Title   Building collective capabilities, resisting far-right extremism.

Abstract

Transitions bring change but they do not assure progress. One notable example is how contemporary far-right activity has benefitted from long-term changes in information and communications technologies and how those technologies are configured in society.

In this paper I explore how people in civil society are fighting back against various harms caused by far-right extremism through organising and acting collectively. I discuss how civil society is both threatened by far-right activity and a potential source or remedial action. I ask: what kind of collective capabilities are valued by civil society organisations in combatting digitally mediated far-right activity? What do these capabilities tell us about resisting transitions more broadly?

The paper presents a novel analytic framework that uses the capabilities approach to map possibilities for collective action valued by staff, allies and members of a digital-first Irish civil society organisation Uplift. The paper reports specific empirical capabilities that are found within the organisation and speculates on the possibilities for more radical transformative change.

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1. Far-right activity, extremism and disinformation in Ireland

'**Far-right activists incite and spread uproar online over Oughterard asylum**'
– *The Times, September 2019* (Tighe & Siggins, 2019)
'**Arson attack on TD Martin Kenny who backed direct provision centre**'
– *The Times, October 2019* (Mahon, 2019)
'**Homophobic trolls attack children's minister**'
– *The Times, July 2020* (Early, 2020)
'**Man charged in case involving assault on LGBT+ activist Izzy Kamikaze**'
– *The Irish Times, September 2020* (Lally, 2020)

Diesel in the air and blood on the streets. These headlines announce hate crimes and extremist activity in Ireland. They report far-right activity on the ground as well as online as demonstrators oppose the planned arrival of families in search of homes and asylum in Oughterard. Fire-starters set ablaze the car of their local parliamentarian in Aughavas. Outside the parliament in Dublin anti-lockdown protesters attack counter-protesters with a wooden pole wrapped in an Irish tricolour.

Journalists, analysts and campaigners draw on stories like these to trace and oppose the growth of far-right activities in Ireland. Activity linked by evidence of common tactics, targets, and motivations of far-right activists. But this activity also presents a set of common threats. First to the freedom and wellbeing of individuals and communities across the country – often communities already marginalised. And critically, also threats to civil society and functioning democracy. Whilst recognising the former, this article is primarily concerned with the latter, how information and communications technologies are implicated in these threats, and how Irish civil society organisations can and are collectively responding to these threats.

Far-right activities include terrorist content and activity, extremist content and activity, harassment, hate crimes, incitement or violence, trolling, intimidation, racist, homophobic and transphobic abuse, and the deliberate creation and dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and other forms of violent content (Hope Not Hate, 2020; Mudde, 2019). These activities are not unique to Ireland. For decades far-right activists have built community and shared knowledge throughout the world and across borders. But inevitably, all actives are performed by people *somewhere.* And in their performance, far-right activities are shaped by local and national political, economic and societal conditions as well as media, technology and infrastructures (Hope Not Hate, 2020).

In Ireland such conditions were, until recently, insufficient to cultivate and sustain indigenous far-right activity. Indeed, far more academic attention has been devoted to explaining the absence of extremist practices than their presence. A weak welfare state, clientelist electoral politics and the 'ongoing' nature of Irish nationalism are all offered as explanations for the far-right's historic incapacity (Kitschelt, 2007; O'Malley, 2008). But as the headlines above illustrate, over the past decade, something's changed.

Never an industrial country, today's Ireland nonetheless shares many economic and cultural characteristics with European post-industrial regions (O'Malley, 2008) – including increasingly visible far-right activity. The financial crash of 2007 destabilised the state and local concepts of sovereignty, and weakened trust in government and public institutions (Quinlan, 2019). And although that trust has slowly recovered, it has resulted in a re-configured party-political settlement with confidence in public institutions and services such as housing and health significantly diminished (Hearne & Murphy, 2019; Murphy & Hearne, 2019; Thomas, Barry, Johnston, & Burke, 2018). Furthermore, demographic and economic shifts and changes in the dynamics of migration have underpinned popularist rhetoric in recent elections, experiences common across European states (Corbet & Larkin, 2019).

