

COLLECTIVE CAPABILITIES FOR RESISTING FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM ONLINE AND IN THE REAL WORLD

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This article examines the capacity of groups in civil society to observe and mitigate far-right extremism. A critical feature of far-right activity today is the adoption of digital technologies such as social media platforms, email, and distributed chat servers. But transitions in underlying sociomaterial systems also contribute to capabilities for civil society to fight back. Using a framework that integrates sociomaterial perspectives of digital transformation with the Capability Approach, the article identifies a set of capabilities for collective action valued at the Far-Right Observatory in Ireland. The FRO is intellectually and empirically interesting because it aims to combine a commitment to building capabilities amongst communities most impacted by extremism; the cultivation of in-house expertise; and collective capabilities developed by new forms of digital advocacy organisations. In conclusion, the article speculates on the possibilities for digital advocacy organisations more broadly to cultivate capabilities that challenge narrow technologically-directed transition and instead contribute to more plural radical transformation.

Keywords: collective action, digital advocacy organisations, far-right extremism, human capabilities, research infrastructure

Complement: [A framework for mapping, building, and evaluating collective capabilities \[pdf\]](#)

1. RESISTING FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITIONS IN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

“Homophobic trolls attack children’s minister” declared *The Times* on July 7th 2020 (Early, 2020). In the previous days, far-right extremists had dug-up tweets Green Party minister Roderic O’Gorman had posted while participating in Dublin’s Pride Festival in 2018. The posts formed the basis for sustained online abuse targeted at Mr. O’Gorman and were now making news headlines.

The attack is notable for how it demonstrates tactics, targets, and motivations common to far-right extremists in Ireland today. Their activities cause harm online and in the real world, to individuals, communities and broader society. Those

with multiple and intersecting identities experience abuse differently, and in many cases are disproportionately impacted, as are those already economically or politically marginalised, for instance migrant groups (Digital Action, 2019).

A feature of far-right activity today is the adoption of digital technologies (Baele et al., 2020; Fielitz & Thurston, 2018). Social media platforms, email, and distributed chat servers are used by extremists for committing hate crimes, racist, homophobic and transphobic abuse of individuals and groups, recruiting new members, spreading propaganda at scale and disrupting mainstream debate (Hope Not Hate, 2020; Mudde, 2019).

These sociomaterial systems – the technologies, user-environments, rules, regulations and cultural contexts in which they are used – are transforming how we live with and relate to each other, our institutions and society (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). And just as far-right extremists have co-evolved with

digital technologies, civil society organisations that oppose them are also changing. New forms of networked action and collaboration are emerging that challenge traditional ways of mobilising for change (Karpf, 2012; Milan & Hintz, 2013).

Indeed, as the O’Gorman attack was taking place, it was being followed by an alliance of civil society organisations working together throughout Ireland. Previous extremist attacks online and on Irish streets (Lally, 2020; Tighe & Siggins, 2019) had convinced them to establish a *Far-Right Observatory*.

The idea behind the FRO is to create a highly-networked organisation that can work with communities targeted by far-right extremists as well as established civil society organisations. In short, to establish at one location the capabilities for collectively challenging far-right extremism. The FRO has been backed by seed-funding from institutional foundations, in-kind support from its founding alliance, and critically for this study, by day-to-day organisational assistance from the Irish campaign organisation Uplift.

Uplift is a *digital advocacy organisation* (Dennis & Hall, 2020), an emerging form of networked civil society institution. Uplift works collectively with their members across a broad spectrum of issues, for instance climate change, housing, mental health and international trade. Acting collectively allows them to challenge powerful incumbent organisations and hold elected representatives to account (Uplift, 2021).

Studies of digital advocacy organisations have analysed their organisational models (Dennis & Hall, 2020), discourse strategies (Gustafsson et al., 2019) and technological practices (Karpf, 2017). Less attention has been paid to how these organisations build capabilities for collective action.

Addressing this gap, the main contribution of the article is a framework with which to answer the following research question: *what capabilities are required to mitigate harms caused by far-right*

activity and how can these be supported by digital advocacy organisations?

Critical to answering these questions is a systemic understanding of transformations of digital technologies and society. Digital technologies have brought about considerable individual and societal benefits for many. But innovation does not guarantee social progress (Stirling et al., 2018) and benefits brought by technology have not been shared by all. Digital technologies have brought about considerable harms to people’s wellbeing, human rights and collective life (Benjamin, 2019; O’Neil, 2016; Whittlestone et al., 2019).

One way of understanding the processes and factors that contribute to complex change in society is through transitions in sociomaterial systems (Hess, 2007). By paying close attention to contention and collective struggles within ongoing transitions, this study seeks to open-up intellectual space for more constructive democratic engagement with sociomaterial change.

In the next section I discuss how transitions in digital technologies are shaping the sociomaterial contexts of far-right activity in Ireland. I review emerging literature of digital advocacy organisations and present a framework of collective action across sociomaterial scales for the purpose of mapping capabilities at the Far-Right Observatory.

In Section 3 I explain how thinking in terms of collective capabilities can help evaluate strategies to respond to far-right activity. For this I provide a framework for analysis using the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999). By building on recent work that integrates sociomaterial perspectives with the Capability Approach, the framework analyses digital technologies not just as passive contexts of collective action, but as active agents in how capabilities are valued and realised by individuals and groups (O’Donovan & Smith, 2020; Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017).

