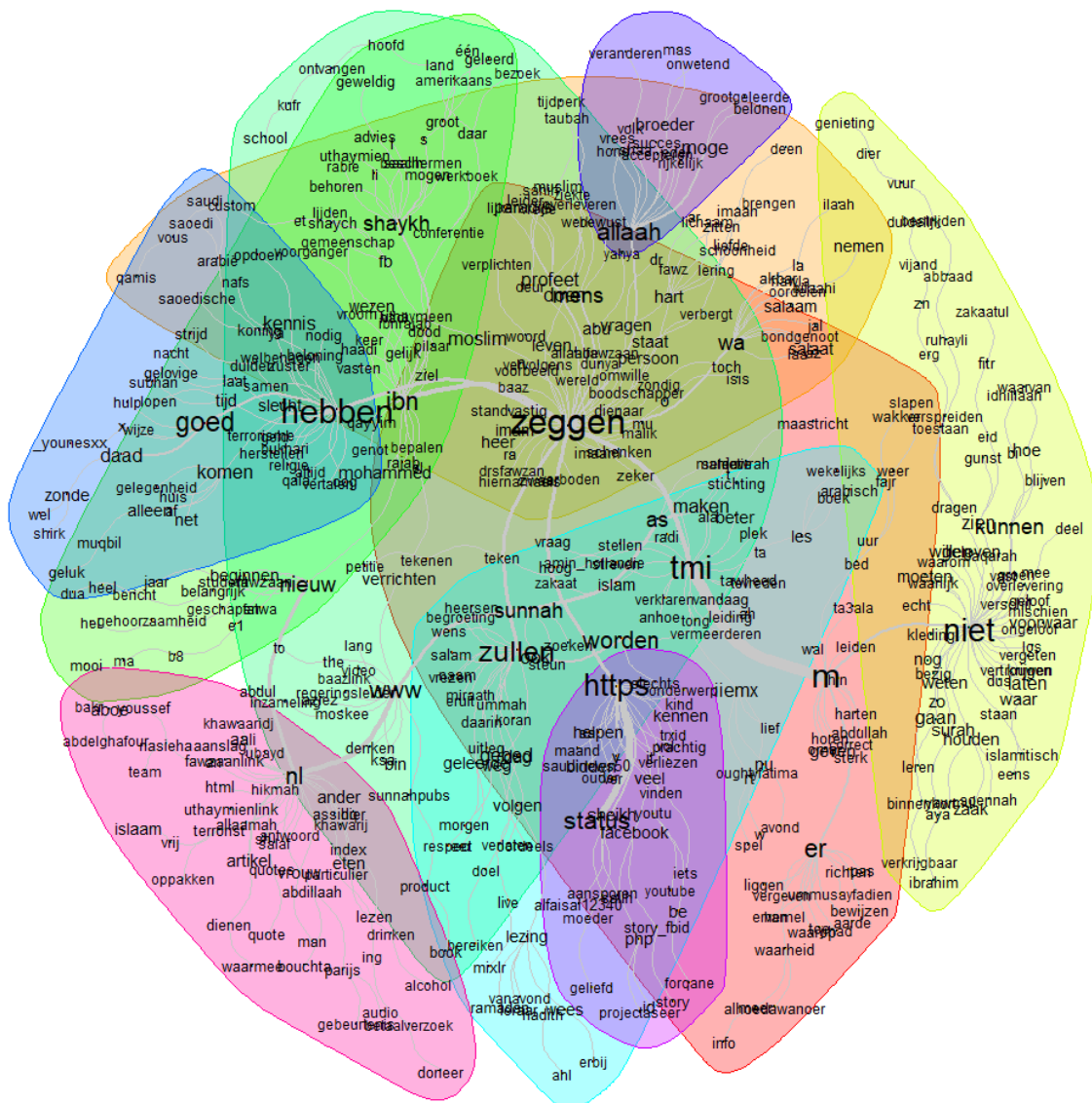


Figure 18: Similarity analysis of the Belgian Islamist sample for the Dutch language: structure of debates

4.1.3 Gender oriented discussions

To understand the structure of debates within a group, another interesting variable to consider is gender. Figure 19 shows which lexical clusters are more often discussed by either men (green bars) or women (red bars). To be specific, links are estimated through a chi2 reflecting the trend to find, in a given cluster, a statistical overrepresentation (a higher proportion) or a statistical underrepresentation (a lower proportion) of tweets produced at each date. The bars going upwards signal an overrepresentation of tweets from one gender over another in the cluster: the bars going downwards underline an underrepresentation.

Gender oriented discussions for the Belgian French speaking RWE sample

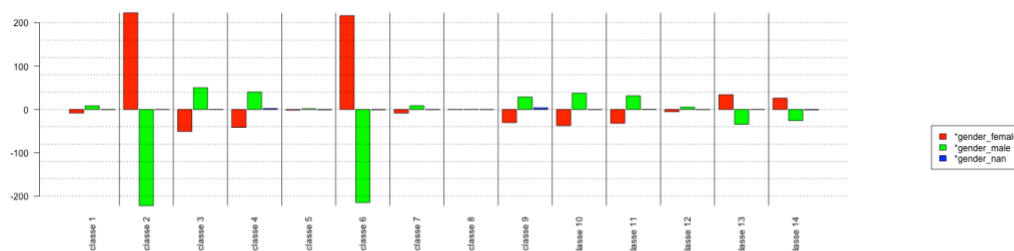


Figure 19: Links between lexical clusters and gender in the Belgium French speaking RWE sample

Figure 19 shows an overrepresentation of female relative to male contributors in Cluster 2 and Cluster 6. Cluster 2 concerns French politics, and has Marine LePen as the most salient topic of discussion. Class 6 concerns everyday chatter.

Gender oriented discussions for the Belgian Flemish speaking RWE sample

Figure 20 shows gender differences in participation in discussions related to specific clusters. We observe a disproportionate male representation in Cluster 2. This cluster has many references to Islam, Islamisation, and totalitarianism. The narrative associated with this cluster is that Islam poses a threat to the Belgian democratic way of life. We also see disproportionate male representation in Cluster 13 - a cluster associated with the influential publisher Joost Niemoller - and reference to the political populist party Vlaams Belang ('Flemish interest'). Cluster 10 has a slight overrepresentation of women participating in the debate; a debate that relates here to abortion.

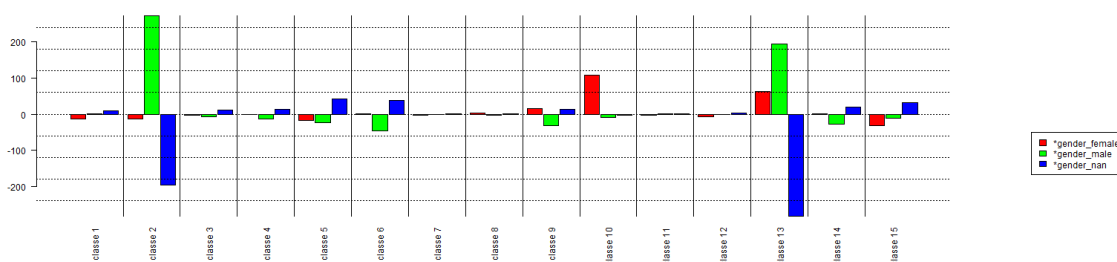


Figure 20: Gender oriented discussions for the Belgian French speaking ISE sample

Gender oriented discussions for the Belgian French speaking ISE sample

The same gender analysis was conducted for the ISE sample as for the RWE sample. Figure 21 below reveals which lexical clusters are specific to either gender of users' tweets. The bars going upwards correspond to an overrepresentation of tweets from one gender over another in the cluster: the bars going downwards signify an underrepresentation. We will only consider the clusters in which male (green bars) or female (red bars) are overrepresented.

