



POLICY BRIEF

# Online Networks of Hate: Cultural Borders in Aterritorial Spaces

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## IN BRIEF

- Online communities escape territorial boundaries yet build virtual borders of their own
- Extremist cultures can thrive in online spaces, evading national legal jurisdictions yet simultaneously operating locally and globally
- Public policy requires focused multilateral and multilevel cross-border governance coordination in law enforcement in conjunction with robust transparency and accountability mechanisms

## Executive Summary

If borders were a vegetable, they might be an onion. Bordering processes layer upon one another, but unlike an onion whose layers are discrete, border layers inform one another, compete with one another, and even contradict one another.

A peculiarity of borders in the 21st Century is that they do not map easily on to the jurisdictional limits of a state. Of course, a state is bounded by a geopolitical border where checkpoints and clearance areas are arranged, but a state's borders are much more. There are linguistic borders, such as those found in the Canadian province of Quebec; there are Indigenous cultural borders that extend across North America in defiance of settler-colonial borders. There are other cultural borders, like those found along the edges of the Cascadia bio-cultural region in the Pacific Northwest, and there are, increasingly,

discursive borders marking the edges of distinct cultural spaces online. This last species of border is perhaps the least understood, which is unfortunate, given that it is rapidly becoming one of the most important.

Research conducted through the Borders in Globalization program has examined the ways that online communities form “culturescapes” to mark where their communities are strongest. This research shows that digital communities, such as those associated with radicalized and extremist movements or organizations, draw participants from around the world and create “spaces without place” in digital networks.

Far from being a purely academic discussion, research into these transboundary or “aterritorial” communities has produced two key findings

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1. Online communities are genuinely transboundary. They can ignore national borders and generate new spaces to share information, build community and identity, and organize activism—both online and offline.
2. These transboundary digital cultures are highly effective production sites for extremist ideologies, and important spaces in which to plan activism—or criminal and violent activities. Their fluid, aterritorial nature makes them hard to surveil and even harder to police or disrupt.

Taken together, these findings point to a critical need for intergovernmental cooperation and policy harmonization to effectively counter the growth and spread of aterritorial extremist networks. Without such cooperation, national surveillance and enforcement policies can only be reactionary.

## Introduction

You know those Proud Boys videos we all love to see where they just march down antifa and start cracking them? Don't you want to be one of those guys? It's your chance. If you can go, go. It's a prime propaganda opportunity for us. (Alex Viriend, Diagon member)

Imagine a country that stretches from Alaska in the Northwest to Florida in the Southeast, carving a rough diagonal across North America. This is Diagon, a fictional nation at the heart of the "meme-but-also-we're-serious" Diagon movement. If you have never heard of them before, it is unsurprising; until early 2022 they existed as an almost-exclusively online group dedicated to sharing far-right, anti-Semitic, and anti-government memes in fringe forums and social media channels. That changed in February 2022, when eleven individuals associated with the movement were arrested at the Coutts, Alberta, border blockade. They were carrying weapons and body armour, as well as ammunition and high-capacity magazines.

Extremist social movements that blur the line between online and offline activism are hardly unique; most contemporary social movements do the same thing. From environmental and animal rights activism to civil rights and religious activism, online spaces have proven to be powerful sites of growth and community building. Yet these spaces are rarely talked about in the context of borders.

Research produced by the Borders in Globalization program has shown that online spaces do more than serve as recruitment and organizational hubs for activism: they are spaces where cultures emerge and develop. Unlike the traditionally understood notion of culture as a group of people who share common beliefs, practices, and history within a geographic space, online

cultures readily exist in a condition of aterritoriality; they operate with irreverence to national borders, not only uncontained by lines on a map but unbound from territory itself.

The nation-state is not a closed container for political and social activism. Communication technologies have eroded the significance of borders as containers or cultural barriers. However, this does not mean that transnational or cross-border activism is either stateless or placeless. Rather [...] on-line activities of alt-right activists' function in part as bordering processes that create new virtual geographies, which transform how a nation is conceptualized and creates a new imagined community that spans borders. (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019, 572)

This research has some challenging implications. Policymakers focused on identifying and prioritizing threats to national security must recognize that the traditional "domestic/international" dyad used in counterterrorism and intelligence circles is outdated. Online social movements are international, and they are domestic; they may recruit from Canada, gather on websites hosted in the Philippines, and source funding from Russia, the United States, and Estonia, all funneled through a third-party fundraising app or site like GiveSendGo or GoFundMe. The memes and other material produced by the movement can then be posted and shared on Canadian Facebook pages or in the comment sections of Canadian media sites.

Just as the activists themselves make use of complex, border-jumping sites and tactics, so too must security and law enforcement agencies in surveilling them. It is not enough to monitor Facebook—or to ask Facebook to voluntarily monitor itself—as a movement like Diagon, or the Groyper Army, Atomwaffen, or a host of other extremist social movements exist in multiple online locales simultaneously. Law enforcement and intelligence services must acknowledge the aterritorial nature of the movements they seek to identify and disrupt, and they must be able to build dynamic transboundary consortiums of stakeholders from the public and private sectors to do it.

