

SOUTHPORT

RIOT



Inside the UK's
Anti-Immigrant
Disinformation
Ecosystem



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SOUTHPORT RIOT: Inside the UK's Anti-Immigrant Disinformation Ecosystem

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The Nerve began as a data-driven investigative initiative to map the disinformation ecosystem in the Philippines. Originating from work with Rappler, the country's top digital-only news outlet, we developed a methodology to track narrative manipulation and online influence operations. Since 2016, our research has exposed domestic and international disinformation campaigns, leading to the takedown of high-reach networks and supporting the work of activists, journalists, and advocates.

Today, The Nerve blends investigative rigor with data science—combining human and machine intelligence to analyze how digital ecosystems shape behavior. Our multi-disciplinary team includes data scientists, journalists, analysts, and strategists, all working together to deliver actionable insights from complex data environments. We specialize in social listening, NLP-driven topic clustering, and large-scale network analysis.

Our core offerings—Reputation & Crisis Strategy, Data Forensics, and Community Building—are anchored in our journalistic roots and a shared mission: to decode digital narratives and turn data into strategy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from The Nerve's investigation into the online information ecosystem surrounding the Southport Riot and the broader rise of anti-immigrant disinformation in the United Kingdom. Drawing from over 27 million social media posts across X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok between October 2022 and November 2024, and complemented by a nationally representative YouGov survey (n=2,000; conducted December 6–11, 2024), the study reveals how long-running disinformation campaigns, powered by far-right networks and global influencers, primed online communities for unrest – and how a single crisis event ignited a nationwide wave of protest and hate.

At the center of this unrest was the tragic stabbing in Southport on July 29, 2024. False claims about the suspect's immigration status emerged almost immediately, sparking a digital backlash that quickly escalated into real-world violence.¹ This disinformation – crafted to exploit existing fears and frustrations – was picked up and amplified by nationalist groups, right-wing media outlets, and anonymous accounts.² From July 30 to August 5, violent protests erupted in 23 towns and cities across the UK, fueled by anti-immigrant sentiment.

The report uncovers a structured lifecycle of disinformation: narratives are seeded in niche echo chambers, reinforced through repetition and community validation, and opportunistically amplified during crises. This cycle is accelerated by platform-specific features, such as algorithmic boosts and insular group dynamics, that reward engagement over information.

Key to this amplification is a range of malign actors: Communities aligned with Reform UK, conspiracy groups, hyper-partisan influencers, and verified X Premium users with high visibility. These actors leveraged emotionally charged content to frame immigrants as threats to public safety, economic stability, and British identity. Global figures like Elon Musk and Andrew Tate fanned out these narratives, bridging UK discourse with broader transnational conspiracies.³

The consequences are tangible. Disinformation around the Southport Riot directly influenced public opinion, shifted political alignments, and exacerbated hostility toward immigrants. Support for Reform UK surged, distrust in mainstream media deepened, and a significant number of UK immigrants reported increased feelings of fear, exclusion, and discrimination.⁴

¹ CNN, Two Children Killed and Nine Injured in Knife Rampage at Taylor Swift-Themed Dance Class in Southport. July 29, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/29/uk/northern-england-stabbing-intl/index.html>; Dogar, Babar, and Brian Melley. "Pakistan Authorities Charge Man with Cyberterrorism over Misinformation That Sparked Riots in U.K." Los Angeles Times, August 21, 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-08-21/pakistan-authorities-charge-man-with-cyber-terrorism-over-misinformation-that-sparked-riots-in-uk>.

² Al Jazeera, Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation?, August 2, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/2/southport-stabbing-what-led-to-the-spread-of-disinformation>; NPR, UK's Worst Riots in Years Were Incited by Online Disinformation About Asylum Seekers, August 10, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/10/nx-s1-5066896/uks-worst-riots-in-years-were-incited-by-online-disinformation-about-asylum-seekers>.

³ CNN, Elon Musk Says 'Civil War Is Inevitable' as UK Rocked by Far-Right Riots, August 6, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/06/tech/elon-musk-civil-war-uk-riots/index.html>; The Guardian, No 10 Criticises Elon Musk for 'Civil War Is Inevitable' Post on England Riots, August 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/05/no-10-criticises-elon-musk-post-x-riots>.