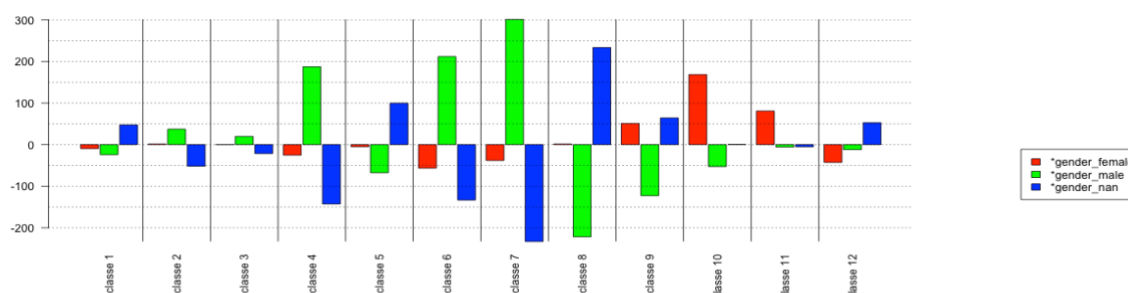


Figure 21: Links between lexical clusters and gender in the Belgian French speaking ISE sample

The graph illustrates a ‘gendered’ debate on Twitter since for many clusters, we see either male or female overrepresentation. Clusters 4, 6, and 7 show male overrepresentation, while Cluster 10 indicates female overrepresentation. Clusters 4, 6, and 7 relate to conflicts in the Middle East. Cluster 10 relates to religious experience and the ‘heart’.

Gender oriented discussions for the Belgium Flemish speaking ISE sample

Figure 22 shows gender differences in participation in discussions related to specific clusters. We caution against inferring strong conclusions from this Figure, since most of the relevant contrasts pertain to the differences between females (depicted in red) and those who did not specify their gender. We see that Cluster 4, which contained references to wishes of peace (‘salaam’) is more representative of females than of males. Otherwise, again, we are hesitant to derive too much from this figure.

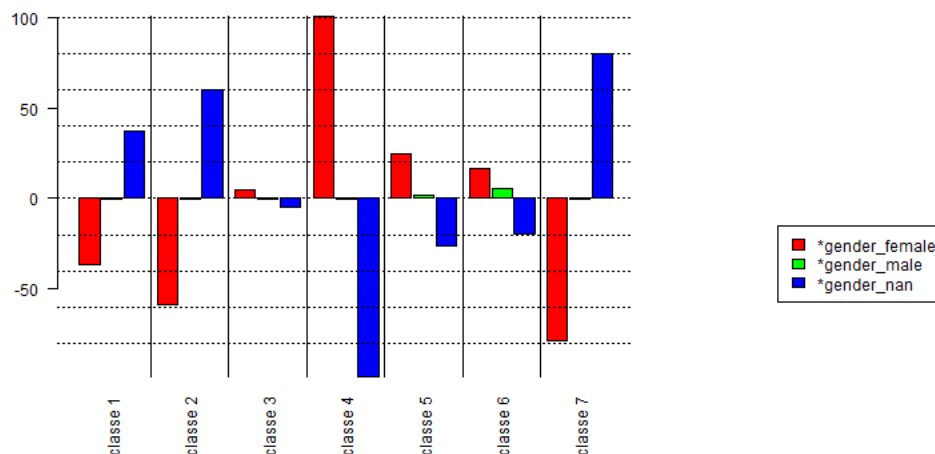


Figure 22: Links between lexical clusters and gender in the Belgian Flemish speaking ISE sample

4.2 Events

Offline incidents, such as a terrorist attack, an election or a social movement, can be perceived as events that provoke a response from bystanders, trigger media participation and fuel radicalisation. In the case of school shootings for example, online dormant networks of fans systematically ‘celebrated’ new massacres, such tragic events providing a renewed sense of legitimacy. Likewise, terrorist attacks lead to the constitution of online shrines, spark vivid online debates at new scales of interpersonal interaction and lead to the constitution of temporary networks of interpretative communities where emotions run high and positions are radical. In this section, we expand on these findings by asking whether the daily news is a driver of radicalisation and potentially triggers digital participation. To demonstrate a possible correlation, we explore whether users engage in high levels of activity over specific topics at a given time and, if so, whether they are related to particular events. In turn, we examine whether these events represent a form of online stimulation for radicalisation.

As in the section above, we will treat the French language lexical corpus and the Dutch language lexical corpus in parallel for each stream of radicalisation in Belgium, starting with the French language corpus before considering the Dutch language corpus.

4.2.1 Publications triggered by events

The analysis starts by considering the RWE extremist sample and moves on to the ISE sample.

Events triggering participation on the extreme right for the French corpus

In Section 4.1, we detailed the content of the clusters that emerged from the lexical analysis. The heat map below is a chronological representation of these categories. Heat maps in general provide

information on the over-representation of a class for a given variable. In the case at hand, the selected variable is the month and the year. This allows the visualisation of what the topics most discussed were within the timeframe of the study (see Figure 23). The class numbers are listed in the column on the right. The months and the year are indicated on the bottom line under each column.

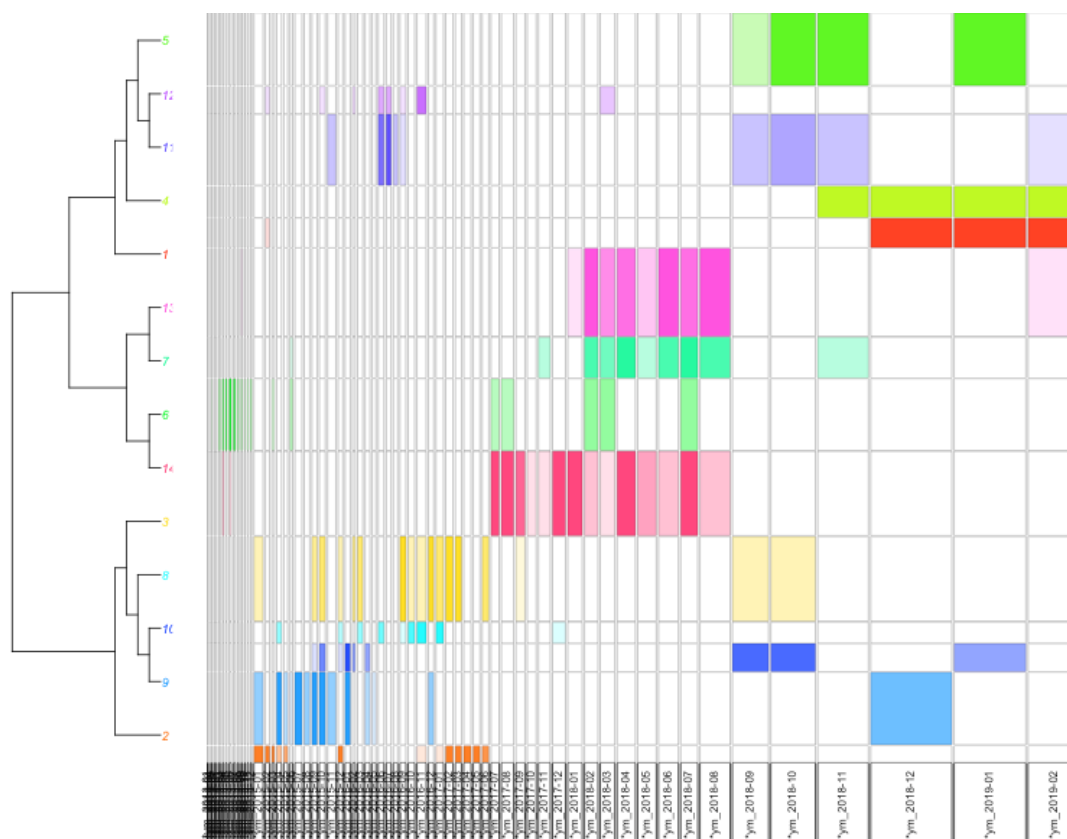


Figure 23: Monthly evolution of clusters according to the volume of discussions per month for the French speaking RWE sample

From Figure 23, it can be inferred that the themes that are present in the cluster analysis are present in the debate during particular time periods and not in others. The debate evolves in terms of content. This could also reflect changes in contributors to the debate. During the period 2016 to summer 2017, the debate focusses on Marie Le Pen and French politics (Cluster 2), Orban and European politics (Cluster 9), Trump and American politics (Cluster 8) and the Modrikamer and the Belgian Parti Populaire (Cluster 3). Starting from late 2017, we see a shift in emphasis in the debate to censorship and political correctness (Clusters 14, 6, 7, and 13). From late 2018, again we see a shift, now to the yellow vests (Cluster 4), debates on Islam in relationship to other religions (Cluster 11), war (Cluster 12), and violence linked to immigrant perpetrators (Cluster 5).