In Section 4 I present the results of empirical research that has mapped collective capabilities as

they are valued at the FRO. I discuss implications for digital advocacy organisations and for theory in Section 5. In conclusion I speculate on how digital advocacy organisations can contribute to plural, radical and democratic transformation of sociomaterial systems.

2. THE CO-EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, THE FAR-RIGHT AND DIGITAL ADVOCACY ORGANISATIONS

2.1 Theories of narrow transition and radical transformation

Transitions are processes of interlinked and co-evolving change in the social, technological, and material conditions of society. Transitions theory is used by scholars to explain change from one incumbent form of sociomaterial system to another. For instance in the provision of digital technologies for economic development, in automated transport systems and in sustainable energy infrastructures (Foster & Heeks, 2013; van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008).

Transitions scholars tend to explain historic change in terms of the scale-up of industrial processes and the diffusion of technologies. Analysts follow how technologies co-evolve with the social conditions in which are used, and trace how they are configured across spatial, institutional and temporal scales (Coenen et al., 2012). Transitions thinking is often used prescriptively by analysts to plot and control how societies progress towards future sociomaterial systems. These analysts tend to focus narrowly on the technical feasibility of realizing global shifts to fixed technological endpoints such as a low-carbon energy futures (Beck et al., 2021) rather than the direction in which they proceed.

But transitions do not proceed inevitably towards given endpoints. Many different future sociomaterial systems are possible (Escobar, 2018) and the pathways to reach these future destinations vary (Hess, 2007; Leach et al., 2010). This is because transitions are full of contested politics such as

struggles over infrastructures and political agendas (Baker et al., 2014), competing visions and imaginaries (Beck et al., 2021), and often outright conflict (Torrens et al., 2019; Yuana et al., 2020).

Taking the contested politics and values in transitions seriously means understanding efforts by civil society to resist, shape or steer sociomaterial change more as processes of culturing plural radical transformation across a range of sociomaterial scales (Arora et al., 2020; Stirling, 2014). In comparison to narrow transitions, these processes tend to involve “more plural, emergent, and unruly political re-alignments, involving social and technological innovations driven by diversely incommensurable knowledges, challenging incumbent structures and pursuing contending (even unknown) ends” (Stirling, 2014, p. 13).

The aim of this article can be understood as trying to find out what kind of capabilities are required for digital advocacy organisations to resist far-right activities structured across information and communications infrastructures and institutions. Strategies to oppose far-right activities must confront these sociomaterial systems. And so, the conditions and conflicts involving far-right extremists, technology firms, digital advocacy organisations and governments form the background landscape of this study and are discussed next.

2.2 How far-right activities in Ireland shape and are shaped by their sociomaterial settings

Far-right on the ground in Ireland

In practice, care is required in defining exactly what constitutes far-right activity and where to set the bar for recognising harm. Far-right activities include extremist content, terrorism, harassment, hate crimes, incitement or violence, trolling, intimidation, racist, homophobic and transphobic abuse, and the deliberate spreading of propaganda, disinformation and other forms of violent content (Hope Not Hate,

2020; Mudde, 2019). Content that is not in itself extremist is often used to open-up harmful dialogue. For instance, in isolation commentary drawing links between crises in housing or health care and migration may seem innocuous. Understanding these activities in the context of underlying ideologies and the groups they are intended to harm is critical.

In Ireland these conditions were, until recently, insufficient to cultivate and sustain indigenous far-right activity. A weak welfare state, clientelist electoral politics and the 'ongoing' nature of Irish nationalism are some explanations for the far-right's historic incapacity (Kitschelt, 2007; O'Malley, 2008).

In 2007 the financial crash destabilised the state and ideas about national sovereignty (Quinlan, 2019). It also weakened trust in government and public institutions. And although that trust has slowly recovered, the party-political settlement has been re-configured and confidence in public institutions and services such as housing and health have been significantly reduced (Murphy & Hearne, 2019; Thomas et al., 2018). Also, demographic and economic shifts and changes in the dynamics of migration have underpinned populist rhetoric in recent elections (Corbet & Larkin, 2019).

Exactly how covid-19 has impacted far-right activity in Ireland is less certain and robust research is emerging only slowly. Nevertheless, it is likely that existing grievances such those against mainstream media and scientific institutions have been reinforced (Opratko et al., 2021). These grievances have been articulated by protests against lock down and face masks. But other common concerns have receded. For instance, complaints that social welfare and state spending is too generous may be weekend by the experience of many of using furlough schemes and public health services. Indeed, given the heterogeneity of the far-right, we should not expect uniform reaction to the crisis and locally situated research and responses from civil society are important (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020).

Economic shocks, unemployment, shifting institutional trust and the pandemic crisis have all contributed to the context in which far-right activity is emerging in Ireland. But these kinds of demand-side conditions are only part of the story. Explanations of far-right activity must also account for supply-side conditions. These are the means by which far-right activists can produce, perform, recruit for and organise activities (Mudde, 2019).

Content, platforms, infrastructures and firms

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and distributed Discord servers are used by extremists for harassing individuals and groups, recruiting new members, spreading propaganda at scale and disrupting mainstream debate (Hope Not Hate, 2020). Where protest mobilisations in response to covid-19 have happened, they have relied on digital infrastructures for spreading information and organising. These activities are designed to harm specific groups of people such as migrants, undocumented workers, and other out groups.

