

Radical web under threat as cash pours in to far right media

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A decade ago the Left believed that it could use social media to outflank the established mass media. But it is the far right that now dominates social media, writes *Phil Hearse*.

Two recent events have focused attention on extreme right social media. The shooter in the Christchurch massacre was an addict of white supremacist message boards on platforms like Reddit and 4Chan. Like the alt-right platform Gab, these noticeboards are filled with overt racism, homophobia, misogyny and Hitler worship. A very different sort of hard right social media fuels Vox, the Spanish neo-fascist party that won 13% of the vote in the April general election. Like its siblings in France and Germany its racism is thinly-disguised Islamophobia, and it tries to present a 'respectable' image. One aspect of far-right social media often overlooked, but highly relevant with Vox, is the immense amount of money that funds it – generally from millionaire or billionaire backers.

All the main hard right parties in Europe have a full-time staff devoted to social media. Vox is on all the main social media platforms, and is way ahead of any other Spanish party in the numbers who interact with it. It has its own standard website, but pays particular attention to Instagram, the fastest growing social media platform, and which enables Vox to be heard by millions of young people. During Andalusia's regional elections in December 2018, Vox concentrated on pay-for advertising on Facebook. It costs €5000 for a one-minute Facebook ad that reaches 100,000 people.

According to the Spanish daily El Pais:

"During the Andalusian elections, [Vox] launched a campaign called #EspañaViva, reaching out to all age groups with clips like this one: "I'm Sylvia, I'm a housewife and I'm 40 years old. If it weren't for my in-laws, we would not have managed. But there are many Andalusians like me. The only solution for Spain is Vox."

The impact on face book is shown by one startling statistic: Vox Madrid has 300,000 Facebook followers.

The party also uses WhatsApp. [El Pais says](#):

"The strategy involves advertising a cellphone number that followers can add to their contacts. They then receive Vox's messages direct to their phone. "You will be kept up to date with our activities. Share it with your contacts".

Within a single day of launch in December the Andalucía WhatsApp campaign had 2,000 followers. The party also uses Youtube and Twitter.

Who pays for this gigantic effort? Of course the party uses volunteers as well as full timers, but the Facebook effort alone costs a huge amount. According to [Foreign Policy magazine](#):

“...almost one million euros donated to Vox between its founding in December 2013 and the European Parliament elections in May 2014 came via supporters of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an exiled Iranian group. The NCRI was set up in the 1980s by Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) and a number of other Iranian dissidents and opposition groups.”

The Mojahedin-e-Khalq participated in the 1978 movement that overthrew the Shah as an ‘Islamic-Marxist’ urban guerrilla group, but after Khomeini’s repression sold its soul to reactionary causes, being hosted and financed by Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Vox thrives on Islamophobia, and often relays stories from the Islamophobic site Casa Aislado on its social media; it is thus less than happy to acknowledge its Iranian financial backers. They are scattered far and wide. [El Pais points out](#):

“From the day it was founded in December 2013—the same day that it registered as a political party with the Spanish Ministry of Interior—Vox started to receive Iranian funds,” said Joaquín Gil, one of the *El País* journalists who first reported on NCRI-linked funding of Vox. The donations came from dozens of individual sources, from several countries including the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and Italy in amounts ranging from 60 to 35,000 euros, totalling almost 972,000 euros, in the period from December 2013 to April 2014, shortly before the European parliamentary elections.”

The slick websites of far-right movement like Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National and the Alliance for Germany also require a full-time staff and lots of financial input. And the billionaire backing for US sites like Breitbart and Gateway Pundit is well known.

Many people have pointed to the ‘echo chamber’ effect of social media interacting with right-wing mass media, for example the way that Fox News in the United States interacts with Gateway Pundit and Donald Trump’s Twitter feed.