Events triggering participation on the far right for the Flemish corpus

The evolution of the RW debates was analysed by considering the salience of specific themes by month. Figure 24 shows the results of this analysis. It indicates that different topics are addressed at different time periods and that none of the thematic clusters dominates the debate throughout the time period. In the final months of the year 2018, the discussion focusses on immigration and the Marrakesh pact (Clusters 11 and 12). We also see that issues related to migration and violent crime (the red Clusters 14 and 15) are discussed in the final months of 2018. In the first months of 2019, we see the focus of the discussion shifting to the rising cost of living, most notably energy (Cluster 3 in beige) and climate change (Cluster 6 in green). Initial discussion focusing on the link between immigration and brutal violence (Clusters 14 and 15) are primarily salient in 2018 and are less discussed in 2019.

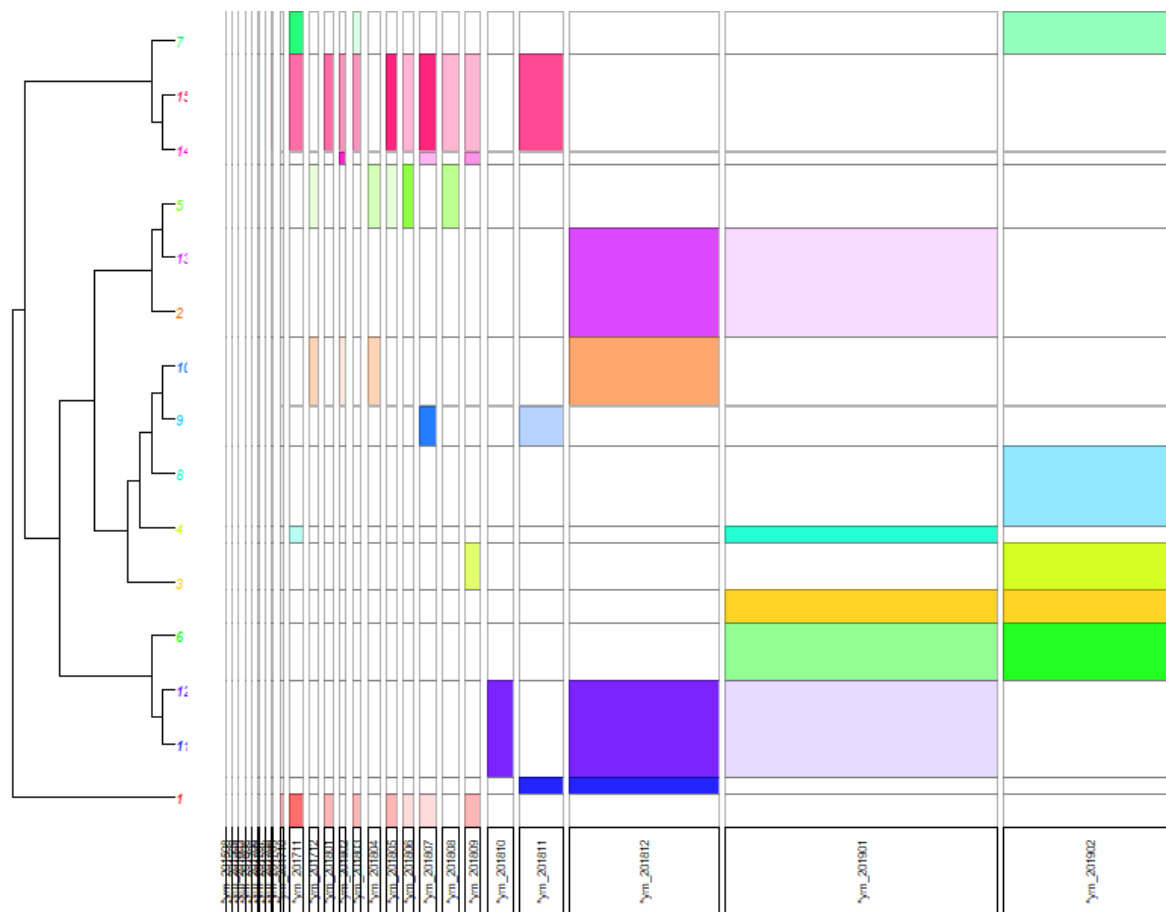


Figure 24: Monthly evolution of clusters according to the volume of the discussions per month for the Flemish speaking RWE corpus

Events triggering participation of Islamist extremists for the French speaking corpus

Because of a technical error associated with the French speaking Belgian ISE corpus, we are unable to report on the temporal evolution of cluster-specific content.

Events triggering participation of the Islamist extremists for the Flemish corpus

Figure 25 shows the result of the analysis for the Flemish speaking ISE sample. The primary insight to be gleaned from Figure 25 is that at different time periods, different themes are discussed. Again, given the lack of thematic specificity of the clusters, any interpretation of the temporal differences in salience between clusters can only be highly speculative.

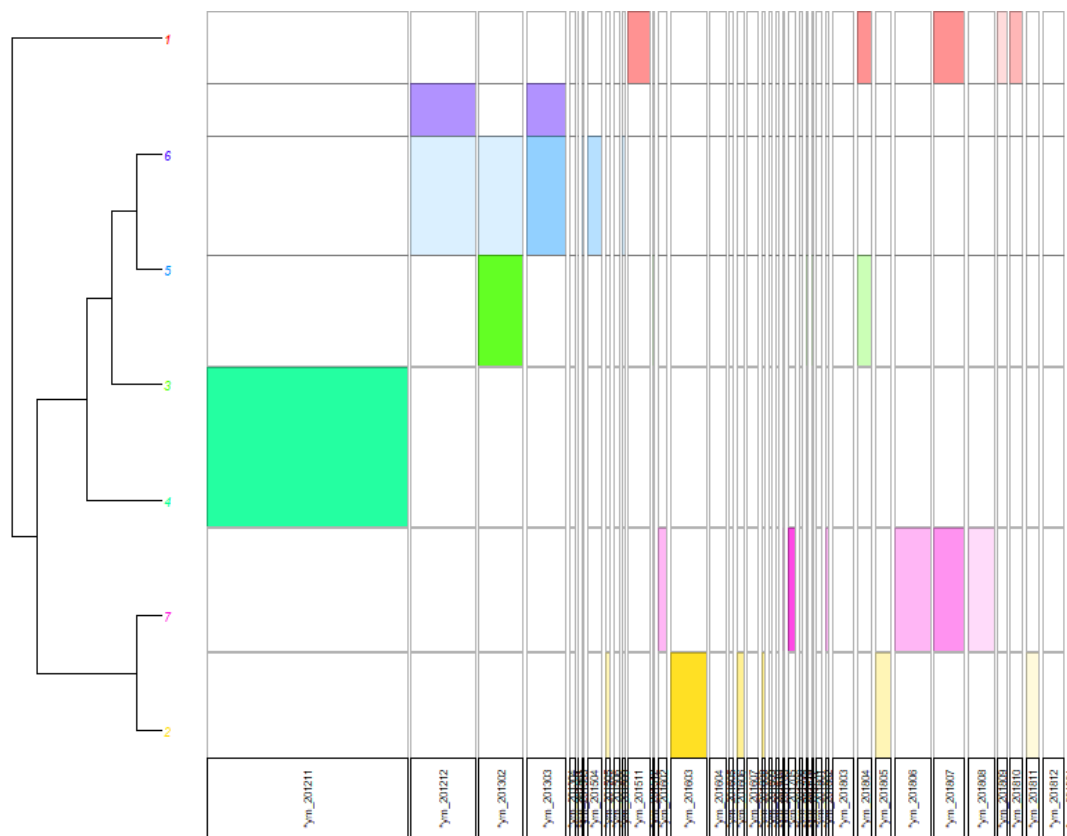


Figure 25: Monthly evolution of clusters according to the volume of the discussions per month for the Flemish speaking ISE corpus

4.2.2 Events as a means for participation depending on the repertoire of action

RWE

As we saw with the RWE sample, events seem to provoke a mirror effect whereby Twitter users comment on what is going on in the news by reacting to political and journalistic information. However, as illustrated by the discussion of the Yellow Vests social movement, the events discussed may be covered in mainstream media outlets rather than being attached to any media outlet or being media induced and they may not be associated with any particular political agenda. Events can very well be fuelled through top-down as well as bottom-up dynamics.

It is also important to stress that, while events may trigger online activity, there is nothing to say that such activity drives radicalisation. The topics discussed are not right-wing ‘by nature’.