These activities are possible because far-right extremists have themselves developed capabilities to take advantage of platform features. YouTube for instance is specifically designed to maximise and manipulate attention (Lewis, 2018). The issue for Digital Action, an alliance of advocacy groups, is this (2019, p. 3):

over time, the progressive subdivision of the public into ever more precisely-defined target audiences traps people in filter bubbles, to whom the platforms' algorithms target then feed a steady diet of similar, or progressively more polarising or extreme content that reaffirms and entrenches pre-existing beliefs. To hold the attention of these groups as consumers of content, firms' algorithms help generate a climate of outrage and sensationalism, normalising what were once extreme views.

These problems are made worse by a lack of

transparency for content promotion and paid-advertising on platforms. And even when acknowledging problems such as preventing the paid-promotion of racist content firms like Facebook have both a disinclination and inability to take action (Gallagher, 2020).

Disinformation “represents an evolving challenge to contemporary democratic processes and societal debate” (Kirk et al., 2020, p. 6). The issue here for Digital Action is the following (2019, p. 3):

disinformation threatens to distort electoral outcomes, remove transparency from political debate and undermine the public’s faith in rational and accountable political decision making. It is used to disseminate hate speech and to suppress voter turnout among already-marginalised groups.

The issue for civil society however is not primarily one of contested truth claims. Rather it is about intent, coordination and activity at scale. The harms of inauthentic and coordinated amplification of disinformation at scale pose significant threats to democratic processes (Government of Ireland, 2018). For instance, in Poland researchers found an anti-Semitic bot-net promoting anti-Ukrainian narratives during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019). The same researchers estimated that 9.6 million Spanish voters saw disinformation on WhatsApp during the same elections.

Care is needed if strategies to mitigate the effects of coordinated disinformation pay attention only to claims of truth and not what is at stake for the intended targets, as discussed in Section 4.2.

Wider society, the public sphere and democratic institutions

Another result of far-right activities is the way the spread of far-right ideas online can normalise ideas in the public sphere. For instance, the amplification of anti-migrant rhetoric on online media platforms

like YouTube and Facebook (Lewis, 2018) can be amplified by politicians subsequently reproducing underlying nativistic values – the desire for Ireland to be inhabited exclusively by ‘natives’ and considering ‘non-natives’ as threats – and legitimising them in mainstream media.

Means of regulating content, content creators and content platforms have been proposed that typically focus on data-transparency, self-regulation, fact-checking, improved human or automated content moderation and advertising transparency (Bredford et al., 2019; Douek, 2019). Unsurprisingly, self-regulation schemes like Facebook’s Oversight Board are favoured by platform firms.

But studies have shown that self-regulation and fact-checking are not sufficient to mitigate harms (Benkler et al., 2020; Teeling & Kirk, 2020). Global content guidelines are often inattentive to local culture and context, and self-regulation risks privatising judicial processes (Hope Not Hate, 2020). Also, content-regulation tends to ignore issues of justice for the victims of extremist content (Salehi, 2020), framing harms passively in terms of content to be reproduced or not. Individuals and groups effectively silenced as they have insufficient methods to report harms. And rarely are civil society groups empowered in these processes.

Complicating the relationship between government, civil society and technology firms in Ireland is the country’s role as a major European hub for US technology firms. Given their outsized role in the economy, the kind of radical regulation that might address some of these issues of power is unlikely to materialise without significant advocacy from civil society. At the heart of the issue is this: the space and scope for discussion of about what kind of online and offline communities we want is limited to what governments and firms permit as possible.

This presents a problem less in the immediate resistance to far-right extremism, but rather in the ability of civil society to respond, to resist and to ultimately steer transitions in digital technologies in

socially useful directions. So how do digital advocacy organisations like Uplift act? Two things are required. First, a way of re-imagining transitions that incorporates the interests and values of a diverse set of interests. Second, a means of building collective capabilities capable of sustaining collective action in pursuit of plural radical transformation.

2.3 Digital advocacy organisations

In their words, Uplift are a digital-first, people-powered campaigning community of more than 330,000 people who take coordinated action together for a more progressive, equal, socially just and democratic Ireland (Uplift, 2021). By comparison with longer-established single issue campaign organisations, such as environmental NGOs, or migrant rights organisations, Uplift works across a broad variety of issues, bringing in issue expertise through close networks with allied organisations nationally and globally.

Uplift's operating model builds on recent developments in digital organising (Dennis & Hall, 2020). Their approach to organisational structure and tactical repertoire have been co-developed with similar organisations such as MoveOn in the US, Campact in Germany, 38 Degrees in the UK and GetUp! in Australia. These are permanent institutions with professional staff which can rapidly mobilise people online and offline (Hall, 2019b). Knowledge and technology exchange between these organisations is facilitated by an international umbrella organisation, the Online Progressive Engagement Network (OPEN) (Hall & Ireland, 2016). OPEN supports learning and promotes technological and organisational innovation between organisations, and allows for some pooling of common resources such as technology stacks and development overheads.

