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# **DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN IRELAND**

EU DISINFO LAB



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EMBLEMATIC CASES	4
NARRATIVES	5
COMMUNITY	6
POLICY	7

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## INTRODUCTION

- The COVID-19 pandemic marked a major turning point for disinformation in Ireland as various conspiracy theorists, anti-establishment actors, and, in particular, right-wing and far-right extremists mobilised online and offline. However, the population as a whole demonstrated a considerable degree of resilience to disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines with high-levels of vaccine uptake.
- Right-wing and far-right extremists utilise disinformation as a tactic in their attempts to capitalise on national crises relating to housing, rent, homelessness, and the lack of accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees. They also use disinformation to oppose the advance of diversity and inclusion.
- Disinformation trends are heavily influenced by trends in the UK and US, which reflects Ireland's status as an English-speaking country with strong ties to the wider Anglo-sphere.
- In response to these challenges, many civil society actors have organised to counter extremists, undermine disinformation campaigns, and promote media literacy. In addition, the government launched a multi-stakeholder working group, which will develop a National Counter Disinformation Strategy by the end of 2023.

## EMBLEMATIC CASES

These are three emblematic cases of disinformation in Ireland:

### ACCOMMODATION FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

- Since 2018, far-right extremists have organised protests against existing and planned accommodation for refugees and asylum-seekers. These protests returned in late 2022 as the numbers requiring accommodation increased during the Russian war on Ukraine and in tandem with major crises in housing, rent, and homelessness.
- Disinformation has played a major role in the protests with [false claims about the imminent arrival of migrants](#) into communities and [false claims about sexual assaults](#) regularly circulating online and in communities.
- Similar protests have been organised in the UK. One of the UK's most prominent far-right activists, Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley Lennon), travelled to Ireland to make a documentary about the protests, which is indicative of ["the increasing co-operation between the British and Irish far-right movements"](#).

### GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

- Against a backdrop of disinformation and conspiracy theories, [there has been a rise in hate-crimes and hostility against the LGBTQ+ community](#).
- Homophobic disinformation linking LGBTQ+ individuals, especially drag queens and trans individuals, to child grooming are a recurring theme for Irish disinformation actors and form part of a wider "anti-woke" agenda that opposes the secularisation of schools and the expansion of sex education in schools.
- A "March for Innocence" rally in Dublin in 2020 was inspired, in part, by the US-based QAnon conspiracy theory, which claims an international cabal of elite paedophiles is trafficking children. The conspiracy theory peaked in 2020 with worldwide #SaveTheChildren protests. As a gay man, the Minister for Children was and is the subject of a [homophobic campaign of disinformation](#) by far-right extremists, influencers, and conservative media.

### HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- Disinformation about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines remain prevalent. Much of this content is not Irish specific as it is shared from an international network of anti-vaccine actors and often concerns sudden deaths among celebrities and young people.
- Some Irish disinformation actors have established a notable following by promoting wellness and "alternative health" products.

# NARRATIVES

These are the dominant narratives underpinning disinformation in Ireland.

## NATIVISM

- Nativist narratives have circulated for many years in Ireland, rising to prominence in tandem with wider events that are ripe for exploitation by extremists. The homelessness crisis; the crisis in accommodation for asylum-seekers and refugees; the advance of diversity and inclusion; and the Covid-19 public health measures have all provided nativists with an opportunity to promote their ideology to a wider audience.
- Some of the key disinformation claims in current protests against accommodation for refugees and asylum-seekers include: references to “unvetted males” and “men of fighting age”, which imply an imminent danger to Irish people, especially women and children, and their communities; references to “economic migrants”, “fake asylum seekers”, and “fakeugees” to imply that refugees and asylum-seekers are lying about the dangers they face; and references to “an invasion” and “plantation” to invoke fears about the decline of Irish identity and white ethnicity.
- Unsurprisingly, nativist narratives rely heavily on national chauvinism in advocating for the prioritisation of Irish people through the rhetoric of “Ireland first” and “Ireland belongs to the Irish”. It is further implied that mainstream politics and mainstream media do not serve national interests.