⁴ The Telegraph, Reform Would Now Beat Labour to Be Largest Party, Poll Shows, April 20, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/04/20/reform-labour-more-in-common-opinion-poll-largest-party>; More in Common, More in Common's April MRP: Reform Surges, Labour Slips, April 2025, <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/more-in-common-s-april-mrp>.

The study finds that the UK's regulatory framework, including the Online Safety Act, fails to adequately address the mechanisms by which disinformation spreads. While current policies focus on illegal or harmful content, they overlook the strategic, patterned manipulation of online discourse that enables narratives to gain power over time.

KEY FINDINGS

Trigger Event The tragic stabbing in Southport was strategically exploited by right-wing actors to escalate pre-existing anti-immigrant narratives into widespread unrest.

Pre-seeded Narratives Disinformation was systematically planted and nurtured long before the Southport incident, creating a receptive environment for rapid amplification during crises.

Central Role of Malign Actors Far-right groups, hyper-partisan media such as GB News, and anonymous online accounts played critical roles in spreading and legitimizing false claims.

Platform Dynamics Algorithmic incentives on platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube accelerated the dissemination of emotionally charged and divisive content, rewarding outrage and engagement over accuracy.

Global Amplification International right-wing influencers, notably Elon Musk and Andrew Tate, significantly boosted these harmful narratives, connecting domestic unrest to broader global conspiracy networks.

This report underscores the urgent need for regulatory reform and platform accountability. Addressing the spread of harmful narratives requires moving beyond content moderation and toward a deeper understanding of the networks, incentives, and crisis triggers that sustain digital disinformation.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

On July 29, 2024, a stabbing at a dance studio in Southport, Merseyside, left three people seriously injured.⁵ Within hours, disinformation began circulating online, falsely identifying the suspect as “Ali Al-Shakati,” an asylum seeker who had arrived by boat.⁶ In reality, the suspect was a 17-year-old British-born citizen from Cardiff. Yet the narrative stuck. Over the next week, violent protests erupted in 23 towns across the UK, driven by digital outrage and a wave of anti-immigrant disinformation.

To understand why this false narrative gained such traction, it’s essential to look beyond the immediate incident. Over the past two decades, the UK has experienced significant demographic change. Migration has steadily increased since the early 2000s, shaped by EU expansion, economic opportunity, and global displacement crises. By 2021, more than 18% of residents in England and Wales were born outside the UK, up from 13% in 2011.⁷ In 2022, the UK received over 74,000 asylum applications, the highest number in 20 years.⁸

While major cities have long absorbed immigration flows, smaller towns like Southport have, more recently, become sites of settlement

under the UK’s asylum dispersal policy, a strategy to relieve housing pressure in urban areas. Southport itself has seen a rise in migrant populations from the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe.⁹ These changes often occurred without adequate integration support or public communication, leaving some communities feeling caught off guard.¹⁰

Nationally, anti-immigration sentiment has been building since the 2015 European migration crisis and intensified during Brexit. Recent policies, including the Illegal Migration Bill and the now-defunct Rwanda deportation scheme, appeared to have hardened political views on immigration.¹¹ Meanwhile, right-wing media and online actors began framing immigration in terms of crisis and threat, laying the groundwork for a rapid narrative uptake when flashpoints such as Southport occur.

The incident in Southport happened against a backdrop of long-term demographic shifts, rising migration, and contentious policy debates. These factors shaped how the event was perceived, and help explain why it resonated so widely and quickly across the country.

⁵ Rainsford, Sarah. “Three Injured in Southport Studio Stabbing.” BBC News, July 29, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-66374899>.

⁶ Dogar and Melley, “Pakistan Authorities Charge Man with Cyberterrorism.”

⁷ Office for National Statistics. 2021 Census: Ethnic Group, National Identity, Language and Religion in England and Wales. London: ONS, 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/ethnicgroupnationalidentitylanguageandreligionenglandandwalescensus2021>.

⁸ Home Office. Immigration Statistics: Asylum, Year Ending December 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2022>.

