

Alt Tech Platforms: Key research findings and lessons for media literacy

Eugenia Siapera

School of Information and Communication Studies

Centre for Digital Policy

University College Dublin

Eugenia.siapera@ucd.ie



UCD Centre for Digital Policy
Ionad um Bheartas Digiteach UCD



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Overview

- What are Alt Tech Platforms
- A theoretical model
- Key findings:
 - Infrastructures
 - Revenue models and monetisation
 - Key strategies and narratives
- Implications for media literacy
 - The concept map approach

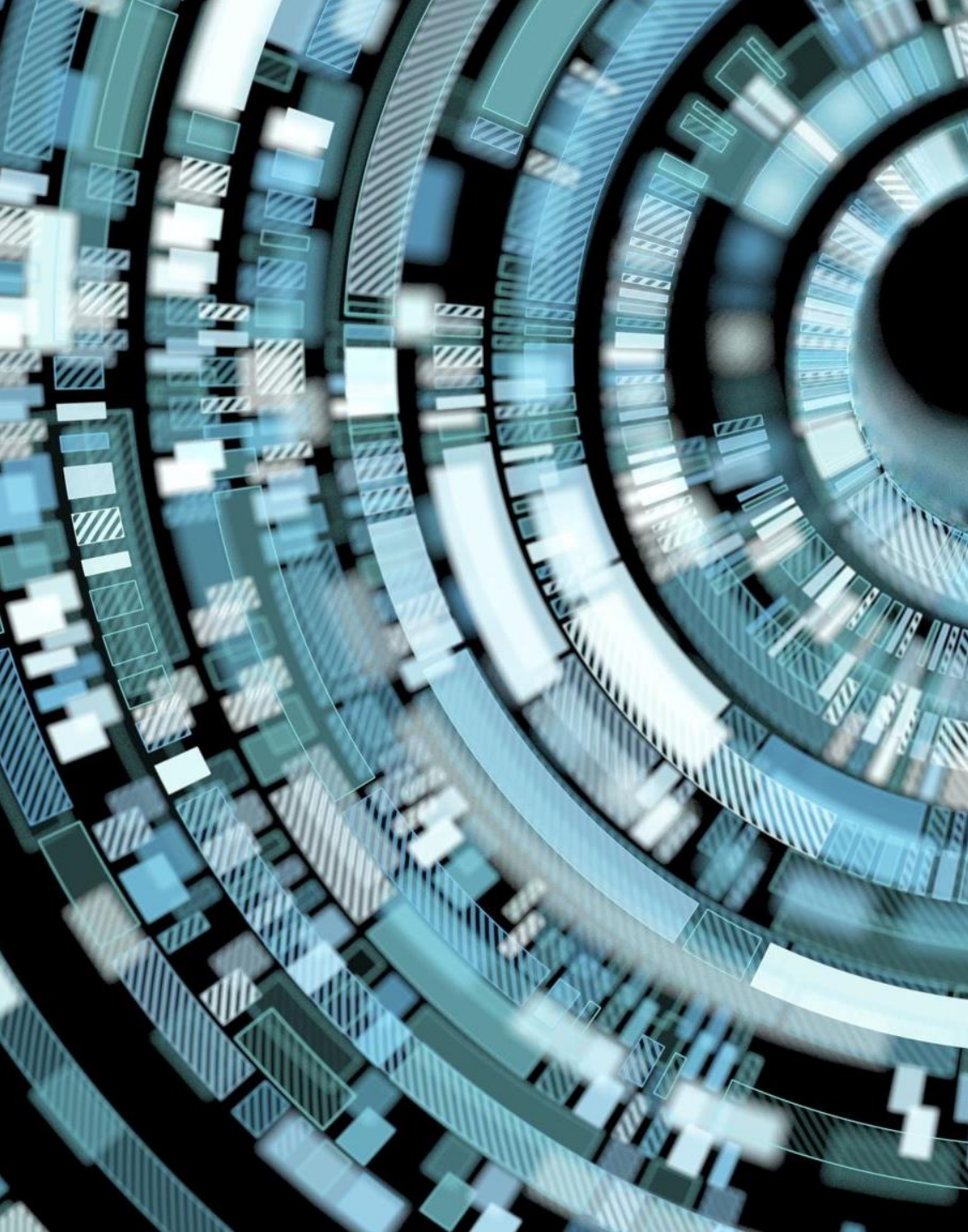


Truth Social



Alt Tech platforms

Deplatforming as momentum



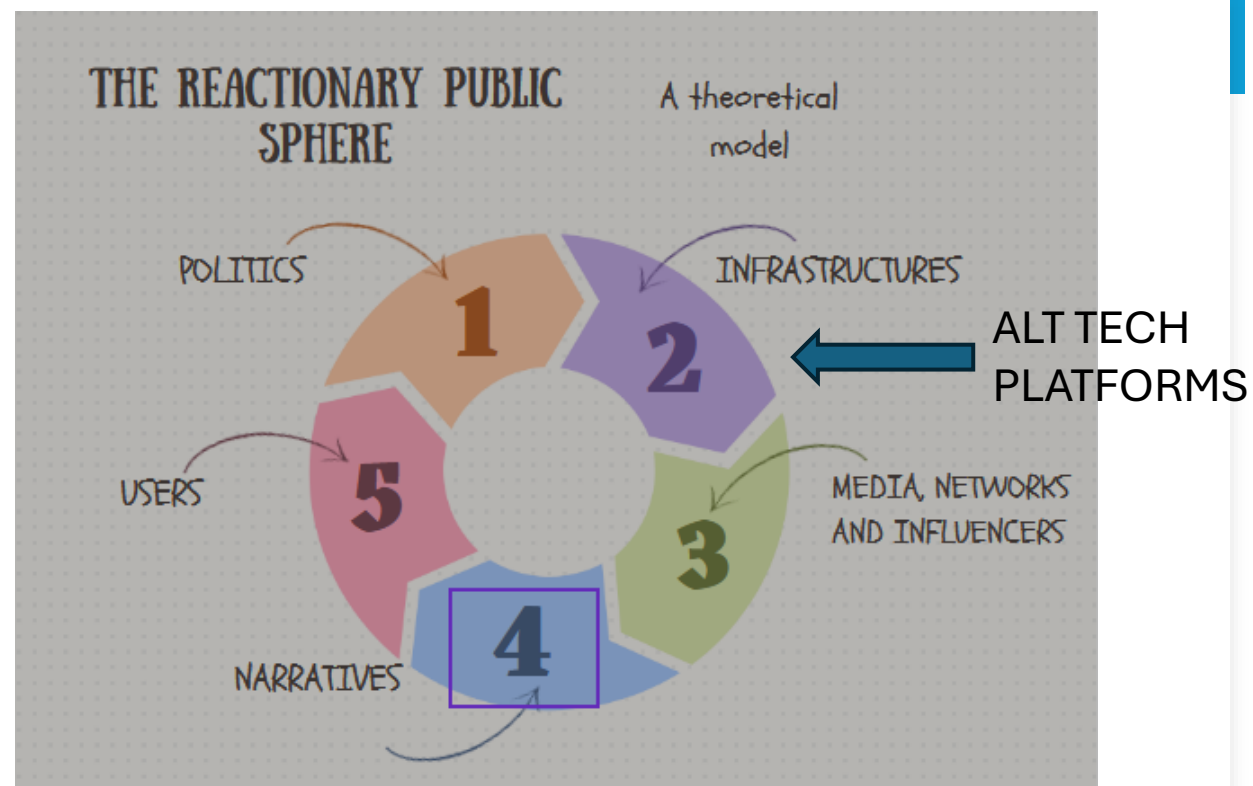
Key characteristics

- Basic/limited/no content moderation
- No/limited user data collection –no microtargeting
- Privacy protections – no ‘real identity’ policies
- Limited applicability of algorithmic ordering

