

## 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

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

“Homophobic trolls attack children’s minister” declared *The Times* on July 7<sup>th</sup> 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 popularist 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**

<b>Scale of strategic action</b>	<b>Harms of far-right extremism</b>	<b>Strategic actions: how digital advocacy organisations can counter extremism</b>
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. <b>Observing far-right activity on the ground, create collective knowledge that is meaningful and useful in community contexts.</b> Build internal practices, processes and systems to manage knowledge within the FRO
Online content and activity on digital platforms	Threats and hate speech targeted at individuals and communities <b>Online media used for recruitment by far-right groups</b> Networks and media used in planning and coordination <b>Dissemination of hate content within and between countries</b>	Observing online far-right activity by independent civil society organisations. Share knowledge and practice with allied organisations locally and globally <b>Articulate from civil society point of view perspectives on how far-right content should be regulated by firms and regulators</b> 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.  <b>Small number of powerful firms have effective control over online infrastructure and have significant influence in policy decisions.</b></p>	<p>Focus on establishing and maintaining governance and accountability structures between firms and civil society at local levels in specific jurisdictions.  <b>Pursue justice and redress at the level of firms and markets, such as class actions.</b>          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.  <b>Nature of public debate is polarised. For instance: “with us or against us” framings used during Covid-19 lockdown debates</b></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.  <b>Building and participating in meaningful accountability structures across platforms and media.</b>          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 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
<b>...mobilise thousands of members at specific moments on single issues</b>	<b>Members</b> Colleagues at allied organisations at home and abroad	<b>Technology stacks and development roadmaps</b> A permeable and inclusive networked membership model	<b>Reflexive storytelling, focusing on previous collective successes</b> Broadening access to previously closed processes of democracy such as government consultations
...build shared identities aligning with common values	<b>Configurations of digital listening and activism technologies</b>	<b>Policy and legislation on civil society activities (e.g. SIPO)</b> An open, civil society based on values of a just society and liberal democracy	
<b>...hold powerful interests to account</b>			
...manage the organisation day-to-day, including complex relations with broader alliance			
<b>...run member-led campaigns</b>			

**Table 3.2 Available capabilities specific to the FRO**

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

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

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

#### 4. 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.x answer this research question and lists the collective capabilities valued at the FRO. This is the main contribution of the article. For the FRO, Tables 3.x 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-focused 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 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.

## 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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