⁹ Refugee Council. Refugee Dispersal Policy: A Review of Local Authority Participation. London: Refugee Council, July 2021. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>.

¹⁰ Centre for Cities. Integration Without Infrastructure: How Dispersal Policy Challenges Local Capacity. Policy briefing, 2020. <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/integration-without-infrastructure>.

¹¹ Home Office. Illegal Migration Bill: Policy Statement. March 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-policy-paper>; Taylor, Diane. “Supreme Court Rules UK’s Rwanda Deportation Plan Is Unlawful.” The Guardian, November 15, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/nov/15/supreme-court-uk-rwanda-deportation-plan-unlawful>.

Why It Escalated Online

The Southport disinformation campaign didn't emerge in a vacuum but tapped into an online ecosystem already saturated with anti-immigrant narratives. As early as 2022, conspiracy groups, far-right accounts, and nationalist communities had circulated content portraying immigrants as threats to public safety, cultural identity, and economic stability.

These narratives were reinforced in tightly insulated online spaces like Facebook groups, Telegram channels, and partisan X networks where repetition created the illusion of consensus. Platform algorithms further amplified the effect, prioritizing emotionally charged, polarizing content that rewarded outrage with visibility. By the time the Southport incident occurred, the digital infrastructure needed to weaponize it was already in place.

Together, these dynamics meant that disinformation was not only disseminated, it was amplified, validated, and entrenched.

Seeding

1 - Narrative creation

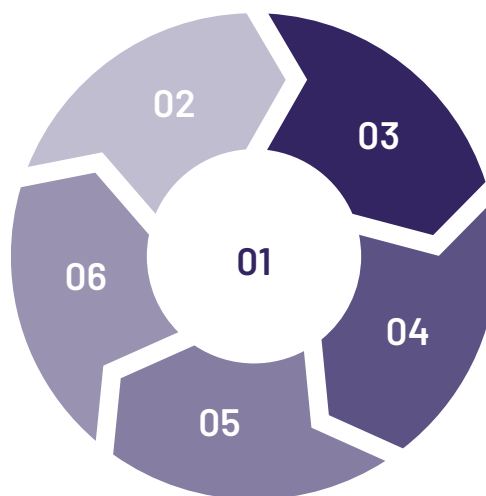
Malign actors craft disinformation narratives based on current events or societal vulnerabilities.

2 - Platform-specific amplification

Narratives are tailored to platform-specific dynamics (e.g., short videos on TikTok, alarmist content on YouTube).

3 - Audience polarization

Disinformation divides audiences, creating "us vs. them" dynamics that foster emotional engagement.



**Anti-immigrant
disinformation lifecycle**

Opportunistic Amplification

4. Echo chamber reinforcement

Polarized groups form isolated communities where disinformation is repeated and normalized.

5. Event-triggered spikes

Specific events (e.g., Southport riots) reignite and amplify narratives.