These organisations share a 'member-driven' model of how individual members relate to and act with each other and the core staff. The model is implemented by a set of organisational practices

and digital listening methods that track member motivations, values and propensity to act on a range of issues using online polling commenting and focus groups (Karpf, 2017). By expressing preferences, members contribute to prioritising campaigns and setting the strategic directions of organisations. (Dennis, 2018). In reality, this means that decision-making power about what issue to campaign on and how is neither centralised with core staff nor completely distributed across the membership (Dennis & Hall, 2020). Nevertheless, staff retain considerable gatekeeping roles by controlling the timing and framing of issues (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Expertise in technological innovation for some of these organisations forms a valued part of their identity, internally and to outsiders. But the instrumental measurement of campaign actions, for instance tracking emails sent, opened and responded to, can over-emphasise ambitions to scale-up, whilst distracting from more reflective work on carefully configuring staff, technology and knowledge to best achieve transformational change.

Several features of digital advocacy organisations are notable in the context of work on far-right extremism. Campaigns tend to be selected based on the salience of issues amongst members and staff who mobilise around tipping-point opportunities which might make success more likely. This is unlike at traditional NGOs where campaign selection is usually driven by in-house issue-experts (Hall, 2019b). This cultivates capabilities to be agile, responding to different issues across a range of domains. This approach can cause tension in coalitions. Amongst single-issue organisations, newer digital advocacy organisations can be seen to arrive late to issues, shout loudly, and depart quickly. But coalitions and informal networks are critical for accessing issue-expertise.

In their communications to members, digital advocacy organisations tend to frame issues in positive language, placing special emphasis on certain discourse arrangements and emotional vocabulary (Gustafsson et al., 2019). This work of

discursively contesting societal norms is important in two senses. First in establishing what norms are appropriate in a progressive society. And second, in reiterating to members what is possible to achieve through collective action, recursively reinforcing in members awareness of their agency.

These strategies have been used for instance in reinforcing changing societal attitudes to refugee groups (Hall, 2019a) and building wider support for them in campaigns. But attention to specifying the urgency of campaign action can mean that bigger picture visions of a better future don't get articulated in detail.

Digital advocacy organisations differ from each other in significant ways, for reasons of place, space and time. For example, despite similarities in organisational structures and repertoires of action, 38 Degrees (UK) and GetUp (Australia) adapt discourse within campaigns to specifically fit national contexts (Vaughan, 2020). They also

change and evolve over time. New and evolving technologies bring new affordances and capabilities that shape organisational practices and participatory norms (Karpf, 2017). The point being that today's digital infrastructures are different to those of 20 years ago, and correspondingly, digital advocacy has been reshaped and reconfigured.

The changing nature of digital advocacy is important to note in studying the possibilities for action against far-right extremists.

Table 1 presents opportunities for collective action by digital advocacy organisations in the Irish context. I use this table to investigate the capabilities required to support this action already available at Uplift. But it is precisely because Uplift on-its-own cannot cultivate all the necessary capabilities to support this action that it has created the Far-Right Observatory. And so the capabilities available at the FRO are also considered in Section 4.

Table 1 Harms of far-right extremism and opportunities for collective action

Scale of strategic action	Harms of far-right extremism	Strategic actions: how digital advocacy organisations can counter extremism
Real world locations	Individual harms such as violence, threats, and intimidation carried-out by individual or organised far-right extremists.	Work with existing community organisations to strengthen resilience to extremist harms and recruitment. Observing far-right activity on the ground, create collective knowledge that is meaningful and useful in community contexts.
Online content and activity on digital platforms	Threats and hate speech targeted at individuals and communities Online media used for recruitment by far-right groups Networks and media used in planning and coordination Dissemination of hate content within and between countries	Build internal practices, processes and systems to manage knowledge within the FRO Observing online far-right activity by independent civil society organisations. Share knowledge and practice with allied organisations locally and globally Articulate from civil society point of view perspectives on how far-right content should be regulated by firms and regulators Collective action and resourcing to advocate for justice for victims of far-right extremism

<p>Technology firms, markets and digital infrastructures</p>	<p>Harms made worse by difficulty in holding private firms to account. Small number of powerful firms have effective control over online infrastructure and have significant influence in policy decisions.</p>	<p>Focus on establishing and maintaining governance and accountability structures between firms and civil society at local levels in specific jurisdictions. Pursue justice and redress at the level of firms and markets, such as class actions. From civil society position, advocate for transnational legal agreements on data and rights such as European directives via international coalition building</p>
<p>Wider society, the public sphere and democratic institutions</p>	<p>Shrinking of the space for democratic discourse. Nature of public debate is polarised. For instance: “with us or against us” framings used during Covid-19 lockdown debates</p>	<p>Foster public conversations and discussion on themes and intersections of three preceding strategic areas to increase public understanding and participation. Build accountability structures from civil society that can hold elected decision makers, and regulators to account. Building and participating in meaningful accountability structures across platforms and media. Increasing participation in governance processes such as consultations about how platforms should be governed.</p>

3. A FRAMEWORK FOR MAPPING COLLECTIVE CAPABILITIES

3.1 The Capabilities Approach

Collective action is made possible only when participants have available to them certain human capabilities (Robeyns, 2016; Sen, 1999). Capabilities are defined as what people can do (doings) and be (beings) (Robeyns, 2005). Collective capabilities are those capabilities required for organisations, groups and individuals to mobilise expertise, and resources to work towards common purposes.

We can empirically identify, evaluate and cultivate capabilities required to support collective action using a set of concepts called the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999). At the centre of the approach are capabilities – the *doings* and *beings* – people have reason to value. Like being a member of an advocacy organisation, and doing campaign work to bring about change.