The Reactionary Public Sphere

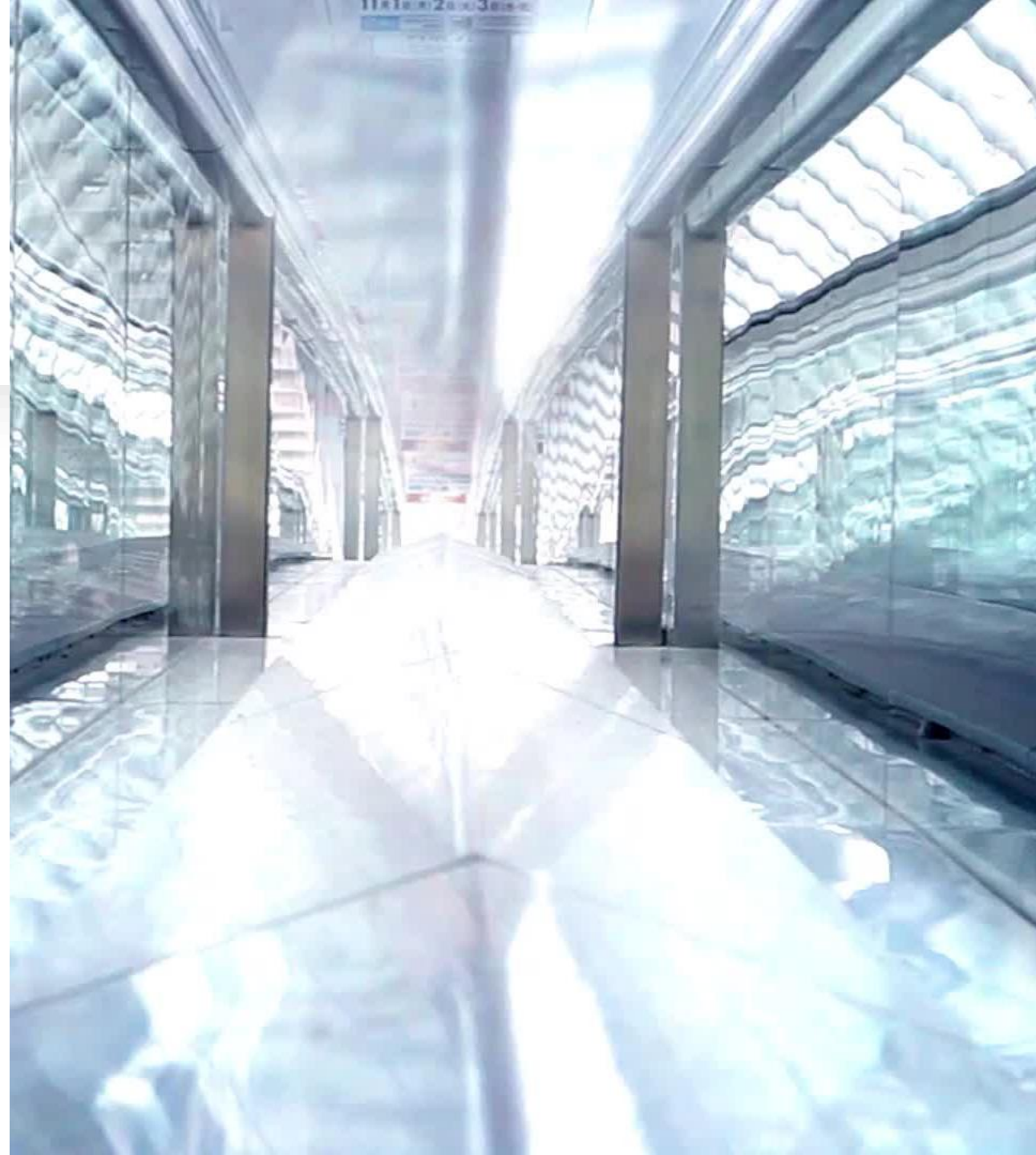
Attempting a definition:

- A diffuse and loosely connected network of:
 - Politicians and political parties associated with far rights/reactionary/ultra conservative positions
 - Platforms (AltTech and recently X/Twitter)
 - Media (e.g. range from online news outlets such as Infowars and Breitbart to GB News, Fox News etc)
 - Influencers – continuously active because that is the main way to attract enough users to enable them to monetise their contents
 - Key narratives: anti-feminist/LGBTQ, anti-immigration, ethno-nationalism
 - Users



Infrastructures

- Like roads, train tracks and airports, platform infrastructures determine pathways, and through them connections and relationships (c.f. Plantin and Punathambekar, 2019)
- The internal structure is determined by their values, which feed into their design, affordances, and algorithms
- Alt Tech platforms values:
 - Telegram -> privacy above all
 - Bitchute -> lifting creators