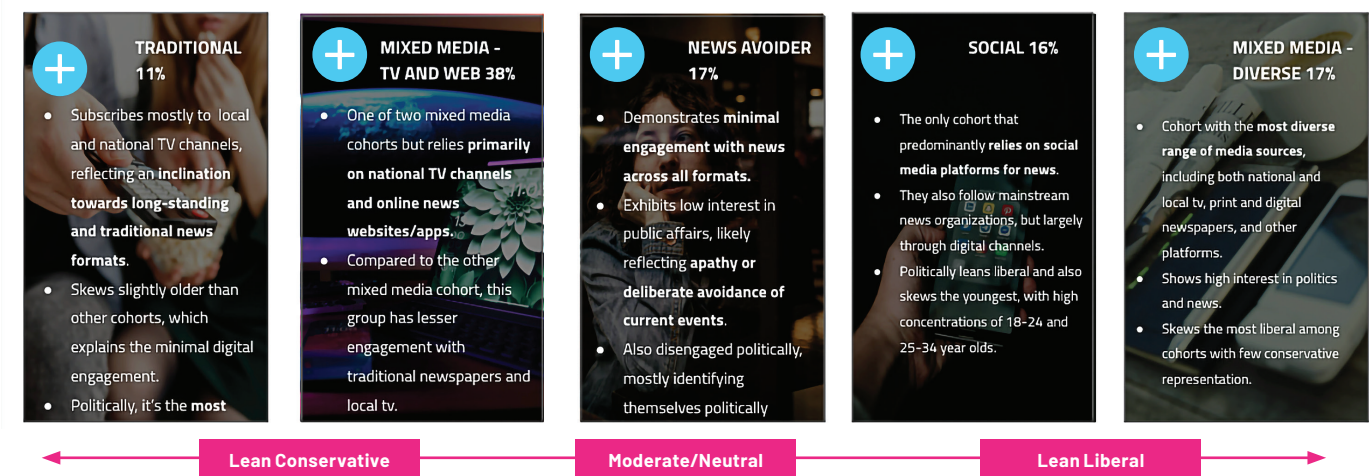
6. Narrative Adaptation

Feedback from audience reactions and new events inform the evolution of disinformation.

The disinformation that catalyzed the Southport Riot took root in a media environment where social media is not just a communication tool, but one of the UK’s dominant sources of news.

Survey data from *The Nerve’s 2024 UK Information Ecosystem Study* found that 55% of UK adults rely on a mix of traditional and digital platforms for news, while an additional 16% rely primarily on social media platforms—such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube—as their main source. Among younger cohorts (ages 18–34), these platforms are especially prominent and frequently cited as primary news sources.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION COHORTS



Source: The Nerve, *UK Public Opinion and Disinformation Survey*, conducted by YouGov Omnibus from December 6–11, 2024. The survey is nationally representative, based on a sample of 2,000 UK adults aged 18 and above, stratified by age, gender, region, and political affiliation. Respondents were grouped into five media consumption cohorts based on their preferred news formats and platforms.

This reflects broader national trends. Ofcom’s *News Consumption in the UK 2023* report found that while television remains the most-used platform overall, social media has overtaken print newspapers as a primary news source among younger audiences.¹² TikTok, in particular, saw significant growth, reaching 28% of 16–24-year-olds in the UK as a news source. Similarly, the Reuters Institute has documented how news is increasingly encountered passively through algorithmic feeds and peer sharing, rather than direct engagement with trusted outlets.¹³

¹² Ofcom. *News Consumption in the UK: 2023 Report*. London: Office of Communications, July 2023. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/264377/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2023-report.pdf

¹³ Newman, Nic, et al. *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 2023. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>.

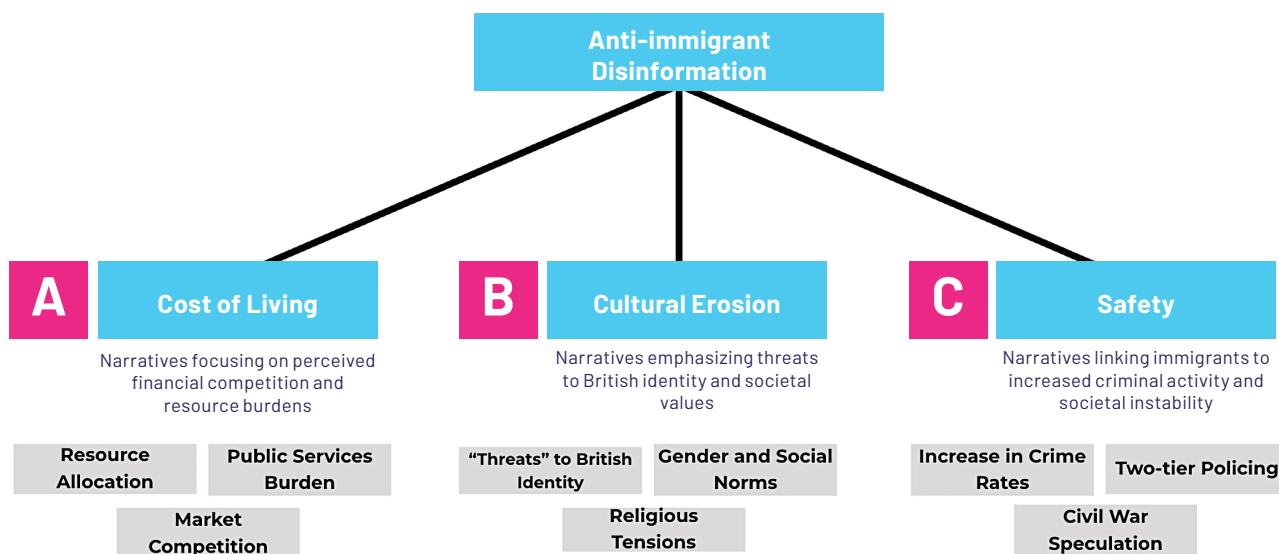
ANTI-IMMIGRANT DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is not merely “content,” but a strategic process. It begins with narrative seeding, becomes normalized within echo chambers reinforced by social media architecture, and gains traction through opportunistic amplification during moments of crisis.