ISE

In section 3 of this report, i.e. ‘Staging and framing identities’, we saw that Twitter facilitates different repertoires of action. RWE exploit Twitter to showcase their opinion and promote their political agendas; their uses are typical of media activism. ISE however demonstrated a quite different use by employing Twitter to share beliefs and offer resources to practice faith. The lingering question is: do events also function as a means for participation when Twitter is not exploited for political ends?

4.3 Influencers

In recent years, influencers on the internet have become central to discussions in computer science, marketing and digital humanities. These new approaches to the classic sociological debate on the role of ‘opinion leaders’ illuminate how individuals, and their social media accounts, shape conversations and impact public debates through their involvement and their popularity in digital threads. Here, we

will identify influencers for each sample and ask whether these users reinforce radicalisation or if, on the contrary, they are irrelevant to the process of radicalisation.

While there is no perfect way to measure the level of users' influence on Twitter, we can gather multiple indicators to identify 'influential' users. Here, we will use the level of connectivity to measure influence as it can reveal the potentiality of a given message to spread widely. Connectivity can be considered on the basis of the ratio between in and out degree relationships - typically the number of followers and followings - of a given user. Measuring influence reveals the directions in which information flows and spreads, and allows the identification of those who have received the most exposure in the form of most replies to their tweets. By defining influencers in this manner, we are considering those who have the largest platforms and the highest levels of visibility. What we are doing here is, in addition to considering the level of connectivity of an account; factoring in the tweets that have received the most responses (commented) and the most shared (retweeted). In short, influence becomes the measure of a ratio between followers/follow and responses to original content posted online.

Looking into users whose content spreads the most and reaches the highest scores in retweets in order to better understand the role of influencers must be done at the level of Twitter rather than at the level of our sample. This is because the size of our sample - 40 to 44 users (depending on stream of radicalisation) – is an insufficient number of users to properly evaluate influencers at the level of the sample. Thus, to study agents of radicalisation, we will focus on the users who are retweeted in our sample and who have received the largest amount of replies at the level of the Twitter platform as a whole. This allows us to identify the users who can be perceived as influencers on a global scale.

4.3.1 Key influencers on Twitter

Far right sample

Figure 26 shows the most influential tweeters for the RWE sample. By far the most visible influencer is the American president, Donald Trump. On this list, we find not only his own account 'realDonaldTrump', but also associated accounts 'PressSec' and 'Flotus' (i.e. first lady of the United States). There are also British and US contributors known for their right-wing stance (PrisonPlanet, KTHopkins, V_of_Europe) and their stance against political correctness (the Real James Woods, Ben Shapiro, RealCandaceO). Nigel Farage is also among the top influencers. Peter Sweden is a self-proclaimed journalist who posts on Twitter about freedom of speech and against political correctness but has been associated with the alt-right and is accused of spreading conspiracy theories. Other influencers include rapper Kanye West who has pledged support for Donald Trump, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, and Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu. None of the tweeters are from Belgium.

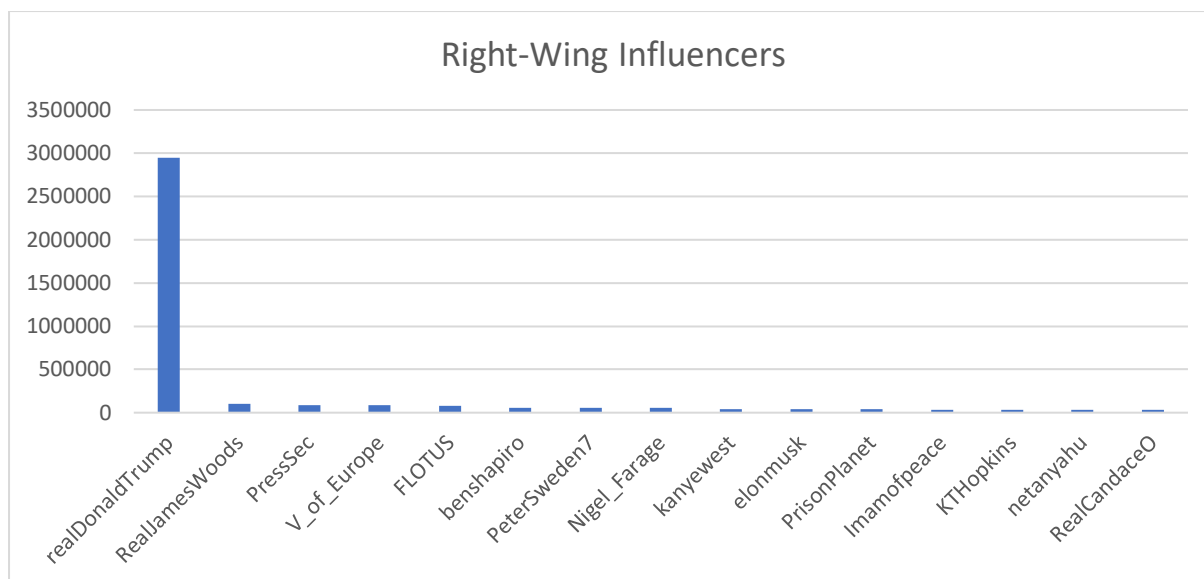


Figure 26: Overview of Right-Wing Influencers

Islamist extremist sample

In the case of the Islamist extremist Belgian sample, the number of mutual mentions and retweets are so low, that it is not possible to properly identify any influencers and therefore determine whether specific influencers play a role in online radicalisation. Given these results, we would be more inclined to say that the Belgium scene on Twitter does not seem to provide a haven for influencers or people who contribute to radicalisation.

In Figure 27 below we see the influencers of our Islamist twitter sample. The overall number of mentions is far lower among the Islamists than among the extreme right-wing. To compare, the most frequently mentioned right wing influencer, Donald Trump, has close to 3 million replies, whereas the top influencer on the Islamist side, the Saudi King Salman, has just 300,000 replies. Indeed, Donald Trump is the second influencer in the ISE list of influencers, with approximately 20,000 replies, while the second most influential person on the right wing is James Woods with close to 100,000 replies. The third most influential person on the right wing is the White House press secretary with close to 90,000 replies, whereas the third in the Islamist sample (Khaled Beydoun) has 6,231 replies. Khaled Beydoun is an American law professor and public intellectual publishing on Islamophobia. Many of the other influencers comment in Arabic on religious (and not so much political) affairs. These include Solyman24, Azhar_s, 7ssry, mehdimaghribi, dr_albukhay, osamaalamri99. None of the influencers comes from Belgium or specifically addresses Belgian political or societal issues.

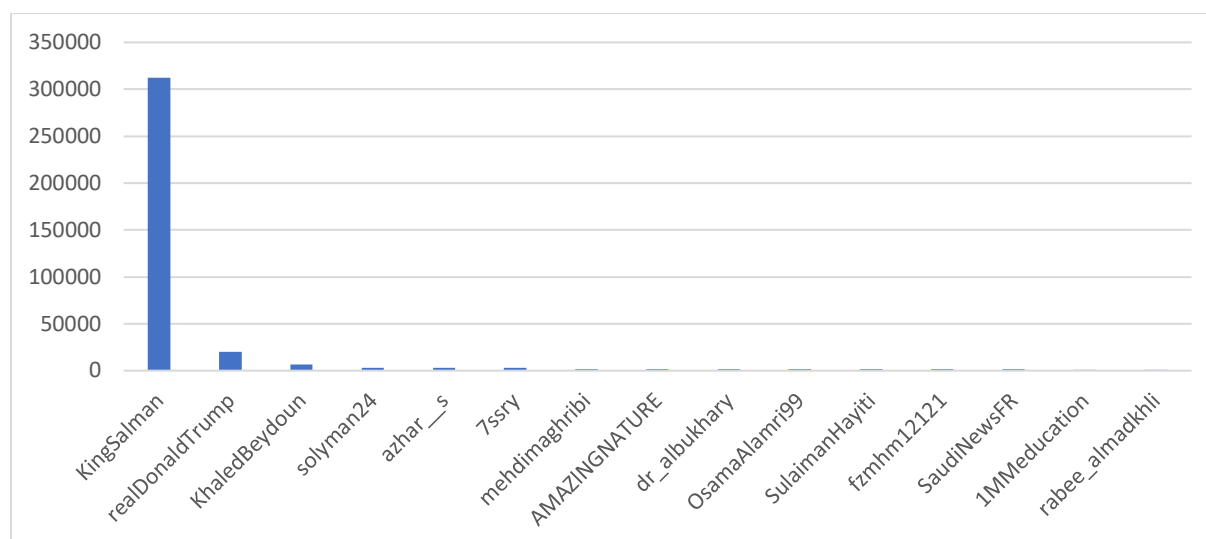


Figure 27: Overview of Islamist Influencers

4.3.2 Influencers as a driver of participation?

In this section of the report, we have identified who may act as leading influencers in online radical networks. While there were no conclusive results for the ISE sample, we did find that world-renowned leaders and figures on the Right received an important amount of attention and are the heart of online conversations. If these social actors play a role in shaping conversations, how so? And is it possible to assert that these users trigger participation?