Bitchute as Infrastructure: key findings

- Decentralisation of content hosting, **direct monetisation** function, no user data collection, **interoperability** with other platforms
- Key principles: ‘People Power’ and ‘Opportunity to Succeed’
 - A creator-based model
 - No algorithmic ordering
- Bitchute is structured in support of such creators who act as **ideological entrepreneurs** (Finlayson, 2021), encouraged to create contents likely to appeal to far-right publics and monetise their political content.
- Far-right publics are attracted to Bitchute because of the concentration of far-right personalities

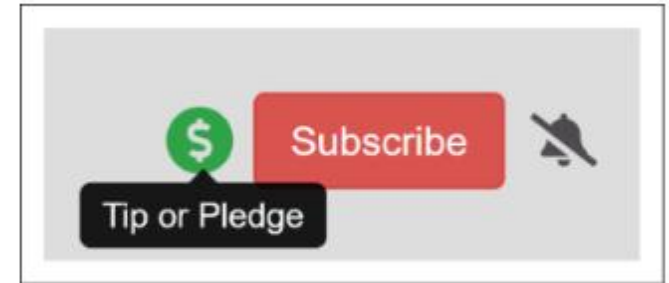


Figure 1. Tip or pledge button for content monetisation.

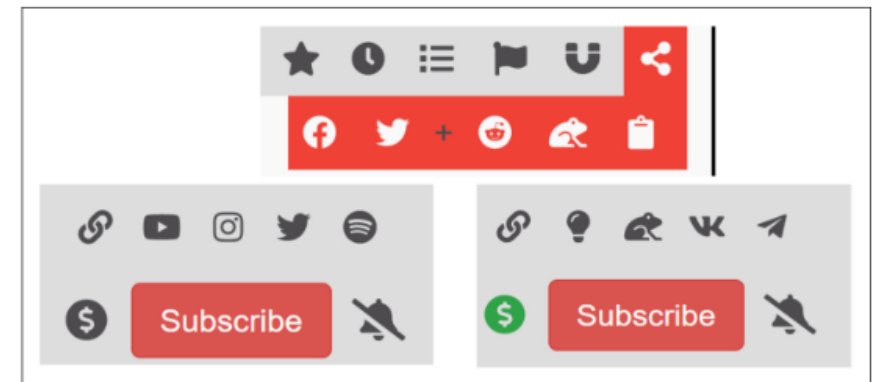
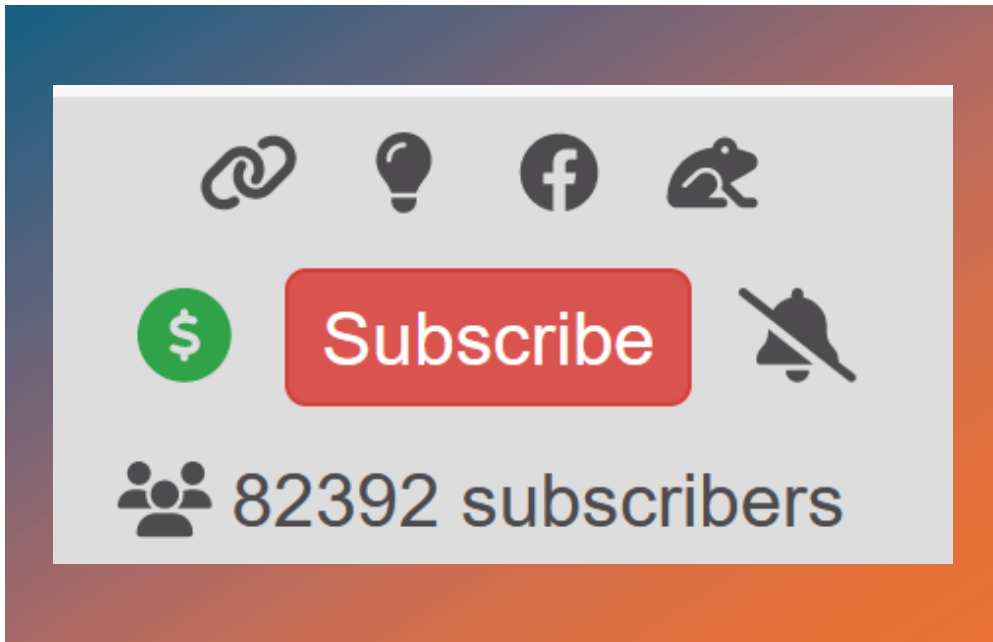
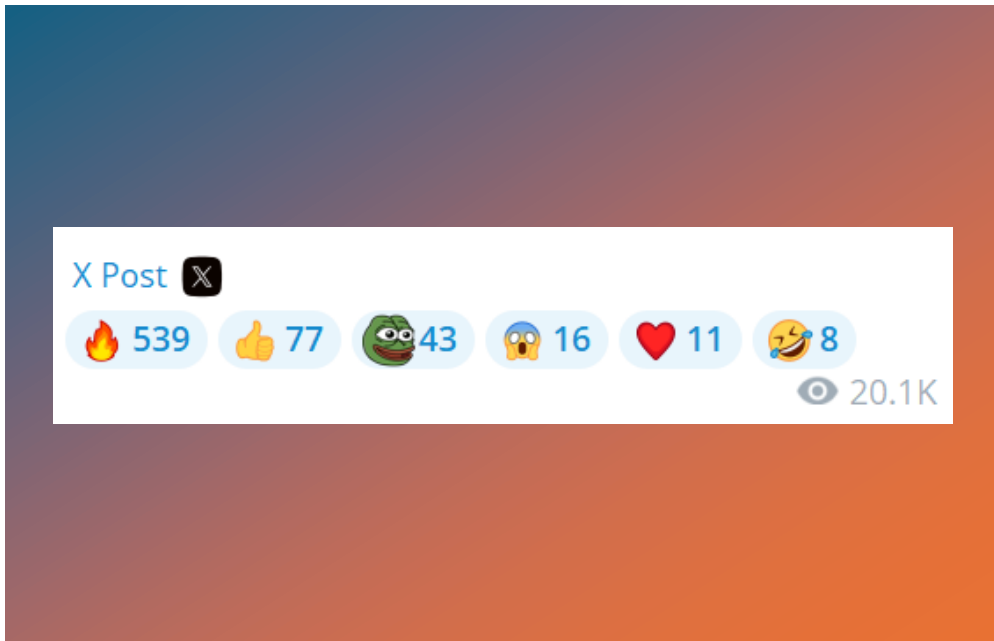