Narrative Seeding: Disinformation Before the Riots

As early as two years before the Southport incident, anti-immigrant narratives had been systematically seeded into online communities. Common themes included:

Anti-immigrant narratives before and after the Southport Riot



Pensioners vs. Immigrants: Claims alleging that the UK government diverted resources from pensioners to support immigrants.

Two-Tier Policing Myth: Assertions that law enforcement favored immigrants over native-born citizens.

Public Services Overload: Repeated messaging suggesting immigrants overwhelmed public resources like the NHS, schools, and housing.

Cultural Erosion: Depictions of immigration, particularly Muslim communities and multicultural policies, as threats to traditional British values.

These claims were potent precisely because they tapped into long-standing anxieties rooted in socio-political developments over the past decade. The disinformation that followed the Southport tragedy – portraying immigrants as burdens on pensions, protected by police, overwhelming public services, or eroding British culture – resonated because it echoed real grievances, even if distorted or exaggerated.

First, years of austerity left many Britons, especially pensioners and low-income families, feeling sidelined.¹⁴ In this context, media reports of asylum seekers being housed in hotels or receiving state support, however temporary or legally required, were reframed to suggest that immigrants were being prioritized.¹⁵ Controversial proposals like the Rwanda deportation plan and debates over the Illegal Migration Bill further polarized public opinion, adding to the perception that immigration policy was out of touch with public concern.¹⁶

At the same time, public services such as the NHS, education, and housing have been under visible strain. While the root causes lie in years of underinvestment and staffing shortages,

disinformation campaigns have consistently used immigrants as a scapegoat – the reason for service breakdowns – and offered a simple and emotive explanation for complex systemic failures.¹⁷

Perceptions of unequal policing also played a role. High-profile protests in recent years, particularly comparisons between how authorities handled Black Lives Matter rallies and anti-lockdown or right-wing demonstrations, sparked claims of bias.¹⁸ Though often anecdotal or selectively framed, these incidents laid the groundwork for the “two-tier policing” myth that flourished online following the Southport attack.

Cultural anxiety sharpened the impact of these narratives. Rapid demographic shifts and public debates around multiculturalism, religion in schools, and British identity have been flashpoints in recent years.¹⁹ High-profile cases, like the backlash in Sadiq Khan’s comments on diversity or controversies over “decolonising” the history curriculum, have been repeatedly used by far-right actors to push the idea that immigration undermines national values.²⁰

¹⁴ Hastings, Annette et al. The Cost of the Cuts: The Impact on Local Government and Poorer Communities. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/cost-cuts-impact-local-government-and-poorer-communities>.

¹⁵ Bulman, May. “Asylum Seekers Housed in Hotels at Cost of £1.2m a Day, Home Office Reveals.” The Independent, November 26, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asylum-seekers-hotels-cost-home-office-b1964086.html>.

¹⁶ Taylor, Diane. “Supreme Court Rules UK’s Rwanda Deportation Plan Is Unlawful.” The Guardian, November 15, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/nov/15/supreme-court-uk-rwanda-deportation-plan-unlawful>; Home Office, Illegal Migration Bill, 2023; Taylor, “UK’s Rwanda Deportation Plan Is Unlawful.”

¹⁷ Stoye, George. “Does Immigration Put Pressure on the NHS?” The Health Foundation, March 2019. <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/does-immigration-put-pressure-on-the-nhs>.