These kind of demand-side-conditions – economic shocks and unemployment – are necessary but on their own insufficient to account for far-right growth. Supply-side conditions are also required. These are the means by which far-right activists can produce, perform, recruit for and organise activities, and also interact with mainstream political ideas (Mudde, 2019). This is where digital technology and innovation enters the story.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, changes in supply-side conditions such as transitions in media and communications infrastructures have been profound. Social media, search and online services are transforming how we know society, each other, and relate to our institutions, often underpinning considerable individual and societal benefits. But innovation is not a force for uncontested good. And it's never neutral. ICTs have induced considerable harms, detrimental

to human rights, freedoms and collective life (Benjamin, 2019; O'Neil, 2016; Whittlestone, Nyrup, Alexandrova, Dihal, & Cave, 2019).

Technology transitions are implicated twice in the rise of far-right activity. First in their contribution to mediating and normalising far-right discourse. Activities include the amplification of racist and anti-migrant rhetoric in mainstream politics and via online media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Discord servers (Lewis, 2018). When platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Telegram are used by extremists "for recruitment, propagandising at scale, disruption of mainstream debate, and the harassment of victims" (Hope Not Hate, 2020), it is not system flaws that are being taken advantage of by *bad actors*, but the very feature set of the services themselves. I will discuss these harms in Section 2.

Second, more broadly, transitions in technology infrastructures and platforms are implicated in undermining processes of democracy such as fair and transparent elections (Cadwalladr, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2018; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019), and in making civil society less civil (Gallagher, 2020). This presents a problem less in the immediate mitigation of far-right harms, but rather in the ability of civil society to resist and respond and to ultimately steer ICT transitions in socially useful directions. It is this issue – *who decides?* – that this article is primarily concerned with. That is, the means, processes and capabilities required to respond and resist harmful transitions in social and material infrastructure we rely on.

Addressing these issues, I ask the following research question: *what kind of collective capabilities are valued by civil society organisations in combatting digitally mediated far-right activity in Ireland*? What do these capabilities tell us about resisting transitions more broadly?

Organisations from across Irish civil society have begun to fight back against far-right extremism, and against demand-side and supply-side conditions that contribute to it. In this article I trace what one such organisation, *Uplift*, is doing.

Uplift, in their words, is 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.

This paper is organised as follows. In the next section I expand the discussion of the harms caused by far-right activity in Ireland and the role of digital technologies. In Section 3 I introduce thinking tools to guide Uplift's strategies in building collective capabilities that can respond to threats from far-right activity. In Section 4 I map collective capabilities as they are valued, realised and imagined by Uplift – novel empirical work. I test how these capabilities address the problems of far-right extremism in Section 5. In conclusion I speculate on how Uplift and other civil society organisations can oppose transitions and instead contribute to plural, radical transformation.

2. Transitions and civil society

In July 2020, Uplift wanted to know if and how people in Ireland were experiencing harms from far-right sources and disinformation. Four months into the Covid-19 pandemic, they

wanted to know how people felt about their online-lives. Staff solicited views from more than 250,000 members. 763 people responded through an online survey. These responses formed the basis of a subsequent submission to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on proposed changes to the forthcoming European Digital Services Act - an ambitious Europe-wide effort to tighten regulation and enforcement of life and commerce online (Uplift, 2020).

The majority of Uplift members reported that digital services are absolutely essential or very important to their way of life. However, these services have also led to increased exposure to illegal and harmful content. In the submission, *Uplift* staff member Shae Flannagan wrote:

> "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" (*ibid.*).

Just over half of respondents reported encountering discriminatory content or hate speech. Uplift members also noted the prevalence of content they considered harmful, but 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*.). Overall, the submission noted a declining trust in the ability of digital services to protect users from illegal and harmful content.

2.1 Uncivilising society. Far-right activity and ICT infrastructures

Improvements in the welfare of civil society is unlikely to occur through government action alone. It requires work from groups like Uplift. Not least because when it comes to countering digitally mediated far-right activity in Ireland, the state and technology firms are compromised. Powerful firms have vested interests in maintaining institutional arrangements, while government parties are reluctant to take on take on firms that employ thousands and contribute significant foreign direct investment. Because of this, collective organising and action instigated outside of the state and firms is vital.