The mission of the FRO can be understood as a goal to

build of capabilities to take on entrenched and incumbent power via political and community action, that individuals alone would not be able to achieve. For instance, collective capabilities such as empowerment, political freedom and political participation (Stewart, 2013). The purposeful cultivation of capabilities is important in this task because “we do not automatically become political agents; we need to [collectively] engage in public dialogue, which enables us to make judgments and to bring about something new” (Walker, 2018).

Collective capabilities are generated through an individual’s engagement with collective action (Ibrahim, 2006). Collective capabilities in civil society are especially valued because they permit people to move beyond invited spaces for participation – such as the ballot box, or the automated ticketing systems offered by platform firms for complaints – and take more active roles in democratic life (Cornwall, 2002; Ibrahim, 2017). Also, the evaluative focus of the capabilities approach as used here is on processes of collective action rather than the outcomes of end-result. This draws attention to building collective

agency in civil society rather than just achieving thin participation for instance. In other words, we get to zoom in on “the capacity of the group to define common goals and the freedom to act to reach the chosen goals” (Pelenc et al., 2015, p. 229), that is, to build power from below.

3.2 Mapping capabilities from the ground up

This analysis follows Sen and Robeyns in seeing the capabilities valued and available at the FRO as a matter of empirical identification (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). A framework from Pellicer-Sifres and colleagues on how capabilities for social

transformation can be generated by grassroots organisations was used to help locate specific capabilities in the study (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017).

Four dimensions of capability building are considered: agency and agents; valued capabilities; drivers, resources and conversion factors; and processes (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017). The four dimensions used to locate capabilities at the FRO are listed in Table 2 alongside analytic implications for collective action and Uplift. Importantly, the sociomaterial landscape, context and infrastructure of society is itself fair game for analysis. Technology does not lie outside of this framework and may be considered as agent or driver depending on the context (O’Donovan & Smith, 2020; Oosterlaken, 2011).

Table 2 A framework for locating entities relevant for capability building

Concept	Implications for mapping collective capabilities at the FRO
Agency/agents	Members of organisations, staff, experts, and the agency they have individually and collectively to make change in the world. Socio-material agency configured in digital listening technologies – the configuration of people and things that make a difference in Uplift.
Valued capabilities	The capabilities staff, allied organisations and members of Uplift and the FRO value. The capabilities that are valued indicate purposes and objectives of transformation.
Drivers, resources and conversion factors	The resources (finance, knowledge, technology, sometimes other capabilities), rules and policies that convert resources into agency to achieve change.
Processes	Mass participation, mass advocacy emails, other tactical repertoire, deliberative democracy, and democratic decision making that Uplift facilitate and open up.

3.3 Data and analytic procedures

Mapping the elements in Table 2 followed a set of procedures designed to locate capabilities in sociomaterial contexts (Michalec et al., 2021; O’Donovan et al., 2020; O’Donovan & Smith, 2020). In this study I used situational analysis as specified in (Michalec et al., 2021). Briefly, situational analysis maps the social and material phenomena that make a difference in a given situation (Clarke, 2005). The analytic goal in this study was to specify which entities – of varying scale and composition – make a difference to the situation at the FRO from the perspective of the people involved. In this case the

situation consists of the Uplift and FRO organisations and their activities, a distributed arena of staff, networked technologies, board meetings and their participants, and the tacit knowledge of staff and countless related entities.

The data used for the situational analysis came from a number of sources including published reports Uplift have made, academic literature about digital advocacy organisations and far-right extremism in Ireland, extensive conversations with staff and allies throughout 2020 and 2021, notes from attendance at workshops and seminars, mainstream media reporting and personal observations.

I have been involved in Uplift since 2014, originally as part of a small founding team of campaigners in Dublin. At the time of writing, I continue to play a governance role on the board of directors.

Analytically, I have used concepts from autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) to analytically inform the study: observations of relational practices, common values and beliefs, shared experiences and thick description of the situation.

In addition, earlier drafts of the complement that accompanies this article were used to triangulate emerging findings with staff at Uplift and the FRO. The complement was built around the findings reported in Tables 1 and 3 in this paper, and was iterated over a series of one-to-one discussions with staff. This allowed me to check that findings and framings of those findings accorded with their experiences. The specific capabilities valued at the FRO are not generalisable to other locations. They are not meant to be. Rather it is the attention to context, situation and point-of-view at the FRO which contributes to the rigour and the strength of the findings.

4. MAPPING CAPABILITIES AT THE FAR-RIGHT OBSERVATORY

4.1 *Collective capabilities at Uplift*

Four months into the covid-19 pandemic, Uplift wanted to know if and how their members were experiencing life online, and how prevalent far right extremism was. In July 2020 staff solicited surveyed their approximately 250,000 members in Ireland, of which 763 responded.

Most responding members reported that digital services were essential or very important to their lives. But many wrote that these services also led to increased exposure to illegal and harmful content. According to the summary report (Uplift, 2020):

almost all respondents reported coming across harmful content online. This varied from content

that is directly illegal such as underage pornography, fraud, discrimination and threats, as well as content that whilst not illegal, can violate people's rights and safety.

Just over half of respondents reported encountering discriminatory content or hate speech. Uplift members also noted the prevalence of harmful content what was not necessarily illegal. This included allegations against other people because of race or religion and "social media posts by companies and individuals that spread divisive and untrue material" (ibid.).