¹⁸ Townsend, Mark. “Black Lives Matter Protests Prompted ‘Double Standards’ in Police Tactics, Say Critics.” The Guardian, June 7, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/07/black-lives-matter-protests-police-double-standards>.

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics. 2021 Census: Ethnic Group, National Identity, Language and Religion in England and Wales. London: ONS, 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/ethnicgroupnationalidentitylanguageandreligionenglandandwalescensus2021>; Ford, Robert, and Matthew Goodwin. National Identity, Cultural Anxiety, and Brexit: Understanding the Leave Vote. In Political Quarterly, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12458>; House of Commons Library. Faith Schools in England: Current Issues. Briefing Paper Number 07070, June 2022. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07070/>.

²⁰ Elgot, Jessica. “Khan Accused of Promoting ‘Woke Agenda’ after Diversity Comments.” The Guardian, April 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/apr/03/khan-accused-promoting-woke-agenda>; Adams, Richard. “Row over History Curriculum ‘Decolonising’ Plan Deepens.” The Guardian, October 5, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/oct/05/row-history-curriculum-decolonising-plan-uk-schools>.

Echo Chamber Reinforcement: Normalizing Hate

Anti-immigrant disinformation was then reinforced in insular digital communities that served as echo chambers—spaces where false claims were repeated, emotionally validated, and rarely challenged. These groups played a crucial role in normalizing disinformation narratives and building collective grievance before they reached broader audiences.

Facebook, where nationalist groups and Reform UK pages echoed the same posts across dozens of communities, creating the illusion of widespread consensus.

X, where anti-immigrant narratives circulated among tightly linked accounts with minimal ideological diversity.

YouTube, where right-wing channels and partisan influencers linked immigration to national decline in emotionally charged videos.

TikTok, where short videos framed immigration as a threat to safety, economic stability, and cultural heritage.

Opportunistic Amplification: Southport as a Catalyst

The Southport stabbing acted as a catalyst, providing a crisis moment that allowed pre-seeded disinformation to rapidly escalate. Malign actors immediately exploited the event, falsely identifying the suspect as a Muslim asylum seeker despite evidence to the contrary. This narrative resonated powerfully due to existing grievances, dramatically amplifying online engagement. Following the incident:

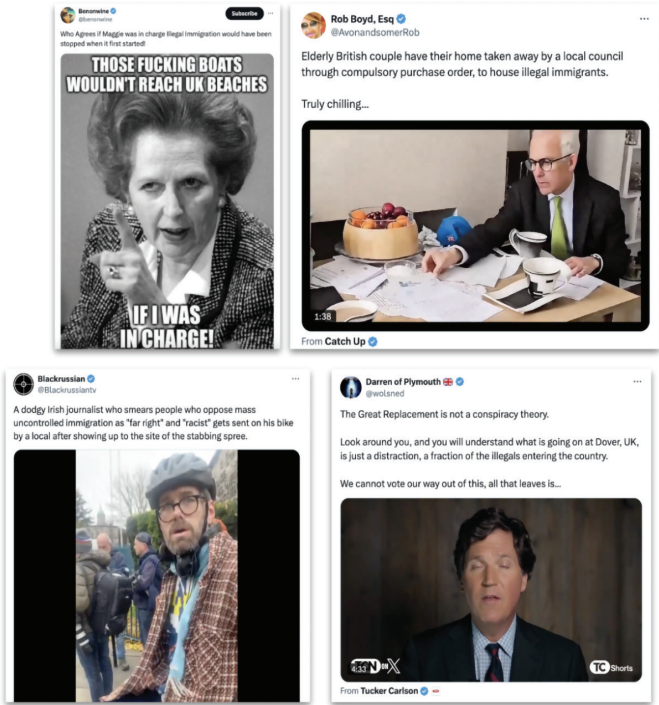
Disinformation posts surged across X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok.

Misleading content was reposted and re-shared by accounts aligned with Reform UK, conspiracy forums, and far-right influencers.

Content volume peaked between July 30 and August 5, coinciding with nationwide protests.

Some of the most viral content did not come from official sources but came from anonymous or fringe accounts, including sock puppets and verified X Premium users with ideological agendas.

