

Major social media companies should seek to remove extremist groups from their platforms despite the risk of groups migrating to more permissive spaces.

This is the main recommendation from the latest paper by Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology after studying the case of Britain First, which collapsed from over 1.8 million followers on Facebook to around 1,100 on an alternative platform. See more on the next page.

When the group was removed from the platform in March 2018, it was 'the second most-liked Facebook page within the politics and society category in the UK, after the Royal Family'.

Britain First was then banned from Facebook for breach of terms of service and after the conviction of its leaders Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen on counts of hate crime. Having previously been banned from Twitter, in December 2017, Britain First began use of the smaller platform Gab.

Now Britain First's Gab account has just 11,181 followers, with both leaders maintaining around 15,000 each. This represents 'an enormous loss of followers and reach' for the group.

Facebook's Community Standards state 'that it does not allow organisations or individuals that engage in "terrorist activity" or "organised hate", and that any content that expresses support or praise for either will result in removal.' In addition to banning Britain First, Facebook also removed several other groups and individuals in April 2019 for violating this policy.

Gab, a smaller platform of 850,000 users with an anti-censorship philosophy, has become 'associated with the radical right, including Stephen Yaxley-Lennon ('Tommy Robinson'), Milo Yiannopoulos and Paul Joseph Watson.' The paper states that the UK and US governments should work towards developing better relationships with newer, smaller and fringe platforms in order for content to be regulated on these sites.

This, the paper suggests, that as well as a collapse in online engagement, the ban from major social media platforms has left Britain First without a 'gateway to a larger pool of potential recruits' or 'the ability to signpost users to sites such as Gab'.

However, alongside the reduction of influence and audience the researchers do note that some of the themes in Britain First's imagery has become more extreme over the course of the migration to Gab and recommend that future research investigates how this social-media strategy progresses.

Recommendations

- * Mainstream social-media companies should continue to seek to remove extremist groups that breach their terms of service.
- * That banning groups from major platforms is effective, reduces the ability of groups to signpost followers more extreme content and reduces their pools of potential recruits.
- * The UK and US governments should work towards developing better relationships with newer, smaller and fringe platforms in order for content to be regulated on these sites.
- * Mainstream social-media companies should continue and intensify the sharing of best practices of the removal and monitoring of extreme content, as well as resources, with smaller and newer platforms.
- * Policymakers should strengthen the response to extremist content through further collaboration (beyond the major social-media platforms) to ensure the consistent removal of content.

Entitled 'Following the Whack-A-Mole: Britain First's Visual Strategy from Facebook to Gab', the paper's authors are Lella Nouri, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Amy-Louise Watkin of Swansea University. The Paper is available at: <https://rusi.org/grntt4>

The Paper is the latest published by the Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology, which aims to understand terrorist exploitation of technology and the digital space. Led by the Royal United Services Institute, the Network is comprised of leading thinktanks and academic institutions from around the world. The Network is supported by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an industry-led initiative comprising Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter.

Further information at <https://rusi.org/projects/global-research-network-terrorism-and-technology>

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