Figure 7. Integrated buttons for video (top) and two different channels (below).



Monetisation

- Creator monetisation practices (micropayments/subscriptions) often directly from the platform or through alternative micropayment platforms such as SubscribeStar – in 2024 Bitchute created Paychute, an integrated micropayment service
 - Creators encouraged to build audiences
- Interoperability with other platforms
 - Economy of scale for creators – one piece of content shared across many platforms, modified if necessary



Politics: Strategy and Tactics



- **Metapolitics:** the idea of the primacy of culture over politics as the spring board for a right wing revolution – a right wing Gramscianism
- Strategy developed by GRECE (Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation Européenne), better known as *La Nouvelle Droite*, the school of thought Alain De Benoist, Guillaume Faye and Dominique Venner founded in 1968 (Maly, 2018)
- Shifting common sense to ideas of the far right
 - But common sense ideas already conservative – (Mondon and Winter, 2020 and Cas Mudde on pathological normalcy)

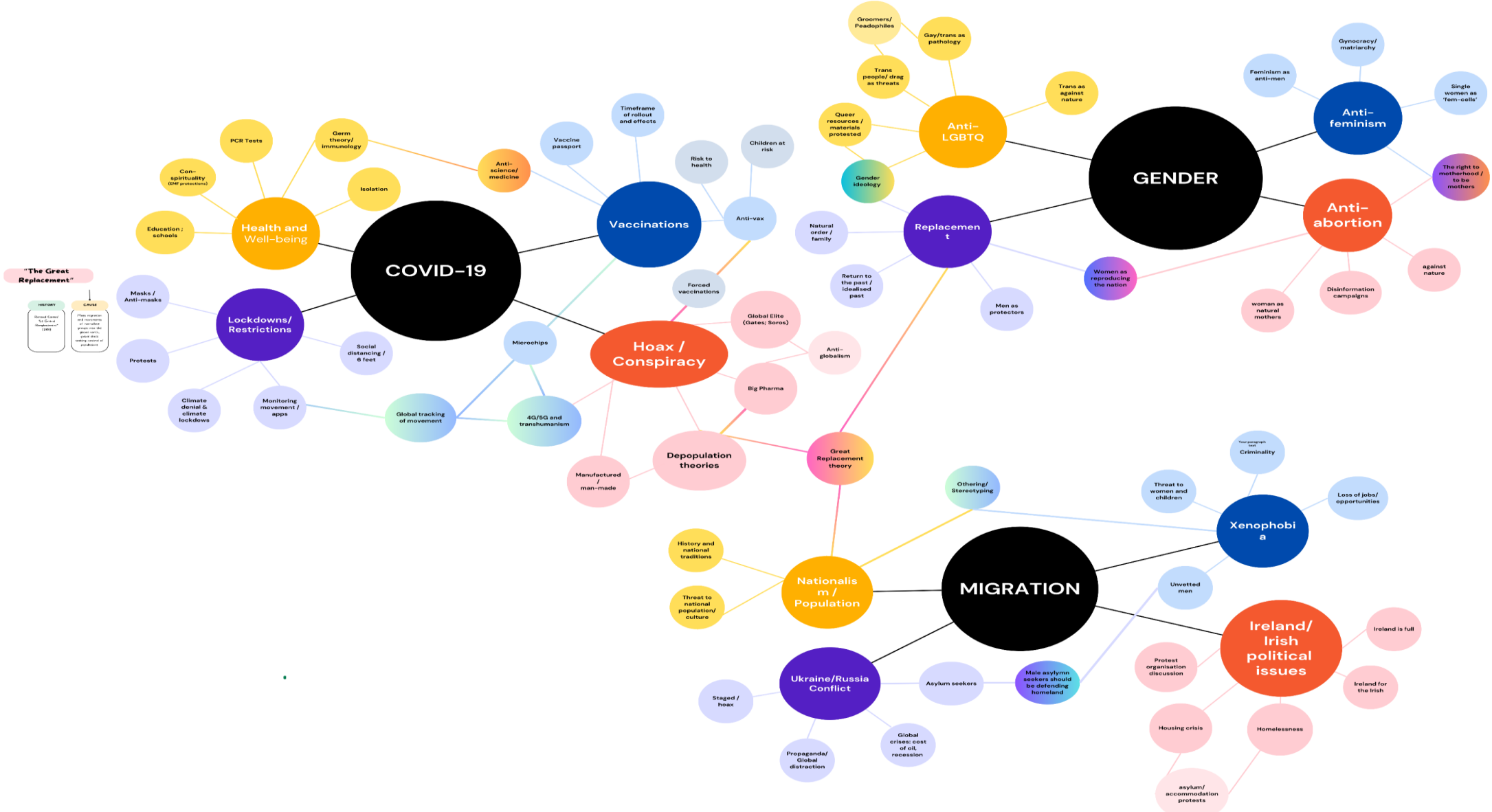
Strategy and Tactics

- Strategy: to shape common sense and push it further to the right- c.f. Castells' communication power: the capacity to influence, shape and control the flow of information in accordance with one's interests
- Typical influencer tactics:
 - No so much hate speech and overt attacks (though these too exist) but focus on popular culture and everyday life
 - 'Deconstruction' of liberal narratives often through ridicule and 'satire'
 - Pseudo intellectual and scientific explanations on gender, race and sexuality – often based on the contested subdiscipline of evolutionary psychology
 - Assuming the viewpoint of unexceptional (but intelligent) everyday 'men like us' who 'had enough'