These responses were submitted to an Irish government consultation on changes to the European Digital Services Act – a Europe-wide policy designed to tighten regulation and enforcement of online activities (ibid.). Overall, the submission noted a declining trust in the ability of digital services to protect users from illegal and harmful content.

This campaign snapshot illuminates some of the organisational practices, tactics and supporting capabilities at Uplift. Eight full-time, part-time, administrative and volunteer staff work at Uplift, distributed throughout the country. They manage and coordinate organisational activities as well as online and offline campaign actions.

Uplift staff initiate campaign actions in response to what they call 'burning bin' moments – when member sentiment or societal issues align with realistic opportunities for success. These are usually pressing opportunities for political and civic change that can be achieved through the rapid online and offline mobilisation of thousands of members.

Uplift considers speed and agility critical to their success. They value capabilities to coordinate and collaborate quickly, often mobilising members using email within hours of a campaign issue emerging. Tactics include collectively funding and purchasing

newspaper advertisements about campaigns, facilitating members writing to their parliamentary representatives and organising the physical hand-in of large petitions.

Member-led campaigning is Uplift's primary campaign mode, instigating collective action through mass mobilisation. Uplift membership is an inclusive category used by staff to refer to individuals who have participated in online or offline action. Members come from all over the country and have many different experiences and backgrounds (Uplift, 2020).

Uplift purposefully cultivate collective identities amongst members through processes of storytelling. They are skilled in building collective identities by explicitly framing issues and shared values in positive language, and reflecting campaign wins back to members in communications. These are used in data-driven feedback loops that reflect collective success back to members that centre how they hold powerful interests to account.

Uplift learns about their members' interests and values through digital listening methods. These processes include member polling, experimental email delivery techniques, surveys, real-time analysis of campaign-responsive fundraising and commissioning of short research tasks. These methods are underpinned by capabilities to collaborate, to coordinate, to enrol new members, to convert resources such as knowledge, funding, technology and members' time and enthusiasm into further capabilities.

Technologies contribute to Uplift's digital listening methods and tactical repertoire in several ways. Online survey tools, quantified email analytics and real-time revenue reports are used by staff to create data-informed narratives about what campaigns 'taking-off', and what issues might make for future campaigns. Their stack of technologies consists of off-the-shelf applications, cloud-based enterprise document, spreadsheet, email and storage, and a set of bespoke outbound communications software used for emailing members and targeting decision-makers

like elected representatives during campaigns. Technical skills and tacit knowledge are required by staff to use technologies. Specialist technical staff are employed to adapt technologies to Irish contexts and also to contribute to international peer produced innovation efforts amongst the OPEN network.

Uplift also carries out some insider policy work. In 2018 for example, they were part of a Coalition for Civil Society Freedom (The Coalition for Civil Society Freedom, 2018) that challenged interpretations of a 2001 Electoral Act intended to curtail the activities of civil society organisations and threaten democratic rights to freedom of association. Insider work like this is important in shaping the policy landscape against which digital advocacy happens and which in turn maintains the conditions in which political advocacy can happen. Capabilities that facilitate pan-European collaboration on EU issues are valued in Ireland, and in a European context, as the vignette above illustrates. In this, OPEN and other European digital advocacy organisations play an important role.

Yet the model of digital advocacy operated by Uplift has several limitations when it comes to the issues identified on far-right extremism. Capabilities for rapid action, convening broad alignments of expertise and scaling-up campaigns in terms of their standard analytic measures are not sufficient for dealing with problems that are more intractably entangled in society. For these reasons, Uplift, and allied organisations set about establishing the Far Right - Observatory.

4.2 Collective capabilities at the Far-Right Observatory

The Far-Right Observatory is a stand-alone organisation, supported by Uplift acting in an incubator role. Uplift provides day-to-day operational support through some staff time and expertise, administrative capabilities and core technologies. The FRO is also supported by other allied organisations through expertise and resource contributions and institutional funders through funding awards.

The FRO's operating model differs in two significant respects from those of the digital advocacy organisations described in Section 2. The FRO is mission-led rather than member-led. While Uplift campaigns across a 'full-spectrum' of issues, the FRO's chief concern is far-right extremism. The second major departure is that decision making at the FRO is broadly informed by a logic of issue-expertise rather than issue-salience. When it comes to choosing strategy and tactics, the FRO places greater emphasis on the expertise of staff and allies rather than how salient issues might be amongst a broader cohort of members.

These differences mean that the FRO must develop specialist knowledge capabilities that are complementary to those available at Uplift. Also important is network building amongst expert organisations in the field and configuring a high-trust coalition in which information and resources can be accessed quickly.

The FRO's strategic aims have three notable elements. The first is an ambition for what they call 'resourcing civil society'. One of Uplift's senior staff explains how building the observatory with and amongst communities is a priority:

How do we put the communities and groups of people directly affected by far-right extremism at the centre of this, for me, that's really important [...]. Now this is an attempt to do that

The goal here is to build relations between groups experiencing hate and far-right activity and empowering those communities in the process. In particular, to put communities and groups who don't have the social and economic capital that the rest of society has at the centre of the FRO's work. The plan is to foster capabilities through training, support and leadership building. Also communicating analysis of far-right activities back to communities in ways that aligns with FRO values.