Political and social theorist Michael Edwards highlights three ways collective life can be understood as civil society (2014). First as collections of people, communities and *associational life in broader society* that are explicitly not the state, not the private sectors, but that encompasses everything else. Second as *a kind of society,* a collection of norms and rules that reflect what a good and collective society can and should be, whether locally, nationally or even globally. And third, *as a public sphere,* a space created by and between people, knowledge and materials. That is infrastructures and processes that allows for democratic discourse, dialogue and practices. Far-right activity, mediated and normalised through ICT infrastructures harms civil society in each of these three dimensions.

First there are the harms of protests on the ground but organised through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram. Protests in Oughterard, and the meetings and door to door organising that took place to counter them took place in what Edwards would call part of society. These harms damage associational groupings in society, precluding migrants, undocumented workers, and other *out groups* in favour of nationalistic and nativistic concepts of associational life. Society is harmed then by extremist activity itself, and in how underlying nativistic values are subsequently reproduced by mainstream politicians.

Then there is the harm of harm of disinformation itself which "represents an evolving challenge to contemporary democratic processes and societal debate" (Teeling & Kirk, 2020). In a submission to the UK's Online Harms Whitepaper, a coalition of think tanks and civil society organisations said that:

> "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" (Digital Action, 2019, p. 3).

The harms of inauthentic and coordinated amplification of disinformation at scale can pose significant threats to democratic processes. They are responsible for both inauthentic and coordinated amplification on Facebook and Twitter. In Poland researchers found an anti-Semitic bot-net promoting an anti-Ukranian narration during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019). The same researchers found estimated that 9.6 million Spanish voters saw disinformation on WhatsApp during the same elections. And in Ireland, the government have themselves acknowledged the threat to democratic process as high (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Racism and other forms of hate speech online cause similar harms. Abuse and intimidation of public figures, especially women and especially individuals from minority groups in Ireland also constitute a threat to a healthy civil society and a functioning democracy. Whether through trolling or other forms of collective and sustained abuse. And as the Digital Action submission reports, "it's important to note that those with multi-intersecting identities will experience abuse differently, and in most cases will be disproportionately impacted."

In Section 5 I will discuss some proposed solutions to these issues and how civil society might contribute. For the moment it is sufficient to state that common solutions such as self-regulation and voluntary codes of practice tend to entrench power with incumbent platform firms and offer little prospect of deviating from uncivilising transitions.

2.2 Transitions in ICTs: change without progress

Technologists have their own myth of transition, disruption (Lepore, 2014). A quarter of a century ago, science and technology studies scholar Langdon Winner warned us about the effects of a heady mix of innovation and ideology emerging from Silicon Valley, and their underlying libertarian myths (Winner, 1997). These were "power fantasies" he wrote, that involved "the reinvention of society in *directions assumed* to be entirely favourable" (p.14, my italics). Winner's concern was that a narrow and poorly thought-through conception of technology-mediated community being pushed by west coast technologists had the potential to undermine or, in their word, disrupt ideas of what actual communities elsewhere in the world could and should be like.

Winner lamented the failure of attempts to direct complex, long-term social and technological change, transitions, through open-ended democratic discussion rather than libertarian reading lists. As he saw it, the stakes were so high because of the problems that confront democratic societies when a handful of organisations control the outlets for news, entertainment, opinions, artistic expression, political discourse and culture (p.16). In his conclusion, Winner posed two rhetorical questions worth asking again today (p.19):

> "Are the practices, relationships and institutions affected by people's involvement with networked computing ones we wish to foster? Or are they ones we must try to modify or even oppose?

If the case for opposition to was not already clear in 1997, it is now. Scholars like Shoshana Zuboff have shown how a small number of huge firms have realised variants of Winner's power fantasies at a significant and often unacknowledged cost to individuals, communities and open democratic societies (Zuboff, 2018). In benefitting far-right extremists, technology firms are not merely implicated as benign hosts of harmful content or as suppliers of infrastructure useful to bad actors. Firms such Alphabet have built platforms such as YouTube to maximise use and manipulate attention ahead of implementing standards that prioritise safety (Lewis, 2018). The issue says Digital Action is that:

> "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"

And even when acknowledging problems – when it comes to preventing advertising spend on racist content for example – firms like Facebook have both a disinclination and inability to take action (Gallagher, 2020).