Verified anonymous accounts posting anti-immigrant narratives



USERNAME	NO. OF FOLLOWERS
benonwine	115,066
Blackrussian	91,870
wolsned	89,710
AvonandsomerRob	88,351
melanoma321	83,457
ROYALMRBADNEWS	77,205
LittleBoats2020	74,581
helen44767171	70,341
Sandra73372316	70,062
AkkadSecretary	65,061
ASK_des	62,564
DarrenPlymouth	60,897
peterstopcrime	60,780
boblistor_poole	56,271
HerdImmunity12	53,759
HHepplewhite	42,807
45johnmac	36,986
dunstablian	28,407
CMY1952	25,031
PhoneixReloaded	23,772
whitepilledpage	23,524
DavidHadley1973	16,782
johnsitme	13,492
Kalimeralynn	12,336
Evelynrei6	12,092
heather_venter	7,552

Platform-Specific Dynamics: How Narratives Spread

Each platform had distinct characteristics that shaped how disinformation was spread and received:

- X (formerly Twitter)** Prominent verified right-wing influencers, including Elon Musk, amplified disinformation by legitimizing false narratives and hashtags.
- Facebook** Rapid dissemination occurred through nationalist and partisan groups, accelerating misinformation via emotionally resonant memes, doctored imagery, and out-of-context videos.
- YouTube and TikTok** Emotionally charged visual content, often designed to provoke fear and outrage, linked immigration explicitly to crime, economic instability, and societal breakdown.

Each platform not only enabled disinformation, but, in many cases, incentivized it through engagement-driven algorithms and lax enforcement.

MALIGN ACTORS AND IMPACT

Anti-immigrant disinformation was actively sustained and amplified by a diverse ecosystem of malign actors, ranging from hyper-partisan media figures to anonymous online accounts. These actors strategically exploited social media dynamics, significantly influencing public perceptions and behavior.

Disinformation Drivers

1) Hyper-Partisan Media and Influencers

Outlets like **GB News**, **TalkTV**, and **The New Culture Forum** played central roles in promoting and legitimizing false narratives. These platforms often blurred the line between opinion and reporting, framing immigration as a crisis and offering little pushback on unverified claims.

Key voices included:

- **Darren Grimes**, a GB News commentator, who helped introduce and amplify the “two-tier policing” myth.
- **Peter Whittle** and **Matt Goodwin**, who positioned themselves as thought leaders while pushing divisive cultural narratives.

These figures gave an air of legitimacy to fringe views, helping them reach broader audiences and appear “mainstream.”

2) Anonymous and Sock Puppet Accounts

The study identified a subset of sock puppet accounts—profiles with vague identities, low friend counts, and suspicious posting patterns—that acted as narrative multipliers.

These accounts often:

- Shared identical disinformation across multiple Facebook groups.
- Posed as “concerned citizens” to feign grassroots authenticity.
- Cross-posted between nationalist, anti-Labour, and Reform UK-aligned communities.
- Engaged disproportionately in posts about immigration, cultural decline, and crime.

This covert activity made narratives appear more widespread and “organic” than they actually were.

3) Global Far-Right Influencers

High-profile figures with transnational reach magnified UK disinformation narratives:

- **Elon Musk** reposted and endorsed anti-immigrant and anti-government content, including the widely circulated #TwoTierKeir hashtag. His replies frequently outperformed the original posts, giving algorithmic boosts to disinformation.
- **Andrew Tate** reframed the Southport unrest as a battle against “globalist elites,” linking immigration with loss of cultural control and government betrayal.
- **Tommy Robinson, Ian Miles Cheong, and Andy Ngo** shared content that cast immigrants as violent and lawless, often drawing false connections to unrelated events (e.g., the Leeds riot).

These influencers served as bridges between UK disinformation and global far-right narratives, amplifying reach and embedding UK-specific grievances into broader ideological frameworks.

Impact on Public Sentiment

The disinformation campaign around Southport did not remain confined to online spaces. It had tangible, real-world effects on public attitudes, media ecosystems, and political affiliations.