The second strategic element is generating the data,

analysis and knowledge that supports decision making by communities and civil society organisations. This requires developing research capabilities for establishing and operating observation infrastructure; carrying out rapid response analysis; and publishing regular and timely analysis in local and national settings. Domain knowledge of far-right extremism and technical skills are required. Technical skills include familiarity with communication platforms used by far-right extremists, and a set of quantitative and qualitative digital methods used to gather and analyse content. Also, because of risks to organisational and personal security, internal workstreams must be robust and resilient.

The FRO also need the capabilities to interpret data in a way that accords with their values and commitments to communities. This is particularly important when it comes to contested knowledge such as disinformation, to the fore during the covid-19 crisis. The issue here is not a matter of checking the veracity of scientific truths. Indeed, what Noortje Marres (2018) calls the politics of demarcation brings its own risk. Responses to misinformation and conspiracy that are too broad in their definition threaten the principle of scientific experts being accountable to the public. This is because when the public is thought to be irrational it discharges experts of their obligation to prove their trustworthiness and accountability (Pearce, 2021).

Rather, a plural response will challenge disinformation not on the facts of the matter, but on the underlying concerns and interests of far-right content creators and the platform firms which host and promote the material. What the FRO might contribute here are not technocratic or algorithmic tools for factchecking. A more useful strategy would be to develop capabilities with communities that recognises uncertainty, values diversity in knowledge and supports public reasoning (ibid). In the future, these capabilities might also support academic research on far-right extremism and be used to make interventions in policy processes if appropriate. Capabilities to communicate to civil society perspectives to local, national, and European legislators will be required.

The third strategic element is piloting, testing and mobilising effective approaches to disrupt far-right individuals and organisations. Dealing with the supply side of harmful ideas and content as well as real-world actions. The FRO and allies may have a critical role in broadening out the terms of which content is regulated and who gets to set those terms in Ireland. Capabilities arising from enrolling communities that have experienced harms augers well here. These capabilities might also ensure that consideration of free speech requires appropriate deliberation of who is being silenced and who is being excluded.

The FRO may seek to create design interventions that test effectiveness of platforms' user rules and accountability structures. This work would also produce message framings that respond rapidly to far-right mobilisation and events. In the near term, this also means holding powerful platform firms to account. For instance, by campaigning to make it difficult to ignore issues of justice for victims of

extremists.

The value of working with communities is in the possibility that might arise to co-create and realise alternative visions for how internet platforms and network can be socially useful. And to contribute to peer-production of internet technologies in the long term. This kind of work will have to be carefully done if the values and interests of communities are to be respected and given voice. Capabilities do not yet exist and will have to be developed to amplify these voices collectively, rather than speak for them with one voice.

Where the capabilities discussed in this section are available already to the FRO, they are listed in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2, along with associated agents, drivers and processes. Where capabilities are not fully cultivated or absent entirely, they are listed in Table 3.3. Implications for the cultivation of these capabilities in the future, and the use of capabilities as an evaluation tool for the work of the FRO is discussed in Section 5.

Table 3.1 Existing capabilities available through Uplift and allied organisations

Capabilities to...	People,organisations, allies	Drivers	Processes
...coordinate, collaborate and campaign together	Staff	Pool of common resources	Collective knowledge building of member interests
...mobilise thousands of members at specific moments on single issues	Members Colleagues at allied organisations at home and abroad	Technology stacks and development roadmaps A permeable and inclusive networked membership model	Reflexive storytelling, focusing on previous collective successes Broadening access to previously closed processes of democracy such as government consultations
...build shared identities aligning with common values	Configurations of digital listening and activism technologies	Policy and legislation on civil society activities (e.g. SIPO) An open, civil society based on values of a just society and liberal democracy	
...hold powerful interests to account ...manage the organisation day-to-day, including complex relations with broader alliance			
...run member-led campaigns			

Table 3.2 Available capabilities specific to the FRO

Capabilities to...	People, organisations, allies	Drivers	Processes
...empower communities most affected by extremism	Core staff Expert analysts	Shared understanding of the threat posed by far-right extremism	Observation, collective knowledge production and building evidence bases
...conduct research and knowledge creation	Leadership and training experts Community networks	Research, data and collective intelligence on far-right organising	FRO internal workstream prioritisation processes FRO internal management processes
...campaign for effective legislation from civil society point of view	Ally networks for mutual aid and intelligence Allied political operatives	Internal organisational practices	FRO-allies communication processes Configuring and maintaining technology stack in secure and safe way that align with shared values
...respond rapidly to far-right mobilisation and events	Network of funders	Legitimacy gained from support of mass membership groups like Uplift	
...interpret data and communicate analysis to inform action that aligns with FRO / Uplift values and visions			
...communicate to public and national and European legislators			
...maintain secure, safe and responsible work environment			

Table 3.3 Capabilities that are not reliably available or absent so far

Capabilities to...	People, organisations, allies	Drivers	Processes
...hold powerful platform firms to account	Expanded internal team	Enhanced organisational practices	Collaborative research, design and innovation processes with national and international partners
...build and realise alternative visions for how internet platforms and network can be socially useful	Expanded network of local communities Extended community of global far-right activists and experts	Open commons approach to technology development	Shaping appropriate accountability processes and structures within platforms and between platforms and civil society
...steer research into far-right extremism	Extended coalition of supporters and funders	Increased understanding of shared values of allied organisations, communities and broader public	
...contribute to peer-production of internet technologies in the long term			

5. DISCUSSION OF COLLECTIVE CAPABILITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UPLIFT AND THE FAR-RIGHT OBSERVATORY

What capabilities are required to locate and mitigate harms caused by far-right activity? The capabilities columns of Tables 3.1 and 3.2 answer this research question and lists the collective capabilities valued at the FRO. This is the main contribution of the article. For the FRO, Table 3.3 offers an inventory with which to plan work needed to build capabilities, and with which to check future progress against today's baseline.