Surveyed Uplift members said that illegal, harmful and false content was largely not reported to the platform, website or service by members. Where it was, it was rare that action was taken or a satisfactory outcome reached. One member wrote:

> "From what I have seen I'm wasting my time, [the] police don't seem to care and social media companies only worry about advertising revenue and the free publicity. It takes so long to take it down" (Uplift, 2020).

So where transitions have not been *"entirely favourable"*, where they have benefited the agendas of far-right extremists for example, how do civil society organisations like Uplift and their allies resist? Two things are required. First, a means of building collective capabilities capable of sustaining social mobilisations. Second, a way of re-imagining transitions that incorporates wider values through plural radical transformations.

2.3 From singular transitions to culturing plural radical transformations

Today, transitions thinking is commonly used by analysts to plot and control destinations towards future social and technological systems. Finished processes are scaled-up and end products diffused to achieve rapid transitions in, for example, sustainable energy infrastructures, automated transport systems, or ICT for economic development (Foster & Heeks, 2013; van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008). By emphasising the socio-technical nature of transitions analysts acknowledge the complex nature of change. In other words, how change is tied to science, knowledge, technologies, materials, institutions, laws, rules, routines and human practices configured in systems, infrastructures and the hurly-burly of our everyday lives.

But this kind of singular transitions thinking often precludes alternative visions of how our socio-technical infrastructures *could be* imagined. As public commons open to all for example, rather than digital enclosures where extremists can cause harms that are difficult or even impossible to police. Moreover, this type of thinking underplays how social progress is almost always the result of contention, confrontation and political choice (Stirling, O'Donovan, & Ayre, 2018).

Combatting these threats requires augmenting transitions thinking with alternative ways of understanding, resisting, and collectively steering change through democratic transformations. Work in these areas emphasises change as culturing plural radical progress (Stirling, 2014). That is, opening up and acknowledging the many possible pathways along which transitions might develop rather than accelerating towards destinations favourable only to incumbent firms. Such transformations emerge from collective action, building relations within and between communities and through participative imagining that admits that many future worlds are possible (Escobar, 2018). In this way, democratic transformations specifically broaden out processes of change to non-state and non-firm groups like communities, civil society organisations and NGOs, traditionally excluded from innovation.

In the following section I introduce a framework for cultivating collective action through human capabilities and following the empirical analysis, I reflect on prospects for broader transformations in Section 6.

3. A framework to fight back: building capabilities to resist

When we work together, we create change in the world. That's how Uplift's staff describe how they work. It's what they call their core theory of change. In practice, the theory works more like an imperative – it doesn't explain change, more it informs how Uplift's staff go about creating strategy and tactics that involve thousands of people acting together. This kind of mass collective action is the basis on which Uplift runs campaigns to hold governments and powerful firms accountable.

So what does this collective action look like in practice and how can we think about these practices in a way that might expand capacity to combat far-right extremism? Uplift staff work using a 'member-driven' model of how individual members relate to and act with each other and the core staff. This model is put into action through a set of organisational practices and digital listening methods (Dennis, 2018; Karpf, 2017) that track member motivations, values and propensity to act on a range of issues. Critical to their success is an ability to act quickly around an emerging political opportunity, often mobilising members via email within hours of a potential campaign issue emerging.

Digital listening methods include member polling, experimental email delivery techniques, surveys, real-time analysis of campaign-responsive fundraising and commissioning of short research tasks. These methods and practices that facilitate collective action are in turn underpinned by a set of human capabilities shared by core staff, members and allied organisations. Capabilities to collaborate, to coordinate, to enrol new members, to convert resources such as knowledge, funding and members' time and enthusiasm into further capabilities.

Using a set of concepts called the *capability approach*, we can empirically identify, evaluate and cultivate capabilities required to support these kinds of collective actions, peer production and group practices. Developed by ethicists and development economists

(Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), the capability approach provides normative and transformative perspectives on collective action. 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. In this article I am interested in learning what Uplift and their members wish to do and to be through collective action.