To properly consider how these influencers impact their audiences, it would be necessary to determine how these users are contributing online, what type of repertoire of action they employ and what they are expressing. Trump for example uses Twitter as an arena for authentic communication (Enli, 2017) providing an example of how public discourses have been changing with the development of social media (Ott, 2016) but also documenting how news and information bypasses official media outlets (Della Porta, 2015). In this sense, attraction for Trump as a prominent online Twitter figure tells us more about the breakdown of social institutions, the growing interest in alternative media and direct communication from social leaders, and the distrust in traditional media or the establishment more generally (Lewis, 2018), than it tells us about what triggers participation online. While any extensive exploration of the relationship between online influencers and user participation lies beyond the scope of the current study, the findings suggest the importance of developing this research in the future to better understand how political influencers adopt the techniques of brand influencers to build their audiences and sell them on extreme right ideology.

5. Networks: analysing how people engage

In this section we consider whether digital milieus of radicalisation exist in the Belgian context using a network analysis approach. This involves paying attention to how well-connected people are online, who they are connected with and how conversations are being conducted on the web. In the case of celebrities or famous politicians, users may enjoy very large audiences of people with whom they share no ties. In this instance, the users' messages can take centre stage and shape public debates even though the relationship is one-directional and solely inbound. Others, with little to no platform or audience prior to their web presence, develop strong ties with like-minded people around the same centres of interest and gain in notoriety online, to the point of becoming digital influencers. As influencers, they have the ability to cast a series of topics into the spotlight. However, most of the time on Twitter, for those who actually engage online and have an active account, people revolve within small circles, enjoy the social network site to microblog and talk about their daily activities,

seek or share information and, most importantly, associate at a community level with users far from the centre of attention (Java et al. 2007; Zhao et al. 2009).

In the context of this report, by studying people who openly support radical ideologies and asking whether radicalisation can be conducted through microblogging, we anticipate our primary focus to be users who tend to build profiles around particular areas of interest and engage in conversations with others who share the same opinions. However, many questions centred around structures of communication and composition of social ties remain unclear, not least the susceptibility of relationships to peer pressure and their ability to sustain, uphold or fuel processes of radicalisation. The analyses conducted here consider how connected people are to one another, how conversations are conducted online and how polarised people are on national or international issues.

Thus, the findings of the network analysis reported on in this section will extend our understanding of the role of digital sociability and online communication in self-radicalisation processes.

Digital ties of the Belgian samples are analysed for both strands of radicalisation on three separate levels: i) on a sample level; ii) on a retweet level; and iii) on a mention level. These three perspectives are complementary as we will later see. For this reason, below throughout our analysis, we distinguish between our 'sample(s)' and the 'full scale of the sample'. Where discussion refers to the 'sample', we are solely examining the users that were hand-picked by the researchers to construct the Belgian sample(s) (i.e. 38 RWE accounts and 42 ISE accounts). Where the 'full scale of the sample' is referred to, we are considering the followers and followings of our country-level sample as well as the samples of the other countries within the DARE study. In this manner, we are not only extending our focus beyond eighty-some people in the Belgium ISE and RWE samples; we are also considering the networks of all of the seven country samples with their respective followers and followings.

5.1 On the sample level

In this subsection, we deal with network analysis at the level of the Belgian samples. Examining what is taking place within the Belgian extremist Twittersphere from a sample perspective helps highlight how samples are structured, and therefore, how people are linked to one another. We can identify who is connected to whom, who is following whom and who is being followed. In short, this tells us more about who is well-connected and who is visible online. Furthermore, this approach provides information on whether people constitute points of passage or hubs of some sorts and, therefore, if conversations are created around clusters of people, if these conversation threads are connected to one another or if, on the contrary, there is a lack of clusters or a disconnection between clusters and conversations. By determining how conversations are structured, we can identify whether conversations intersect, are parallel to one another, or if conversations are mainly peripheral and isolated. In turn, we can determine the level of circulation of radical ideologies as well as their level of resonance.

We examine the RWE and then the ISE sample. We have analysed the level of connectivity of the Belgian sample at the full scale of the sample, meaning we considered the followers and followings of our country-level sample as well as the samples of the other countries within the DARE study.

For each of the two network graphs, the sizes of the nodes are representative of in-degree relationships, so the bigger the node is, the more that account is followed. Large nodes imply a person has a strong reputation and other people's attention. Colours translate into the same indices for each sample. Colours of the nodes and edges (i.e. lines) represent countries. It is important to note that colours represent different countries for each sample, as the legend indicates. The spatialisation layout is a force directed algorithm (Force Atlas 2); it helps visualise the level of connectivity of our sample and the people who are central to the network. This algorithm heightens interrelationships and therefore helps us better determine whether the samples we are looking at have close bonds or not.

5.1.1 The network of the RWE sample

Figure 28 below is produced on the basis of a network analysis of the far-right Belgian sample, allowing us to visualise this sample's country level structure in consideration with this study's full sample of accounts. In such a manner we can clearly highlight interrelations in the Belgium Twittersphere but also beyond.

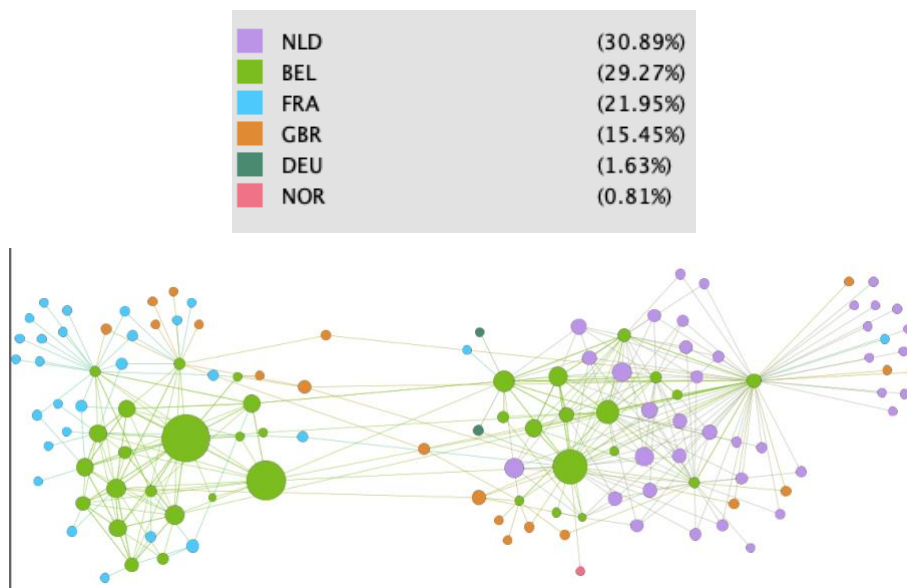


Figure 28: Network of the tweets for the RWE sample with an emphasis on the countries of residency of contributors

Four main conclusions can be drawn based on the graphic depiction of networks presented in Figure 28.

1. High connectivity and circulation of radical ideas in a unique Belgian milieu

The Belgian sample presents a rather unique configuration. The overall density of the network is high, reciprocal interrelations appear to be strong, and the number of key players is high. One of the main conclusions to draw from this initial analysis is that there is a high level of circulation of content and, therefore, ideas. The Belgian extreme right scene is thus a potentially rather unique type of extreme right milieu within the European landscape, consisting of a well-connected bunch of individual accounts that ensures effective circulation of content and overlapping conversations.

2. A clear division between the Flemish and the French scene within the Belgian milieu, reflecting strong connections to the Netherlands and France

While, overall, the Belgian sample shows a high degree of connectivity and interweaving of conversations, the graph also clearly illustrates the existence of two distinct clusters, oriented towards the Netherlands and France respectively. This division is essentially linguistic at root, reflecting the composition of the Belgium population and presenting on one side, a French-language based network and on the other a Flemish-language based one.