The inventory differentiates between capabilities needed to address different strategic priorities. For instance, a major objective for the FRO is to centre communities and groups in their work and cultivate capabilities with them. To achieve this, staff will need to respond to changes in the capabilities available to the FRO and will need to ensure appropriate resources are made available to competing priorities, such as more technology-focussed objectives to observe far-right activities.

Maintaining sometimes complex relations with the founding group of allies will be needed to continue accessing people, drivers and processes that contribute to capabilities. In this, good organisational governance is required to ensure attention is paid to the wider set of values, relationships and drivers that matter to staff, allies and civil society.

A second contribution is this: the study has identified the capabilities of digital advocacy organisations like Uplift required for challenging far-right extremists. It has specified capabilities not readily available at Uplift already. This has important conceptual and empirical implications for the emerging literature on digital advocacy organisations (Dennis & Hall, 2020). It indicates that cultivating collective capabilities to address specific

issues like far-right extremism, in specific countries like Ireland, requires new organisational forms. These forms of digital advocacy organisation further depart from the set of common organisational features identified in Section 2.

What is intriguing about the FRO is that it aims to integrate features of new digital advocacy organisations like Uplift, as well as some of the organisational logics of more traditional single-issue organisations like Hope Not Hate. For instance, valuing capabilities for decision making via informed experts, while at the same time also building capabilities to attune itself to the values of communities via digital listening methods innovated by digital advocacy organisations. This evolving organisational form offers one way for digital advocacy organisations created in the past decade to *scale down* into grounded community settings, rather than *scale up* membership or funding.

A third contribution concerns evaluation. It is a limitation of the framework that it measures change in the real world through valued capabilities. If we are to take social progress seriously, other ways of measuring impact are also required. Luckily, monitoring and evaluation exercises are already in place because they are required for funder feedback for instance. In this context capability mapping may be used as a useful complement for assessing strategic priorities and progress made in reaching those goals. Future analytic work might investigate methods of evaluating the capabilities of distributed members and supporters not covered here. These are especially salient given the FRO's focus on strengthening community voice and resilience.

As a priority, work at the FRO might begin the task of using Table 3.3 to inform the building of new capabilities. That is, configuring the people, drivers and processes that contribute to capabilities and doing the work that will make resources available, and shift policy and cultural drivers. It is a limitation of the capabilities approach that it does not tell us how best to configure these phenomena so as to maximise capabilities. This work will form the basis

of ongoing action and evaluation by Uplift and the FRO.

6. CONCLUSIONS: COLLECTIVE CAPABILITIES FOR CULTURING PLURAL RADICAL PROGRESS

So what does this study tell us about prospects for steering progress in sociomaterial systems towards radical transformations? Recapitulating from Section 2.1, such progress entails plural, emergent, contentious politics and is driven by diverse knowledge and values and processes of challenging incumbent power. Challenging far-right extremism in the context of digital technologies, the FRO's aims are broadly aligned with these imperatives (Section 4). At stake then are the capabilities to put these aims into practice in three senses.

First capabilities for culturing. These are about creating the conditions to cultivate the specific capabilities required for transformation. We can observe this in how Uplift and allied organisations have come together to incubate the FRO. In the past, instrumental imperatives common to digital advocacy organisations have informed Uplift's priorities to *scale-up* membership numbers and email reach. Not least because it was seen as a route to financial sustainability. Yet in the case of the FRO Uplift enacted a different strategy. It has *scaled-down* and *scaled-out*, deepening connections and broadening relations in community settings via capabilities established at the FRO, whilst simultaneously progressing organisational and technological innovation.

Second, embracing plurality. This entails admitting many capabilities may be valued at different scales. This is evidenced in the FRO's ambition to build capabilities to speak *with* communities about far-right extremism, not *for* them. A commitment to embracing plurality is particularly salient in challenging far-right extremism. Take the issue of disinformation. A strategy that embraces plurality will focus not simply on the facts of the matter, but on what's at stake for people harmed by this

content. These capabilities will be important in allowing communities decide what facts matter to them and how, whilst also holding experts in science and technology to account.

Finally, progress can be understood as transformational change in a collectively imagined direction. The chief concern here for digital advocacy organisations is how this direction is agreed and realised. An important shared value of these groups is democracy. We can understand democracy in terms of capabilities as the collective capability for the least powerful to challenge asynchronously structured power. This understanding underpins many forms of collective action in civil society. But is particularly important in online settings, where low-margin technology costs facilitate rapid scale-up in action, often with insufficient consideration of the consequences.

It is exactly this commitment to capabilities for empowering communities to challenging power, and attention to what's at stake for these communities that prevents activities of the Far-Right Observatory from being merely a mode of civil society surveillance.

Like all capabilities, practices of democracy must be built and constantly maintained. The approach proposed in this article contributes one way of locating, sustaining and evaluating such capabilities.

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