Platforming Harm Key Findings Concept Map

OVERARCHING THEME: PROTECTION OF THE NATION, CHILDREN AND THE FAMILY

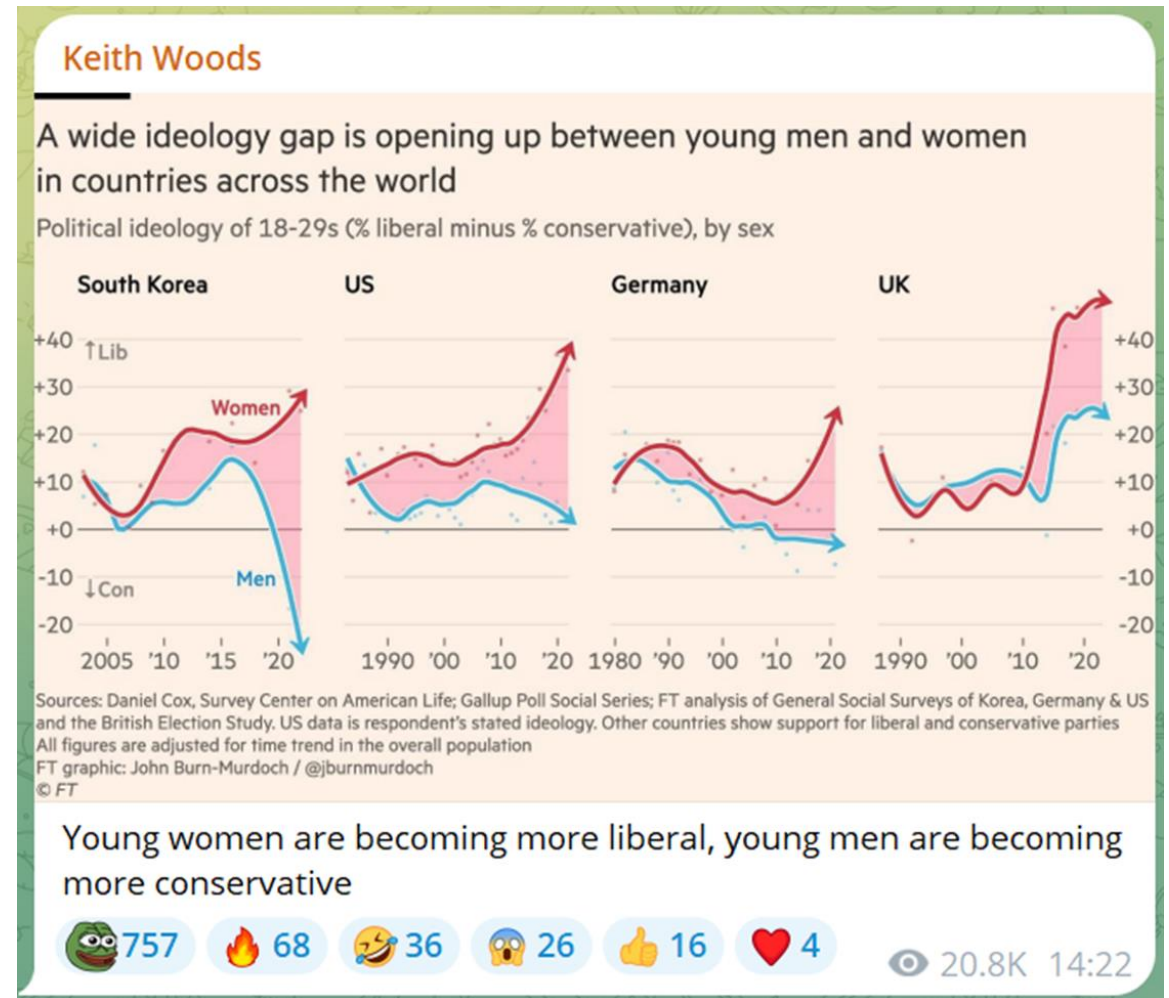


"The Great Replacement"

| History | Case |
|---|--|
| <p>World War II The Holocaust 1948-1952</p> | <p>Mass migration and displacement of European people into the Americas. The US immigration restrictions</p> |

Three Challenges

- (i) shift towards a more conservative and exclusionary common sense;
- (ii) chilling effect of toxic digital cultures;
- (iii) harm caused to specific communities



What lessons for media literacy?

- Focus on facts important and necessary but not sufficient
- Affect and emotion animate Alt Tech publics
- Sarah Ahmed (2004)
 - Hate inverted: *“It is not hate that makes the White workingclass man curse about the latest boatland of aliens dumped on our shores to be given job preferences over the White citizen who built this land. It is not hate that brings rage into the heart of a White Christian farmer when he reads of billions loaned or given away as ‘aid’ to foreigners when he can’t get the smallest break from an unmerciful government to save his failing farm. No, it’s not hate, It is Love. (Aryan Nations Website)”*
 - *“Because we love, we hate and this hate is what makes us together.”*

Concept map: potential uses

- Understanding the emotional basis and affective investments involved
- Use the map to reclaim common sense
 - Refute, problematise, disrupt the connections claimed in these narratives
- Use it as a tool for deconstructing and discrediting these narratives
- Identify and highlight key factual errors

Finally

- Beyond media literacy:
 - Policy to impede the circulation of these narratives
 - Is the DSA enough?