3. Influencers are central to content circulation and milieu stability

Despite these distinct linguistic networks, the two communities remain well-connected through some high-profile influencers. The larger the nodes, the more the person is connected to others. We can identify them in Figure 28 in both larger size clusters.

4. British accounts in the Belgian milieu: indicative of a global extreme right conversation in Europe?

British accounts appear to be central intermediaries, contributing in bridging the gap between the two dominant linguistic communities (French and Flemish). At the very least, they open up the national linguistic mix bringing in an additional linguistic horizon, tied to other ideological streams of thought. The presence of British accounts further highlights the strong content flow between each linguistic community and tends to indicate the existence of a transnational extreme right conversation in Europe.

5. High level of transnationality: global conversations and strength in international movements?

The high-level interpenetration of linguistic communities (French, Flemish, English, possibly German) and the high proportion of interrelated countries in the network suggest that the Belgian extreme right-wing milieu demonstrates strong transnational dimensions, worth exploring further in future research. What we observe here leads us to question how far national milieus are strengthened by exposure to global conversations and/or from their association to movements beyond national borders. Likewise, it raises the question of the transnationality of users, rather than their awareness of conversations being held elsewhere.

Another aspect to framing the findings from the Belgium far right milieu is to question whether the English sample amplifies the impression of transnationality by the mere fact of being in English language. It is possible that this captures less with the transnationality of conversations and actual interactions between users, than the phenomenon of bystanders paying attention to what is going on on an international scale and/or abroad. In other words, an alternative understanding of the apparent transnationality of the network is that, since English has become the most widely spoken language, information broadcast in that language is highly likely to attract a larger audience. Integrating British users into one's list of followers on a platform like Twitter, can simply be a means of keeping an eye on a global conversation in an age in which public debates are transnational, tied to media spheres in general and commonly in English. Connectivity then no longer implies transnationality of conversation; it indicates a flow of ideological streams of thought and possible homogeneity of ideologies.

5.1.2 The network of the ISE sample

Figure 29 is produced on the basis of a network analysis of the ISE Belgian sample, allowing us to visualise the sample's structure at the level of the full seven-country sample.

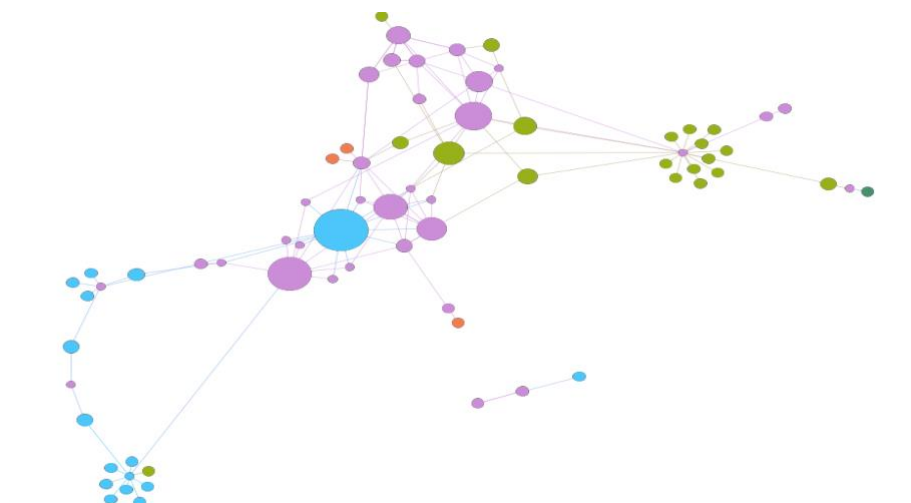




Figure 29: Network of retweets for the ISE Belgium sample with an emphasis on the countries of residency of contributors

Three main findings emerge from the analysis of the ISE sample.

1. Small network poorly connected with a few influencers: lack of digital Islamist Belgian milieu

The overall picture of the graph leads us to conclude that the Belgian sample reflects a small network of poorly related accounts with half a dozen influencers at its centre. There are also strings of users who are interconnected, but each account becomes a point of passage, preventing any actual circulation of content and/or any interpenetration to a larger network of accounts.

The dominant influencers at the centre of the main cluster have a small audience and therefore have little ability to promote or circulate content. In respect to these observations, we can further conclude that there is no Belgian Islamist extremist milieu on Twitter.

2. Transnationality remains strong very probably due to linguistic division in Belgium

Interestingly enough, despite the lack of a milieu and/or a large number of disconnected clusters, the ISE sample still demonstrates a high degree of transnationality. The large cluster of accounts at the centre of the graph connects accounts from France and the Netherlands just as much as Belgium; displaying a strong interpenetration of national contexts and thus possible circulation of ideas. This interpenetration of France, the Netherlands and Belgium is of course most likely due to the national Belgian context in which the linguistic division into three official languages makes interculturality intrinsic to the Belgian landscape. Nonetheless, while the size of the cluster prevents a high degree of circulation, interactions between countries does demonstrate the fact that ideas are not country-bound or, at the very least, Belgian users have an interest in what is going on abroad and keep an eye on information across their national borders. This echoes a similar finding for the extreme right sample noted above.

3. Interpenetration of French and Dutch influencers into the Belgian Islamist scene

The final conclusion to be draw concerns two isolated influencers with a few followers. Beyond the central influencers on this graph, there are two tiny clusters around single users; people who are points of passages in their own right. Both of these secondary influencers are Belgian. One of the influencers around whom we can note a tiny cluster is situated in the graph on the top right, the other is situated in the bottom left. If in both cases a Belgian account is central, one is strictly composed of French followers, the second composed of Dutch followers. This is yet another example of the interpenetration of networks cross-border. It illustrates, in particular, the fact that the Islamist Belgian scene has some degree of impact on the French and Dutch scenes.

5.2 On the retweet level

In this subsection we present how conversations are articulated in relation to one another and discuss their overall structure to highlight how communication is conducted. It is important to keep in mind that high levels of retweets - and this is the same for mentions - of a given account do not automatically signal the popularity of a message - or an account in the case of mentions. Sharing a message can very well be a strategy to highlight a controversial topic and therefore be used as an act

of intervention or disruption to trigger controversy. Analysing retweets is thus a way to map interactions and conceptualise conversation patterns.

The two graphs below show us who retweets whom within the Belgian sample. For users to be considered in the analysis reported on in this subsection, however, they had to meet two conditions: the person who is retweeting must be part of the country-level sample; and the person who is retweeted must be part of the DARE full sample (any of the seven countries).

The size of the nodes represents the indegree of the node, i.e. the more the account is retweeted, the bigger the node. Colours represent countries and therefore highlight which countries are most central to the conversation but also which countries are part of the conversation. The spatialisation layout is a force directed algorithm (Force Atlas 2); it helps visualise the level of connectivity of our sample and the people who constitute points of passage, possibly leading into the observed online milieu or connecting people outside of the milieu.

5.2.1 The RWE retweet network

In Figure 30 below we can observe the retweet network of the Belgian extreme right sample.

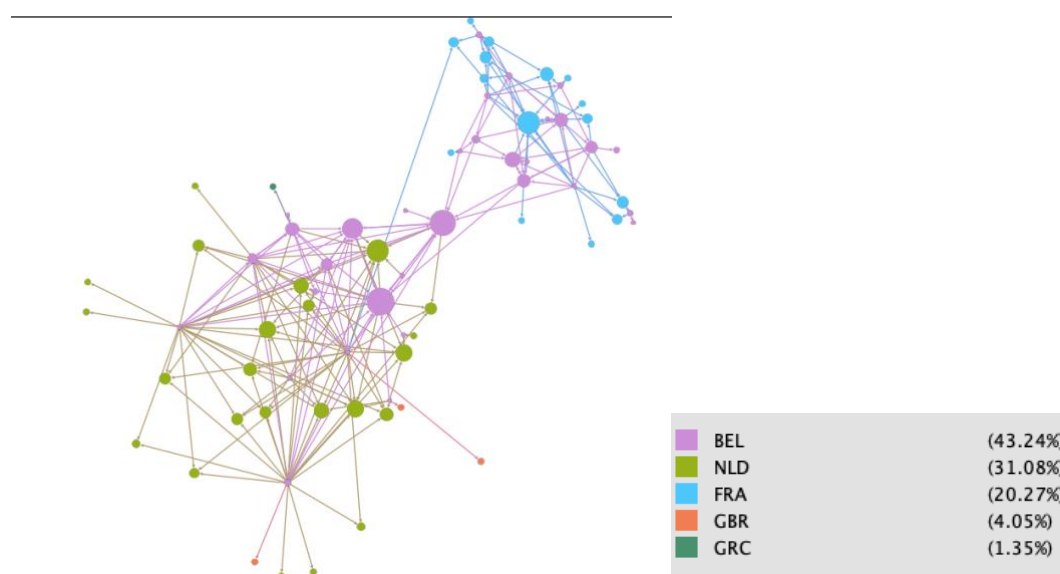


Figure 30: Retweet network for the RWE sample with an emphasis on the countries of residency of contributors

The analysis suggests five main conclusions.

