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COMMENTARY

Alternative Platforms and Alternative Recommendation Systems: A Case of the Australian Sovereign Citizen Movement on Telegram

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The logo for the Lowy Institute, featuring the words "LOWY INSTITUTE" in a bold, white, sans-serif font centered on a light blue rectangular background.

The [sovereign citizen movement](#) is a collection of individuals and groups who reject the legitimacy of the state and hold a number of eccentric beliefs on the nature of government. [Top](#)
The sovereign citizen movement might be most identified with the United States, but they

have a presence in many countries, including Australia. In fact, the Australian sovereign citizen movement is having a resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the hand of the state has been heavy in response to the pandemic. With the country under a state of emergency, the government has broad powers to curtail liberties normally provided under a democracy. The anti-lockdown measures in Australia- particularly in the state of Victoria – have been among the [strictest in the world](#).

During the pandemic a diverse crew of anti-lockdown protesters organised and evangelised via social media around their objections over these state of emergency restrictions, framing them as ‘illegal’ and illegitimate and part of a hidden agenda by a tyrannical government. This message resonated among the sovereign citizen movement who held similar beliefs – like for example, that the [government is a corporation](#) and individuals are not subject to government regulations because they, as ‘natural beings’ can chose when and where to enter into a ‘contract’ with government. Sovereign citizens also believe that parliament is treasonous and follow [idiosyncratic](#) interpretations of common law yet often try to prosecute their case against the government via the judiciary.

In the Australian Venn diagram of anti-government groups, anti-lockdown protesters and sovereign citizens overlapped and have now [grown into a broader conspiratorial anti-government movement](#), initially aided by the use of mainstream social media platforms and their algorithmic recommendation functions.

Over the past year, Australian sovereign citizens and anti-lockdown protesters have organised a number of [protests in defiance of state emergency regulations](#), many of which led to [violence against police](#), committed acts of [individual defiance of COVID restrictions](#) and posted them on social media and advanced conspiracy theories and disinformation about the pandemic, vaccinations and government regulations and their intentions. Much of this disinformation is also, unsurprisingly, QAnon or [Q-adjacent content](#).

The sovereign citizen/anti-lockdown movement initially coalesced and expanded via Facebook pages and groups organised to oppose the state lockdowns. Through these pages, where they were also exposed to conspiracy theories claiming the virus was a hoax and an undercover means of expanding control and railed against the legitimacy of the state’s emergency actions, they [planned illegal protests](#), encouraged violation of emergency regulations like mandating mask wearing and traveling outside of restricted zones. Sovereign citizens and anti-lockdown protesters would often film themselves defying lockdown restrictions and confronting authorities while doing so, later posted their videos on their individual and group social media pages.

An example of one such page that quickly grew to hundreds of thousands of followers before it was taken down was the “99% unite Main Group ‘it’s us or them’” – a group started by a former reality television show contestant that spread anti-government and anti-COVID-19 and 5G conspiracies that organised illegal protests in Victoria. Having joined this one p
which began a collection of anti-government, anti-lockdown protest postings from one
conspiracist, individuals were then recommended to other likeminded groups and pages,

including those of the broader sovereign citizen movement, via the platforms algorithmic recommendation functions.

The growth and merging of the sovereign citizen/anti-lockdown movement in Australia via their interactions and exposure on mainstream social media is not an unusual case. Algorithmic recommendation has been blamed for the uptick of extremist content on mainstream platforms in the past. According to Facebook's internal research in 2018, ["64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools."](#)

Many of these individuals and groups were [deplatformed](#) in late 2020 as part of Facebook's crackdown against content that hindered the COVID-19 health response. By that point, however, the language and ideas of the sovereign citizen movement, had seeped into the anti-lockdown protesters rhetoric and narratives. Formation of other groups soon followed, many attracting and connecting with international sovereign citizen individuals and groups.

Though remnants of sovereign citizen and conspiracy minded anti-lockdown pages remain on Facebook, as a result of their deplatforming, many have now decamped to alt tech platforms like Telegram and Gab. One feature of these platforms that is missing however is the algorithmic recommendation function which initially contributed to the online growth of these communities. Having inevitably lost followers when they switched platforms, the anti-lockdown/sovereign citizen groups, are trying to reconstitute themselves on an alternative platform and work around the loss of an automated recommendation tool that brought users to their pages. They are attempting a form of do-it-yourself recommendation system on Telegram. While not as efficient or powerful as algorithmic recommendation, it points to the work arounds available to extremist movements on alternative platforms.

Even though, technically, Telegram is an end-to-end encryption messaging service rather than a social media platform – it does allow for messages [groups as large as 200,000](#) – essentially mimicking the function of a social media page. However, because you need to know the exact name of a Telegram messaging group to join and there is no algorithmic recommendation function, one is less likely to accidentally or incidentally encounter other accounts. To get around this, sovereign citizen and anti-lockdown Telegram accounts have been manually posting and sending lists of like-minded Telegram accounts to join in their message threads. Some of the recommendations are not only other anti-lockdown or sovereign citizen accounts, but far-right figures and conspiracy influencers.

This practice of a coordinating mutual 'liking' and 'following' has been identified as a practice in social media influencing echo systems called 'pods.' This 'pod' activity is mostly done by mainstream social media influencers who are trying to increase their visibility on mainstream platforms. They form these pods or groups of influencers on Telegram where they [coordinate reciprocal activity](#), systematically exchanging likes and comments and follows with each other. Obviously, the difference with the 'pod' activity among the sovereign citizen and anti-lockdown groups on Telegram is that they are not then carrying it over to a mainstream platform but limiting to mutual following of Telegram channels. But through this pod act

they are creating an alternative recommendation function and mitigating some of the effects of their de-platforming from mainstream social media sites.

This do-it-yourself variety of recommendation is not as powerful as algorithmic recommendation in reach and efficiency. But what these curated recommendations may lose in efficiency they may gain in credibility. The do-it-yourself recommendation system may carry more weight precisely because it is low tech. Essentially – they function like ‘word of mouth’ recommendations, which Neilson surveys have consistently found to be the most effective and trusted means of marketing. A [2012 survey found](#) that “Ninety-two percent of consumers around the world say they trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth or recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising.”

Because the recommendation is made via human-to-human interaction rather than algorithm to human, it could serve to strengthen interpersonal bonds and community cohesion- key aspects to the strength and longevity of any social movement.

The lockdown measures in Australia have already relaxed and the sovereign citizen movement needs new issues to reinforce its narratives and other groups to recruit to their movement that likewise affirm and echo their anti-government and conspiratorial narratives. Just as the sovereign citizen movement gathered around the anti-lockdown protest groups, they have now also made cause with the anti-vaxx movement- capitalising on its shared antipathy to government regulation, their conspiratorial mindset and opposition to the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. With the vaccination program soon to be underway in Australia, they have ramped up their networking and outreach among the anti-vaxx community who are agitating against any mandatory vaccine programs and spreading disinformation that questions the safety, efficacy and necessity of the vaccines. With Facebook’s recent announcement that they will be targeting anti-vaxx content for removal, Telegram becomes an even more important platform for these movements.

The Australian Sov Cit movement is but one example of this do-it-yourself, word of mouth alternative recommendation system. It is a tactic that can be and has been used by other extremist movements who have been deplatformed from mainstream social media sites.

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