But billionaire financing and the echo chamber effect has also been recently revealed in Britain. George Monbiot has shown that the *Spiked* website, run by former members of the *Living Marxism* tendency, but now a hard-right media intervention, has been financed by the ultra-reactionary American Koch brothers – who between them are worth an estimated \$120 billion. The Koch brothers were central in the financing of the American Tea Party, a racist, reactionary mass movement that was a precursor of Donald Trump’s election campaign. As [Aditya Chakraborty points out](#), *Spiked* editor Brendan O’Neill is a regular on the 24-hour rolling-news channels and has frequently contributed to the *Spectator* and *Daily Telegraph*.

Right-wing social media played a crucial role in the Brexit referendum. Data Analytica was able to break down Facebook information to identify likely non-voters, who could then be precisely targeted with ‘Vote Leave’ messages and persuaded to turn out. Aaron Banks poured millions into the Leave.EU campaign which carried out this operation.

A decade ago the Left was buoyed by the idea that it could use social media to outflank the right-wing dominance of the established mass media. Subsequently huge amounts of money have generated the right-wing’s effort to outdistance the Left in cyberspace.

But the Left also faces disturbing trends from governments and social media providers that could limit or restrict its input. This takes two forms. First the main search engine Google has changed its algorithm so that left-wing or radical websites are deprioritised in searches. Well-known radical websites like Democracy Now and Alternet have seen a sharp drop in hits as a result.

As a result of the use of its pages by far right, racist and pro-Islamic State groups, Facebook has

taken action to eject some of them, most notably the page of Tommy Robinson. Instagram, owned by Facebook, has also ejected him. But there is danger here, that this is being extended into a campaign to censor 'extremist' content and 'fake news', which will target left wing and radical content as well. Social media platforms are certainly under pressure from the US, Israeli and other government to exclude pro-Palestinian material. Recently the page of the site Venezuelanalysis was temporarily shut down

In addition, Facebook has changed its algorithm to deprioritise news feeds, so that normally posts featuring mass media or even small-scale left media will only be sent to 35 selected 'friends'. Facebook is now employing up to 10,000 people to detect offensive content and fact-check. Facts of course are highly contested in today's morbid political climate.

In Australia a bill is going through parliament providing for huge fines and imprisonment of social media providers themselves if they allow 'abhorrent' or violent material on their sites. This could be used for example to prevent the posting of videos showing the violence of French police in the 'yellow vest' protests.

However there are plenty of examples of direct censorship by repressive regimes. In September 2017 police raided the offices of the internet registry company that hosts websites with the suffix 'cat', used by sites promoting Catalan independence. The company's servers were seized, all the sites were closed down and the directors charged with sedition.

Since the coup that brought the military to power in Egypt in 2012, the internet has been subject to repeated censorship, with numerous sites closed down and access to international sites blocked. Any site with more than 500 visitors is now regarded as a news channel and subject to massive fines or imprisonment for promoting anti-regime material. Not far behind Egypt is Turkey, which has repeatedly censored local and international websites. China of course has a gigantic surveillance regime preventing critical material being posted, with dire consequences for Chinese citizens who break the rules. Think of a repressive regime and it will be censoring the internet.

The shocking but predictable consequence of world-wide internet surveillance has been self censorship. When you know that state surveillance is likely (your state, but maybe others as well) you may well refrain from talking about certain topics, or modify what you say. According to a [survey by Strathclyde University](#):

"After surveying 118 writers, including novelists, poets, essayists, journalists, translators, editors and publishers, and interviewing a number of participants we uncovered a disturbing trend of writers avoiding certain topics in their work or research, modifying their work or refusing to use certain online tools. 22% of responders have avoided writing or speaking on a particular topic due to the perception of surveillance and 28% have curtailed or avoided activities on social media. Further to this, 82% said that if they knew that the UK government had collected data about their Internet activity they would feel as though their personal privacy had been violated, something made more likely by the passage of the investigatory Powers Act."

During the Occupy! movement, the Arab Spring and dozens of other mass social movements up to Extinction Rebellion, radical social media has been a vital organising and co-ordinating tool. Left and radical sites must be supported and internet freedom championed.

Read [Open Democracy's chilling account](#) of how numerous governments demand wide-ranging content removal from websites and streaming services.

Phil Hearse is the author of the pamphlet *Full Spectrum Mendacity* on the far right and social media.

Phil Hearse

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