In terms of the capabilities approach, Uplift's mission can be understood as a goal to build of capability to take on entrenched and incumbent power via political action, that individuals alone would not be able to achieve. Capabilities like empowerment, political freedom and political participation (Stewart, 2013). The cultivation of capabilities is important in this task, according to Walker, 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" (2018, p. 56).

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 complaint ticket systems offered by platform firms, and take more active roles in democratic life (Cornwall, 2002; Ibrahim, 2017). Furthermore, a significant benefit the capability approach offers is the focus on the process of collective action over the end result. This draws attention to building collective agency in civil society, not just thin participation. That is "the capacity of the group to define common goals and the freedom to act to reach the chosen goals" (Pelenc, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015, p. 229).

So what exactly are these capabilities in the case of Uplift? This analysis follows Sen and Robeyns in seeing the capabilities valued and available to groups such as Uplift 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 innovation movement organisations can help guide our identification of capabilities in Uplift.

Four dimensions of capability building are important for this task (Pellicer-Sifres, Belda-Miquel, López-Fogués, & Boni Aristizábal, 2017). First, agency and agents. The members of organisations, staff, experts, and the agency they have individually and collectively to make change in the world. Second, the specific capabilities they value help direct our attention to purposes and objectives of transformation and vice versa. Third, the drivers or conversion factors. That is, the resources, rules and policies that convert resources into agency to achieve change. And fourth, processes such as deliberative democracy, and democratic decision making are vital. These processes drive, sustain and give meaning to collective action, and are themselves often contributory conversion factors which contribute to cultivating further capabilities.

The four dimensions of capability building are listed in Table 2 alongside analytic implications for collective action and Uplift.

Table 1. A framework for conceptualising capabilities for collective action

Concept	Implications for mapping collective capabilities at Uplift
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

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	things that make a difference in Uplift.
Valued capabilities	The capabilities staff, allied organisations and members of Uplift value. Indicate purposes and objectives of transformation
Drivers 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.

Data and methodology for mapping capabilities

Based on the concepts presented in Table 1, a set of grounded methods is required to map collective capabilities valued and available to Uplift. In doing this I build on interpretive methods for mapping human capabilities as they are situated in collaborative socio-material settings like hackspaces and open workshops (O'Donovan & Smith, 2020) and in transdisciplinary research projects (Michalec, Sobhani, & O'Donovan, 2021; O'Donovan, Michalec, & Moon, 2020).

Data was collected through conversations with Uplift staff and members, participation in workshops specifically on far-right activism in European contexts in 2020, as well as observations made through seven years of personal involvement with Uplift as a founding member of their board. These observations are grounded and triangulated with original desk-based research on state-of-the-art analysis by academics and think-tanks. Grey literature is particularly important in this field, and reports were identified using the search query (ireland far-right "far right" filetype:pdf site:*.ie) on DuckDuckGo and bootstrapping the query and snowballing following report content from there.

4. Mapping capabilities of Uplift

4.1 Mapping Uplift's core collective capabilities

Uplift staff initiate action following what they call 'burning bin' moments – when member sentiment or issues monitored on news media align with realistic opportunities for success. These are usually pressing opportunities for political and civic change that can be achieved through rapid online and offline-collective action. Uplift members, individuals who have participated in online or offline action, come from all over the country and have many different experiences and backgrounds (Uplift, 2020).

A core of eight full time, part time, administrative and volunteer staff, distributed throughout the country, plan and coordinate organisational activities as well as online and offline actions. Methods and tactical repertoire have been developed with, and learned from, similar advocacy groups like MoveOn in the US, Campact in Germany, 38 Degrees in the UK and GetUp! in Australia. Knowledge and technology exchange between these organisations is critical for Uplift – it allows them to rapidly learn from technological and organisational innovation elsewhere, and poos common resources such as technology stacks and development overheads.