## ANTI-ELITE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- Conspiracy theories, especially claims about an elite conspiratorial agenda such as “The Great Reset”, are a common factor across disinformation narratives.
- The concept of an elite conspiracy is also frequently invoked through discussions of a “NWO (New World Order)”, “globalists”, “cabals”, and general opposition to “MSM (mainstream media)”.
- While such content can be localised, much of what circulates in Irish spaces emanates from the US.

## CRITIQUES OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA

- Attacks on journalism and “mainstream media” – especially RTÉ as the public broadcaster and TheJournal.ie as the only IFCN-registered fact-checker – are a common feature of disinformation campaigns. While there are, of course, legitimate criticisms of journalism and mainstream media, disinformation actors consistently seek to undermine professional journalism while promoting their own media practices as authentic journalism.
- A small network of alternative right-wing media has emerged in the form of news and opinion websites, YouTube channels, and even a physical newspaper. Although they vary in the extent to which they explicitly propagate disinformation, they promote a common narrative of opposition to mainstream media. More extreme narratives are found on less popular platforms such as Telegram channels.

## COMMUNITY

### THE JOURNAL FACTCHECK

TheJournal is a news media organisation with a mix of breaking news, in-depth reporting, opinion, explainers and exclusives. The [FactCheck unit](#) was established in 2016 and, since 2017, is the only verified Irish signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles. It is a partner in the EDMO Ireland Hub.

### MEDIA LITERACY IRELAND

[Media Literacy Ireland \(MLI\)](#) is an informal alliance of individuals and organisations who work together on a mainly voluntary basis to promote media literacy in Ireland. Facilitated by Coimisiún na Meán, MLI has over 250 members drawn from a broad range of sectors including media, education, NGOs, and libraries. It coordinates knowledge-exchange and the Be Media Smart campaign.

### EDMO IRELAND HUB

[EDMO Ireland](#) is one of fourteen hubs established as part of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). The consortium includes the DCU Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society (FuJo), TheJournal FactCheck, NewsWhip, and the University of Sheffield. It is part-financed by the European Union to monitor and analyse disinformation; conduct fact-checks and investigations; develop media literacy resources; assess and inform policy; advance tools to detect and analyse disinformation; conduct research; and increase capacity among the community of Irish stakeholders.

### INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

The London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising tide of polarisation, extremism and disinformation worldwide. ISD has produced numerous reports on disinformation in Ireland.

### ANTI-FASCIST ACTIVISTS

A range of actors are committed to monitoring and countering far-right activity in Ireland. They frequently debunk far-right disinformation and expose manipulation tactics.

## POLICY

In addition to EU-wide policy developments, such as the Digital Services Act, the following Irish developments are notable:

### **NATIONAL COUNTER-DISINFORMATION STRATEGY 2023**

In February 2023, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media established a working group to develop a National Counter-Disinformation Strategy. The work group is composed of representatives from industry, academia, civil society, and government departments. It is expected to complete its work by December 2023.

### **ONLINE SAFETY AND MEDIA REGULATION ACT 2022**

In December 2022, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act established a new regulatory body for media with a specific remit to develop and monitor online safety codes for harmful content. Although disinformation was not identified as a specific category of harmful content in the text of the act, the Online Safety Commissioner has the power to designate new categories should the need arise.

### **ELECTORAL REFORM ACT 2022**

The 2022 Electoral Reform Act led to the establishment of an Electoral Commission (An Coimisiún Toghcháin) in February 2023. It includes provisions to tackle online disinformation during elections and referenda including the power to issue take-down and correction notices. There are additional provisions on the regulation of online advertising.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FUTURE OF MEDIA COMMISSION REPORT 2023**

Established by Government in September 2020, the Future of Media Commission was tasked with developing recommendations on sustainable public funding and other supports to ensure media in Ireland remains viable, independent and capable of delivering public service aims. It included a specific recommendation to develop a National Counter-Disinformation Strategy as well as wide-ranging actions to strengthen the media sector including reform of Ireland's defamation law, which currently encourages SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) cases against news media.

### **EU CODE OF PRACTICE ON DISINFORMATION 2018-2021**

Ireland is one of the few EU countries to have systematically analysed the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation. The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (now Coimisiún na Meán) commissioned the Institute of Future Media, Democracy and Society at Dublin City University to evaluate the code for three reports.

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