## Approach and Results

Research supported by the Borders in Globalization program used an analysis of extremist websites as a way of investigating the way that culture in digital spaces transcends borders. Extremist movements are difficult to study at the best of times, and online versions more challenging still, as the fluidity of online networks makes them difficult to track. Yet their forums, blogs, and social media networks are ideologically stable, meaning that even when the anonymity of individuals prevents researchers from tracking them across movement spaces, the content of their rhetoric (particularly the

slang and idiosyncrasies of users) can be used to show how these movements cross-pollinate.

To gain a solid picture of what extremist spaces "look" like, researchers compiled lists of the major sites where affiliates of the movements gathered and examined which platforms they most frequently shared content on. Using software that identifies similarities between websites based on several factors, including which links were most frequently shared and which movement-specific terms were frequently shared, the research was able to shed light on how extremist movements grow, recruit, and spread through social media networks.

The research also found something interesting about online communities: though their membership is drawn from different nationalities and thus ignore geopolitical borders, the borders around movement spaces online are fiercely maintained. In other words, political borders in the traditional sense are irrelevant, but cultural borders matter.

Indeed, the ability of alt-right networks to transcend geophysical and geopolitical borders illustrates the extent to which the reality of borders in the 21st Century is to some extent a performed one. Discussions of borders are of necessity discussions of territoriality (Brambilla 2015) and the management or control of space; online communities are spaces of a kind and so their virtual territoriality must be maintained as well. (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir 2019, 572)

These findings align with earlier research on cultural borders that cross national boundaries. In Canada and the United States, an example of such a space can be found in Cascadia, a distinct bio-cultural region that runs from Alaska, through British Columbia and into Washington, Oregon, and Idaho states. The unique histories of the region set it apart from others in North America, and while Cascadia has no distinct geo-political boundaries of its own, it does have imposing physical barriers (rugged mountains and coastlines, for example), and a cultural orientation that differs from other parts of the continent. In both the case of Cascadia and the online cultures of extremist social movements, research shows that national and cultural borders do not always overlap. In some cases, national boundaries matter much less than cultural.

## Conclusion

When visualized, North America is a space overflowing with thickly layered borders and bordering processes. Some, like Indigenous boundaries, stretch back centuries and more, while others—though recent—span the borders between nations and produce distinct identities that see national boundaries as just one more element in the complexity of cultural terrain. The research shows that whether discussing biocultural spaces like Cascadia,

or digital spaces like 4chan, 8kun, or reddit, cultural boundaries often remain crucial to understanding the motivations and identities of the people affiliated with them.

In the absence of an easily recognized, geopolitically contiguous cultural identity, alt-right activists seek to create a new cultural border that rejects globalization and integration, multiculturalism, and the blurring distinctions between social categories in race, gender, sexuality and class... Ultimately, it is a manifestation of the extremist nationalism that sits at the core of many of its affiliated groups' identities; it is an attempt to construct new borders in a world where traditional borders seem to be less relevant, only for the alt-right, it is cultural borders that matter. (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir 2019, 575)

## Implications and Recommendations

As our world becomes more digital and as the lines between online and offline continue to dissolve, the cultural geographies of online spaces will become too important to neglect. Social media networks bypass geopolitical borders, and for people who have grown up in these digital spaces, they can often hold greater significance than place-based identities. Policymakers can no more ignore emerging cultural spaces online than they can ignore transboundary water or environmental issues.

The research shows that these aterritorial spaces have become ideal sites for recruitment into radicalized and extremist movements. More than that, these spaces are now crucial to the planning and execution of offline activities, from rallies or marches to insurrections, as the events of January 6th, 2020, in Washington, DC illustrate. Those who engaged in violent and illegal actions at the Capitol did not organize in clandestine groups in the backs of pubs or movement safehouses, as they may have in the past. Groups today meet in restricted channels and forums while riding the bus to school or work, while sitting alone at home, or while spending time with their families and friends. There is no easy way to identify and surveil them, and no foolproof way of tracking them down. Thanks to social media and digital technologies, radicalized and extremist activists can meet, network, and organize actions without ever having to meet in person and, should their online spaces be discovered and shut down, they can readily move to a new one, taking their online culture with them.

Policymakers must adapt to this new reality by rethinking the ways that they rely on territoriality in their work. Too often, when discussing surveillance or law-enforcement strategies, policy ends at the border. Even if an extremist has no previous criminal record, and no record of associating with gangs or extremist movements in offline spaces, they might very well have extensive connections online. While not suggesting the formation



of a transboundary "world police", policymakers ought to more seriously consider the role that international partnerships, data-sharing, and collaboration with non-state actors play in their strategies for countering extremism online. That means identifying existing collaborative frameworks to refine and creating new ones where needs emerge. Investment in cutting-edge technical expertise, coupled with ethical oversight and mechanisms for transparency, will be required for governments to meet these challenges while maintaining the trust of the public.

#### **Work Cited:**

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