These methods and technologies are configured for local contexts and form a core part of organisational campaigning practices. They are used by staff to create data-driven narratives about what campaigns members are participating in and funding, and what issues might make

for future campaigns. Success and collective agency is reflected back to members in subsequent calls to action creating narrative and data-driven feedback loops focussed on a core theory of change: when we work together we can take on incumbent political and corporate interests and we can win.

Uplift also contributes to insider policy work, protecting and shaping conversion factors for distributed collective capabilities in civil society. In 2018 for example, they were part of a Coalition for Civil Society Freedom (The Coalition for Civil Society Freedom, 2018) that sought to challenge interpretations of a 2001 Electoral Act that would curtail the activities of civil society organisations and threaten the democratic rights to freedom of association.

In summary, collective capabilities that are central to Uplift's core work are summarised on the first row of Table 2.

4.2 Collective capabilities for a far-right observatory valued by Uplift

> "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".

Siobhán O'Donoghue, Uplift's executive director, explains the motivation behind a project designed to tackle far-right activity from the ground up – by building what she calls a far-right observatory. This is an ambitious project that centres on an alliance of multiple civil society organisations in Ireland as well as representatives of communities directly affected by far-right activity. Their mission is build the kind of capabilities in and with civil society needed to combat far-right extremism.

The FRO will employ core staff to lead three sets of activities. First, what they call "resourcing civil society. Building relations between groups experiencing hate and far-right activity. Fostering capabilities within and between these groups through training, support and leadership building that will allow distributed responses to far-right mobilisation. Rapid response capabilities

Second, generating useful analysis and data that supports strategic analysis, policy formulation and decision making. This is about developing data tracking and monitoring infrastructure, publishing the results of regular and timely analysis on far-right activity in local and national settings, and carrying out rapid response analysis and intelligence gathering.

Third, piloting and testing effective approaches to disrupt far-right actors. This will be accomplished through campaigns for regulation and legislative changes. Moreover, through co-creative and peer produced projects, it will seek to create design interventions that test effectiveness of platforms user rules and accountability structures. This scope of work will also produce progressive message framing that

Initially incubated by Uplift with close assistance from others, the FRO is designed as a stand-alone organisation, closely supported by partner organisations and institutional funders through staff time, expertise, co-funding awards and other resource contributions.

While designed around Uplift's member-driven model, this ambition departs from Uplift's strategic template. Most notably, the FRO is not an advocacy campaign with a clearly identified win, or even specific target, be that government, corporate or far right actors themselves. Instead, there are distributed targets not all of whom are identifiable at the outset.

Not one clear government or corporate target. Uplift is usually very good at identifying these. Moreover, while the FRO is member-driven, there is also a network building aspect that will enrol expert knowledge and capabilities of individuals and organisations in the field. Configuring a high-trust coalition in which information and resources can flow quickly but the danger being that an extra layer of communication and negotiation, even with partners, has the potential to constrain valued capabilities of being nimble and agile in action. These capabilities and associated agents, drivers and processes are summarised on the second row of Table 2. This mapping of capabilities for an organisational project not yet fully realised is prospective. Nevertheless, this is both useful, and backed by conversations and plans. And assessing what capabilities *will be* needed for a civil society organisation is a task at least as helpful as post hoc evaluation. I will discuss implications for capabilities valued for wider transformations, the third row of the table, in Section 6.

Table 2. Notable agents, valued capabilities, drivers and processes for cultivation of collective capabilities at Uplift

	Agents and situated agency	Valued capabilities to…	Drivers	Processes
Core collective capabilities (empirical, retrospective)	Staff Members Colleagues at sister organisations overseas Configurations of digital listening and activism technologies	… coordinate, collaborate and campaign …mobilise 000's of members at specific moments on single issues …build group identities aligning with common values …hold powerful interests to account	Technology development Common resource pooling Policy and legislation on civil society activities (e.g. SIPO) An open, civil society based on values of liberal democracy A permeable and inclusive networked membership model	Reflexive storytelling, focussing on collective successes Collective intelligence gathering on member interests Open up and tap into often deficient processes of democracy at the exogenous institutional level
Capabilities valued for Far-Right Observatory (empirical, prospective)	Domain expert analysts Leadership trainers Community networks Network builders Allied politicians Funders Configurations of tracking and monitoring technologies that enables evidence gathering	…enrol and build new communities experiencing hate …respond rapidly to far-right mobilisation efforts IRL …contribute analysis that aligns with FRO / Uplift values and visions …conduct rapid response research and intelligence gathering …campaign for effective	Appropriate legislative settings Enforceable regulations Shared understanding of the threat posed by far-right activity Research, data and collective intelligence on far-right organising	Appropriate accountability processes and structures within platforms and between platforms and civil society Collective intelligence production across institutional settings

