

# Researching Far-Right Communities Online: Finding, Qualifying and Vetting Servers

Yi Ting Chua

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## Executive summary

CCC COVID Briefing Papers are an ongoing series of short-form, open access reports aimed at academics, policymakers, and practitioners, which aim to provide an accessible summary of our ongoing research into the effects which the coronavirus pandemic (and government responses) are having on cybercrime.

In this report, we discuss how we identify far-right and extremist platforms and channels for data collection. The main purpose of our data collection is to assess the effects of COVID-19 on online extremist movement communities. This paper gives an overview of the data collection process, some of the challenges we have had to overcome, and the practical issues we have to address.

## Identification process

To identify websites, forums, and chat channels on Discord and Telegram, we rely on two approaches. First, we employ ‘snowball sampling’ techniques. Channels and platforms can be identified via known existing websites (e.g. Stormfront or the Proud Boys). These websites contain discussions or direct links to other websites and/or platforms. The content of the destination is then manually verified. If it has far-right or extremist content, data will be collected from the platform and/or website and further links followed from there. Second, we use specialist search engines: for the identification of Discord servers, we use `disboard.org`, `discordservers.com`, and `discord.me/discord-servers`; for Telegram, we use `telegramchannels.me` and `lyzem.com`. Keywords related to extremist and far-right ideologies are used to identify invitation links and channels. Some of these keywords include “1488”, “Nazi”, “alt-right”, “QANON” and “White Lives Matter”.

With both approaches, we encounter issues: chiefly, where sites have become inactive or inaccessible, or Discord invitation links have expired. In the former instance, it is possible that the party managing the website is no longer involved, or the website has been taken down, such as the case of 8chan after the mass shooting in El Paso [1]. In the latter instance, it is harder to determine the status of the Discord server. There are two possible scenarios: only the invitation link has expired or the server itself is also inactive.

In most cases, invitation links to Discord servers with relevant tags expire rather quickly, sometimes within days of creation. When servers are banned or removed, there are several options for server owners. In the first instance, the server owner can create a new server as an updated version of the old one (e.g. XX Ver. 2 or ABC 4.0). Alternatively, some server owners create several servers at once to increase the overall survival rate. Finally, the server owner can create a brand new server under a different name, but make reference to the previous server in the description of the new server. Server owners can also combine these options together, as illustrated in the following examples:

*We are a community that has faced hard times over the last few weeks, the original NS Discord Server was removed and we lost just under 220 members. Join us and fight back today! [Description from NS 4.0]*

*I should also mention our original server was the Trump Republic (deceased), and this is the official sequel owned by the original creator*

Another challenge lies in determining the relevance of content. This is more of an issue with the identification of Telegram and Discord channels due to lack of detailed channel/server description:

*Nazi, Hitler, and other funny offensive emojis!*

*Heil Hitler! Join today for a free value entertainment!*

*Well that's basically it, we're a nazi server (Not an actual nazi-supporting server, just a joke)*

More specifically, an increasing number of channels incorporate humour, or self-identify as “shitposting” or meme-posting servers in part of the channel description. This may be a self-conscious attempt to reduce the chance of the channel being banned by Discord’s proactive teams, however, our researchers need to join such channels and manually review the content to distinguish between channels that are engaging in serious discussion from those satirising a movement.

## Recruitment and vetting process

When trying to join channels, we often encounter a vetting process. This is becoming common for Discord servers where the a channel’s true purpose is to recruit or establish the credibility of new members for the main server/channel. This can be evident in the use of the word “recruitment” as part of the server name, or as part of the server description:

*This is a Recruitment server for a All White Pure Christian server.*

*A vetting server for a right leaning political server.*

With these channels, a new member tends to have limited access to server content (e.g. #announcement or #rules channels within a server). To gain access to server content or to the main server/channel, the new member has to follow instructions. The most common procedure requires a new member to answer a series of questions, ranging from stating one’s age to expressing one’s political inclination. In rare instances, some servers ask new members to take a picture where a designated sign or quote needs to be in the photo.

## Conclusions

This paper provides an overview of the data collection process from extremist online communities. For our current project, our ethics approval limits data collection to publicly available materials, and we have zero interaction with channel members. In addition, there are procedures for reporting any instances where illegal or criminal activities are found. However, refusal to engage with a vetting process can result in the end of data collection – but there are significant practical and ethical questions about participation and deception. Future data collection from online deviant and extremist communities may require us to engage with vetting processes and for this, pre-established and pre-approved guidelines for that engagement will be essential.

- [1] Josh Taylor and Julia Carrie Wong. *Cloudflare cuts off far-right message board 8chan after El Paso shooting*. Accessed: 30th October 2020. 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/05/cloudflare-8chan-matthew-prince-terminate-service-cuts-off-far-right-message-board-el-paso-shooting>.

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*At the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre we make our research data available to other academics, sometimes before we have looked at it ourselves! Researchers can be provided access to our ‘CrimeBB’ dataset of (26 and counting) underground cybercrime forums, our extensive collections of chat channel data, and our new collections of forums relating to online right-wing extremism and radicalisation. We can also share email spam and sensor data related to DDoS and IoT malware. All these collections are regularly updated and can be rapidly provided under licence – for full details see: <https://cambridgecybercrime.uk>*

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