



I want to thank the Justice Committee for the invitation to present here today. My name is Niamh McDonald. I am the Director of the Hope and Courage Collective, and with me is Mark Malone, Research and Communications Lead.

The Hope & Courage Collective has extensive experience combating hate and supporting communities to be strong in the face of far right mobilisation. Today I want to focus on 3 things:

1. The dynamics of the far right
2. The role of social media companies in spreading lies, hate, and disinformation
3. How we can tackle the business model of social media companies.

We want to leave you in no doubt that the severity of what we are seeing leaves us fearful for people's lives, especially people from marginalised communities such as migrants, people seeking asylum, LGBTQIA+, and the Roma community, to name a few. The intensity of hate, lies and misinformation on social media has been on the increase for a number of years. H&CC has been consistently warning of the real world implications for violence which is now manifesting across society.

Most recently in Kildare, we saw how a lie became the truth when outside agitators whipped up fear using disinformation shared on social media platforms and called for a mobilisation outside an accommodation centre where there had never been any protests before. In the mobilisation, calls for violence were made against those residing in the building. Residents of the centre could not access the accommodation. Local people residing in the area from different cultural backgrounds were threatened while just trying to get home. People on the ground said it was terrifying for people in the centre, as well as for those supporting them and those living in the vicinity. The local Garda had no plan on how to keep people safe, despite the fact that it was easy to identify the leading extremists in the crowd who had initially shared the disinformation and fear.

Dynamics of the Far Right

There are a number of factors aiding the growth of the far right. Extremists are weaponizing the very real issues communities are facing by sowing hate and division. Communities need to be engaged and supported to ensure no matter who you are, where you come from or how you identify, you have what you need to flourish. Ireland is a wealthy country and the resources are there to ensure everyone can have what they need.

The narrative coming from the government, especially since January 2024, is focused on 'getting tough' and 'cracking down' on immigration, followed by a row back on policies supporting people seeking asylum. It has been reported that there are empty beds in the asylum system, while people seeking refuge are sleeping on the streets in freezing conditions with no access to sanitation or food.

This 'get tough' narrative is dominating media headlines and distracting everyone from the real issues that people are facing on the ground, while also appeasing and emboldening the far right.

Over the past five years, there has been an exponential growth of lies, hate, and disinformation. This is part of a well documented 'playbook', with the purpose of creating the illusion that there is more support for the far right than actually exists. Extremists do this by organising events and by creating hateful content to share with their followers. For example, on YouTube, videos from extreme right content producers in Ireland have received over 13.5 million views. Extremists then set out to stir up debate online and in the media by 'baiting' politicians, community leaders and journalists into reacting to them.

This movement is primarily driven by white supremacists and fascists who encourage anger, hate and disgust in followers by actively normalising tactics of public humiliation, intimidation and violence. Since November 2023, the increase of the intensity of online violent rhetoric has led to physical confrontation and politically motivated violence, as evidenced by recent arson attacks. Since the riot, every community we have worked with has expressed a sense that tensions and fear are rising locally.

Social media companies

The spread of hate is intensified and normalised through social media platforms. These are giant corporations who offer a product to make profit. Division and hate sells. For almost 15 years, many of these organisations have grown to monopoly sizes with international reach and have deliberately sought to rebuff regulation. Communities and individuals are harmed day in and day out by this business model, with no recourse or accountability on the companies that profit from this harm. Harm is coded into how these platforms function, yet at government level, there seems to be an unwillingness to address the business model of hate.

We can say with certainty that if social media companies had not provided extremism with such a massive platform, we would not be experiencing such levels of disinformation and violence. This business model is a direct attack on our democracy. Some of the richest people in the world lead these organisations that wield power and influence over billions of people across the globe.

The Hope and Courage Collective is a trusted flagger with all social media platforms. To date, all have failed to live up to commitments given in December 2022 to engage with local experts, with one notable exception (TikTok). In 2023, the trust, safety and integrity teams and resources across Meta, Twitter/X and Google were slashed, precisely at a time when coordinated action was needed to combat hate and violent content. Recently, representatives of X in Ireland told another Dáil committee that it has only 250 content moderators for the whole of the EU. There has been no meaningful accountability levelled at social media platforms, while our communities unjustly carry the burdens of social division and hate.

Many people in our communities are running a dangerous gauntlet of hate and extremism that is amplified by social media, often outside their own front door, on a daily basis. However, those heading the platforms are repeatedly granted the privilege of meeting Dáil committees behind closed doors, away from the public view of those suffering the harms of their recommender systems.

This Committee has the responsibility and power to create a positive global impact by reigning in the harms of social media platforms. The platforms have played a significant roles facilitating genocide, turning a blind eye to potential child abuse, and have directly supported white supremacists to spread hate in towns and villages, not only across Ireland, but across the globe.

The solution

We need to prevent the amplification of hateful, dangerous and violent content. To date, the sole focus has been the removal of hateful content after it's already been amplified. This process doesn't work because by the time dangerous content is taken down, the damage has already been done. We have also learned that we cannot always trust the social media companies to take hateful content down, despite clear violations of community standards.

Turning off the recommender system by default reduces the amplification of content, thus reducing harm. This will not prevent people posting on social media, but it will reduce the amplification of hateful and dangerous posts. The right to freedom of speech is not the same as the right to amplification by global social media platforms. It is completely possible to protect freedom of speech while also reducing amplification, and that can be achieved by turning off social platform recommender systems by default.

We ask that the committee urgently writes to Minister Catherine Martin asking her to set out her approach to holding these companies to account.