		legislation		
Capabilities valued for wider transformations (analytic, speculative)	Broad coalition of funders	...mediate accountability vis-a-vis governance of internet platforms ...contribute to production of national scale socio-technical imaginaries ...realise plural technological pathways ...capabilities to steer research, innovation and transformation ...peer produce and democratise technology	Open commons	Open research, design and innovation processes Forms of technology democracy

5. Discussion: aligning collective capabilities with solutions for far-right activity

In order to assess how Uplift's collective capabilities identified in Table 2 align with the issues discussed in Section 2, I recapitulate the harms caused in Ireland of far-right activity on four levels. First in terms of real-world harms as carried out by bad actors such as violent street protesters. Second in terms of content mediated online and the platforms that host them. Third in terms of the firms, markets and infrastructures and how they order social relations. And finally, in terms of broader society and democracy. Note, these heuristic levels are strategically chosen to aid analytic comparison – they are not ideal types. This analysis is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Representative threats and harms of internet-mediated far-right activity and disinformation and implications for civil society

Analytic level	Harms and threats of internet mediated far-right extremism and disinformation	Implications for civil society's role in steering and resisting transitions
Real-world harms	Individual harms such as violence inflicted by bad actors.	Strengthening rule of law, ensuring enforcement of legislation
Content and platforms	Individual harms such as threats and hate speech Harms inflicted on those most likely already marginalised in society Insufficient transparency for far-right/political advertising Individuals and groups have ineffective or insufficient methods to report harms – effectively silenced	Status quo: civil society consulted, not empowered Status Quo: Privatising the judiciary. Current codes of conduct insufficient to prevent ongoing harms Civil society has a role to set the terms of which content is regulated Civil society to address issues of justice for victims of far-right extremism
Firms, markets and infrastructures	Harms structured by socio-material configurations of knowledge, human relations, gradients of power. Lack of accountability relations between users and owners of platforms a contributing process Deficit of	Focus on establishing and maintaining relations and obligations between firms and civil society. For example: responsibility, accountability, control and care and other forms of power Issues of justice and redress.

Society and democracy	Harms leading to the curtailment of public sphere	Maintaining participation, broader governance, liberal democracy.
	Harms to democratic discourse	Instigating and participating in accountability structures across mainstream journalism and media hosting.
	Space for debate amongst publics is curtailed. Nature of debates are bifurcated. For example: "with us or against us" framings for example in Covid-19 governance debates	

Let's test how collective capabilities cultivated within the FRO might address the problems discussed in Section 2 by considering each row of Table 3. When it comes to real-world harms, far-right extremist actions are illegal – they should primarily be addressed through legal sanction (Mudde, 2019). Here Uplift's and the FRO's aim to create intelligence and early warning is appropriate. Moreover, Uplift's core collective capabilities of holding politicians and legislators to account is also well suited to raising awareness about failures of enforcement.

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 is not sufficient to mitigate harms (Teeling & Kirk, 2020). Global content guidelines are often inattentive to local culture and context, and self-regulation risks privatising judicial process (Hope Not Hate, 2020). Moreover, 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.

Uplift and the FRO then has 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 consideration of who is being silenced and who is being excluded. Moreover, the FRO might assure an explicit and expert focus on justice, through collaborative work with domain expert FRO partners such as the Irish Council of Civil Liberties, already part of the founding group. These might be underpinned by collective capabilities for campaigning and aligning common values across the FRO and Uplift.