1. The Dutch are central to the Belgian conversation, more so than the French

Based on the graph above, we can see which accounts Belgians retweet the most. It appears that Belgians retweet more messages from their compatriots than accounts from other countries. However, Dutch and French tweets are heavily shared also and the number of messages from the Dutch surpasses the quantity of messages shared from the French; the number of Dutch messages shared is even close to the number of Belgian retweeted tweets. This is evident simply from the percentages of retweets by origin (see Figure 30, legend).

In other words, by switching the focus of the network analysis to the direction of retweets, the overall structure of the extreme right network illustrates the domination of Dutch in the conversation. Based on these new findings, we could venture as far as to make the hypothesis that the Dutch have a stronger online presence and/or are more influential in the far-right Belgian milieu on Twitter than the French.

2. A clear divide between linguistic communities

Despite the fact the retweet structure differs from the tweet structure, we still find the linguistic division, or more accurately, a country divide between the French influences on Belgian accounts and the Dutch influences on Belgian accounts.

Belgians retweet more Dutch accounts than French accounts. However, the Belgians who retweet Dutch accounts do not retweet French accounts, and vice versa. This observation suggests that there remains a distinct separation between the two linguistic realms, even though there is one central influencer bridging the gap between the two clusters.

3. High level of density and interconnectivity

Density of relationships (i.e. proximity and overlap in relations) and interconnectivity (i.e. number of connections) remain high. This is typical of a vibrant digital milieu. From this perspective, results from retweet network analysis confirm findings from the Belgian sample, which suggests that Twitter is home to an extreme right milieu.

4. Transnationality remains but is refocused around linguistic communities rather than favouring global circulation of ideas

Transnationality remains evident but is less prominent than in the previous graphs. This suggests that British tweets identified in the sample are possibly more a source of information to stay on top of what is going on elsewhere and be informed of their ideological standpoints, than part of the conversation. In other words, it is important to know what the British have to say but that the Belgians are not engaging with them, bringing them into the conversation and/or trying to contribute to their threads of discussion.

5. An influencer permitting a national milieu to emerge

Finally, we can see that there are a few central influencers, one of whom, a Belgian, bridges the gap between the French linguistic community and the Flemish one. Without this point of passage, the extreme right Belgian milieu would not be a national milieu but simply a linguistic milieu related to the residents of Belgium.

5.2.2 The ISE retweet network

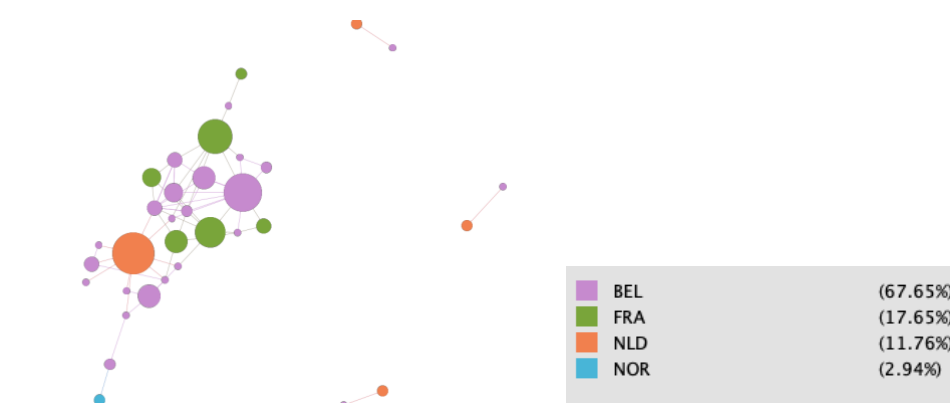


Figure 31: Retweet network for the ISE sample with an emphasis on the countries of residency of contributors

Three conclusions can be drawn from the analysis depicted in Figure 31.

1. Tiny network of people sharing content

The first finding is that, in comparison to the network above and to all the networks examined to date, the ISE network of retweets is very limited. This very limited network is composed of two dozen accounts.

2. A dense and well-connected small network within the general sample allows ideologies to circulate

This new network is dense and well-connected, which goes against what we saw above for the tweet network, which suggested the strong linguistic division prevented the network from showing up as a single community. Here, when examining conversations, we can see that the whole network of the Belgian ISE sample may not follow one another and therefore constitute a digital milieu, but the most influential and active actors actually converse. Communication flows between accounts and topics of conversation are shared in a very community-like manner, so that ideologies circulate, minimally, but circulate nonetheless.

3. Transnationality is slightly less important

Finally, when considering the messages people are sharing instead of who they are following, we note that transnationality is slightly less important than in comparison with the previous ISE network. This remark tends to reinforce the hypothesis made before, i.e. transnationality has more to do with the will to follow foreign topics and awareness of what is going on abroad than actual connectivity and interactions with other users online. This assertion would have to be confirmed by further research.

5.3 On the mention level

To pursue our understanding of processes of radicalisation on Twitter, we will now examine the level of interconnectivity, as well as the centrality and the reputation of accounts that are interlinked through mentions. This will help reveal the accounts that are part of the conservation of radicalisation.

A mention is signified with a special character like this @ and is immediately followed by the Twitter handle of an account. This sign can be employed for different purposes. By using the @ sign, someone can address another account and engage that account in an exchange with the purpose of jump starting or pursuing a conversation. Employing the at-sign (@) can also be a way to tag someone. Then, the purpose is less to engage a conversation than to bring attention to something or someone, possibly to showcase a message, take a stand in favour of someone or something or speak out against a person and/or a message. In this respect, mentions are not systemic engagement in a conversation; they can serve to endorse a message or on the contrary, be used for conflictual ends to generate disruption.

Given that mentions can be conversation tools, endorsement signs, or conflict indices, or even none of these, and that, in the context of this study, we are dealing with large amounts of data, it is impossible to know what the exact reasons behind the network of mentions are without providing further analysis. For these reasons, we will be careful to not assume that the centrality in a mention network supposes positive or negative popularity unless the context provides sufficient indicators to substantiate such an analytic conclusion.

In contrast to the analysis conducted for other national level reports as part of the DARE study, here we do not present findings on all the mentions in the Belgian sample in relation to the DARE full sample. These analyses were conducted but dismissed because they did not offer useful insight without further analysis. The mention networks in the RWE and the ISE Belgian samples alone offer somewhat more interesting information and are presented below if only to confirm findings already outlined.

The layout of both graphs below mirrors that of those above. The node size represents the PageRank, i.e. an algorithm that outputs a probability distribution used to represent the likelihood that a person randomly mentioning one person will arrive at this particular person. The colour of nodes corresponds to the community of a given node. Interpretative communities are generated based on the Louvain algorithm (modularity calculation).

The PageRank algorithm outputs a probability distribution used to represent the likelihood that a person randomly clicking on the links will arrive at any particular page.

5.3.1 The RWE mention network - with the mentions of the Belgium sample

Below is the graph produced on the basis of a network analysis of mentions included in the tweets and retweets of the RWE Belgium sample, allowing us to visualise the countries with which the sample interacts and/or references through their messages.