Regulating firms, markets and infrastructures tends to take place at national and trans-national level. Proposals include national and transnational social media councils (Article 19, 2019), cross-sectoral voluntary codes of conduct for platform firms, and forthcoming regulation such as the European Union's Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2020) and the UK's Online Harms Act (HM Government, 2019). More radically, proposals for alternative cooperative and community platform models, digital infrastructure commons and the nationalisation of existing platforms have been made but remain marginalised.

Here Uplift and the FRO's must be attentive to social media councils that shield rather than police the activities of platform firms and extremist users – collective capabilities that open-up meaningful and material participation are essential. Coordinated collective action is

required nationally and across the European Union in order to mitigate the influence of special interest lobbyists in Dublin and Brussels. In these tasks the FRO, through Uplift already have core capabilities for collaborating with sister organisations across the continent.

Finally, wider threats to civil discourse are more complex if no less urgent. In work examining disinformation during 2020 US elections, Yochai Benkler and colleagues show that solving problems of disinformation isn't just about factchecking Facebook – rather accountability structures across mainstream media networks and journalism must change (Benkler et al., 2020). After all it is wider infrastructures and institutions that normalise, give legitimacy, make collective meaning of disinformation and far-right content. The scope of capabilities required these kinds of tasks centre on maintaining participation in socio-material configurations such as media and internet platforms, in broader governance, and in processes of liberal democracy. These are themes I take up in the Conclusion.

In summary then, this broad-brush analysis indicates that Uplift and the Far-Right Observatory are well-placed to cultivate collective capabilities. What's clear already however is that in its name, the FRO must do more than passively observe. Table 2 answers the first research question and shows what kind of collective capabilities are valued by Uplift and allied civil society organisations in Ireland. It also indicates that broad configuration of agency, technology, funding, drivers and processes are required to sustain collective capabilities. Exactly how remains a matter of testing, experimentation and future research.

6. Conclusion: from resisting disruption to culturing transformation [500]

We must be careful in drawing conclusions from this explorative work. The value of this kind of grounded inquiry is in tracing social and material phenomena in context. That is cultivating collective capabilities in Ireland to address far-right extremism. It is in this spirt these following conclusions are offered.

So what, if anything, do these findings tell us about resisting transitions more broadly? Most importantly, collective capabilities and decision-making forces us to consider the question of action *by and on behalf of whom*? In other words, who decides in which directions transitions proceed? Attending to this question, civil society organisations can cultivate capabilities, and lobby for the conditions and conversion factors that can resist, shape and steer transitions. This *steering* is made possible when people and communities are given the possibility of collectively resisting framings of technology that assert inevitability and control. Moreover, by using the capability approach, I have highlighted the interplay between individual and collective capabilities on the one hand, and the drivers and conversion factors on the other.

In both of these regards, the capabilities approach framework presented here offers not so much a roadmap with a set destination, but rather a guiding compass for strategists intent on enhancing collective capabilities and putting diverse values and interests at the heart of their strategies.

What about prospects for instigating radical transformations that, following Arturo Escobar (see discussion, Section 2), are emergent from collective action, relation building and participative imagining? Work from sustainability scholars Saurabh Arora and colleagues (2020) offer some guidance. They propose collective action and policy interventions that can instigate radical transformations along more societally directed pathways. Their work indicates that these can be achieved though directing greater attention to distinctions between

the forms of power afforded by socio-material configurations and not merely instrumentally given end results.

Applied to the context of digitally mediated far-right extremism, that means taking seriously how gradients of power in, for example, social media platforms, open up or close down our collective capabilities to hold firms and users accountable, or ensure that relations with community members remain convivial or even emancipatory. Exploring relationships between embedded gradients of power within socio-material configurations offers at least one exciting prospect for future empirical work in this domain. And the capabilities approach, enlivened with ideas from science and technology studies, offers a way of robustly and systematically testing these communications infrastructures that have become central to our ways of living.

Finally, the substantive goal of this paper has been achieved. I have identified and differentiated collective capabilities valued by Uplift and allies in Ireland in their fight against far-right extremism. These conceptual and empirical results might form the basis of future work that will set out the configurations of agents, drivers and processes required to cultivate and sustain such capabilities. In the meantime, this is a matter of ongoing and urgent work by Uplift, their staff and hundreds of thousands of members committed to making society in Ireland more civil.

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