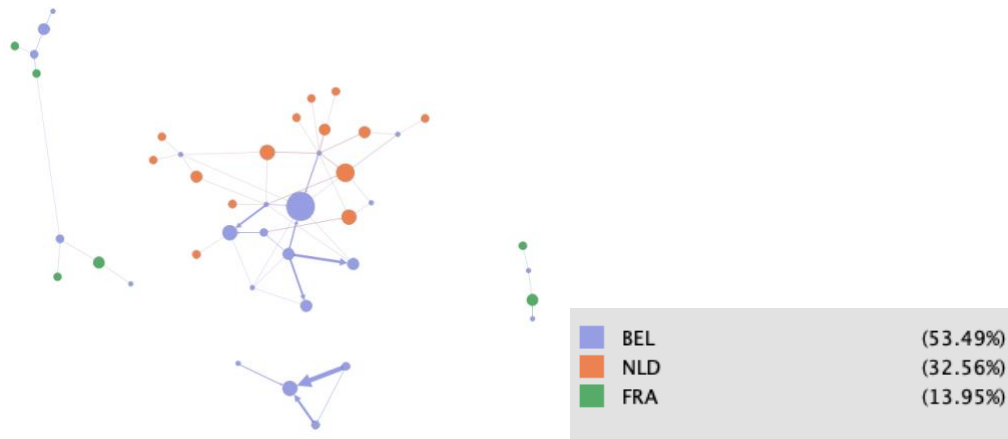


Figure 32: Mention network for the RWE sample with an emphasis on the countries of residence of the contributors

1. Mentions are a secondary form of communication

If we compare retweet and mention networks, the structure of conversations has completely changed. Here we barely have a network, simply a few points of passage and a handful of clusters with a few influencers and one major influencer situated at the very centre of the graph. By definition, mentions are discriminating in comparison with retweets, so it is normal that the size of the network is smaller and clusters are evenly dispersed. What this new analysis shows is those that are mentioned - and thus singled out in tweets - are not those with whom users have a conversation. In other words, conversations within the extreme right milieu are not determined by mentions. It would be necessary to isolate the mentions and complete a statistical lexical analysis to determine what explains this, but it would seem that 'mentions' are not a manner in which this sample communicates much, whether it is to reference people, bring newbies into the conversations or simply bring one user or another's attention to another matter.

2. Centrality of the Netherlands further confirmed

At the centre of the graph, it would seem that the Belgian far right is closer to the Netherlands than to France, in such a way that Belgian extremism appears more tightly linked to the Dutch than the French political scene. This further confirms what we saw above, i.e. the far-right Belgian milieu is interlinked with the Dutch one, more than to the French speaking community.

It would be necessary to further investigate this ideological overlap between the Netherlands and Belgium (instead of the Belgian and the French and/or simply internal to Belgium) to determine what is behind this proximity and what is at stake on a more global level of interpretation to understand this structuration of conversation.

5.3.2 The ISE mention network - with the mentions of the Belgium sample

Figure 33 is produced on the basis of a network analysis of mentions included in the tweets and retweets of the ISE Belgium sample, allowing us to visualise the countries with which the sample

interacts and/or references through their messages. Based on the analysis of mentions within the ISE Belgium sample, we can underline one observation.

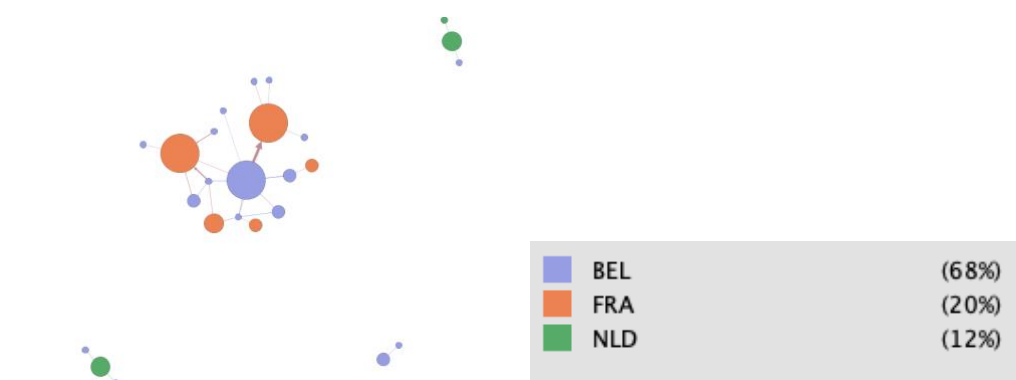


Figure 33: Mention network for the ISE sample with an emphasis on the countries of residence of the contributors

1. Lack of a global conversation and reciprocal interactions

Given the size of this network, we will not over-interpret the lack of data. The only point worth mentioning is the lack of a global conversation and no direct reciprocal interaction between users. However, it is possible that French, as opposed to Dutch influence is greater here - contradicting the finding in relation to the Belgian extreme right scene. In other words, Islamist radicalisation might be French-based in Belgium; this is in sharp contrast to the findings in relation to the extreme right milieu. That being said, given the size of the network of mentions, we must not draw hasty conclusions and more research must be conducted to confirm our preliminary findings.

6. Conclusion

This report has considered Islamist extremist and extreme right debates on Twitter as they occurred in Belgium over the past decade. For each strand of radicalisation, we selected samples and considered for each sample the content of expressions and the way viewpoints are expressed. We also sought to thematically classify the debates using formal categorisation methods. Finally, we investigated the degree of interaction between the individuals within each sample, and between the samples and the 'outside' world using network analysis.

Belgian social, cultural, and political life is divided. Multilingualism constitutes one particularly salient feature in this context. But there are also many other social, cultural and political divides. There are considerable divisions between the left and the right, between those favouring local governance versus global governance, and between conservatives and progressives.

We studied a total of 80 Twitter accounts; 38 right wing extremist accounts and 42 Islamist extremist accounts. For the right-wing extremists, we experienced difficulty constructing a gender balanced sample and ended up with a sample of 7 females and 31 males. For the Islamist extremists we identified 20 female and 22 male accounts. Overall, activity of the extreme right sample was concentrated in more recent years, while activity of the Islamists was found to be spread out over the past decade. The difference in activity across the time period under investigation may reflect a stronger monitoring and repression of Islamist activity in more recent years relative to the monitoring and repression of right-wing extremist activity.

For the right-wing extremist sample, we found the critical characteristic of anti-Islamism to be part of a broader set of negative attitudes towards immigration. Within recent Belgian political history, the issue of immigration has been contentious and even led to the fall of the federal Belgian government in 2018. For the sample under investigation, Jihadist terrorism and violent crime by immigrants is

taken to suggest that the people of Belgium are at risk of being overrun by immigrants and of losing their identity. In this context, there are differences between the Flemish and French speaking segments of our sample in the understanding of what this Belgian identity actually means. For the Flemish segment, identity pertains to a Flemish heritage, which by its very nature is oppositional to Walloon heritage. Anti-Flemish sentiments are not particularly salient among the Walloon sample, however. In order to define the identity that is considered to be under threat and in need of defence, both Walloon and Flemish segments of the sample resort to the idea of a common race and a shared European cultural heritage that leads for instance to the identification with medieval crusaders.

Identity of the sample is also defined by a negative stance towards the 'elite' embodied in liberal and progressive politicians, who in the eyes of the sample fail to represent the will of the people and in their efforts to bring about change in society, hurt the interests (and the financial resources) of the common man. In this lies a reproach to a significant share of the progressive political spectrum. While the political left preaches political correctness and tolerance, they fail to address the needs of the 'true' Belgian people including the concern for security and cost of living. For the right-wing sample, network analyses show strong connections within the sample, although the clusters are clearly differentiated along linguistic lines with the Flemish and Walloon parts of the sample forming their own cluster. The Flemish cluster is strongly connected to and influenced by Dutch twitter debates, whereas the Walloon cluster is strongly connected to and influenced by French twitter debates. Taking both samples together, however, we found the strongest influencers to come from US politics, with Donald Trump being by far the most mentioned.

For the Islamist extremist sample, we found a predominance of interest in primarily religious rather than political affairs. Many of the messages we investigated concerned the doctrinal, social, and psychological aspects of life as a Muslim. However, some political issues were discussed. There are concerns expressed about the treatment of Muslims worldwide, and the application of double standards where Muslims are treated and judged unfairly (and often harshly) is considered a particularly frustrating issue. In the sample, concerns are expressed about ongoing conflicts involving Muslims, for instance in Syria and Israel. There were no noticeable differences between the Flemish and Walloon segments of the sample. Overall, the Islamist extremist sample showed considerably fewer expressions of militancy than the right-wing extremist sample. This may at least in part be due to surveillance efforts that have been particularly focussed on violent jihadist expressions, most notably as espoused by ISIS. At this point in time, militant Islamism is difficult to identify on Twitter or to describe as a unified phenomenon. The network analysis conducted on the sample showed disconnected nodes with limited interaction among the nodes and limited international influences.

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