1) Political Shifts: Reform UK's Ascent

Disinformation narratives directly supported the political rise of Reform UK, which positioned itself as the only party willing to confront “the immigration crisis.” Survey data showed:

- A dramatic increase in support for Reform UK, placing it just 1% behind Labour in voting intention at the time of the study.²¹
- Over 80% of Reform supporters believe immigration causes or worsens strain on public services, crime rates, and shifts in societal values.²²

The party's messaging was tightly aligned with the disinformation ecosystem—echoing its claims, capitalizing on its fears, and reinforcing its legitimacy.

²¹ YouGov. “First YouGov Voting Intention Since 2024 General Election Shows a Close Contest between Labour and Reform UK.” July 12, 2024. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/51329-first-yougov-voting-intention-since-2024-general-election-shows-a-close-contest-between-labour-and-reform-uk>.

²² The Nerve. UK Public Opinion and Disinformation Survey. Conducted by YouGov Omnibus for The Nerve, December 6–11, 2024. n = 2,000, UK adults aged 18+.

2) Public Trust and Polarization

The amplification of anti-immigrant narratives also led to:

- A deepening distrust in mainstream media, particularly among Reform UK and UKIP supporters. In our survey, 64% of Reform UK supporters and 59% of UKIP supporters believed that media coverage of immigration was biased in favor of immigrants.²³
- Growing hostility toward immigrants, with 32% of UK immigrants reporting that they now feel less welcome in public spaces, 27% citing increased experiences of verbal or online harassment, and 21% reporting mental health strain linked to rising anti-immigrant rhetoric.²⁴

These sentiments were most pronounced in communities exposed to high volumes of disinformation content—particularly on Facebook and X.

3) Mainstreaming of Fringe Views

Previously fringe conspiracy theories, such as the “Great Replacement,” two-tier policing, or claims of reverse racism, have entered public discourse through high-visibility figures and media channels. The normalization of these views reflects how online disinformation can reshape cultural norms and legitimize exclusionary ideologies.

²³ The Nerve, UK Public Opinion and Disinformation Survey.

²⁴ The Nerve, UK Public Opinion and Disinformation Survey.

REGULATORY AND PLATFORM GAPS

The Southport disinformation campaign exposed significant shortcomings in both the UK's regulatory frameworks and the governance models of major social media platforms. While the UK has made recent strides in online safety regulation, most notably through the Online Safety Act (OSA), these efforts remain poorly equipped to address the complex, coordinated, and cross-platform dynamics that drive disinformation at scale.

What this study highlights is not a failure to remove “harmful content” per se, but a deeper failure to address the mechanisms that make disinformation effective: networked amplification, algorithmic incentives, and the legitimization of falsehoods through influential figures and political actors.

The Limits of the Online Safety Act

The OSA was designed to reduce exposure to illegal content, protect children online, and demand greater transparency from platforms. However, the study finds it falls short in critical ways:

Focus on content, not patterns: The OSA primarily addresses harmful or illegal individual posts, but does not account for how narratives are seeded and scaled across networks over time.²⁵

Lack of enforcement tools for networked manipulation: Coordinated activity by sock puppet accounts, bot-like engagement behavior, or echo chamber reinforcement is rarely addressed by existing regulatory measures.

Reactive rather than preventive: Without mechanisms for early detection of narrative seeding and coordinated amplification, regulators are left responding to harm after it has already occurred.

Vulnerable to platform policy changes: Regulatory reliance on voluntary cooperation leaves gaps when platforms shift priorities. For instance, Meta's recent decision to discontinue third-party fact-checking in several regions—including the US—has raised concerns among experts that it could legitimize narratives favored by disinformation communities, demonstrating the fragility of current safeguards.²⁶

²⁵ Jim Waterson, “Online Safety Act ‘Not Fit for Purpose’ amid Far-Right Riots, Says Sadiq Khan,” The Guardian, August 8, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/aug/08/online-safety-act-not-fit-for-purpose-far-right-riots-sadiq-khan>.

²⁶ Dan Evon, “Why Meta Ending Third-Party Fact-Checking on Threads and in the U.S. Is a Big Deal,” News Literacy Project, March 7, 2024, <https://newsliit.org/updates/meta-ending-third-party-fact-checking-is-a-big-deal/>.

Platform Incentives: Engagement Over Integrity

Social media platforms continue to reward high-engagement content, regardless of its accuracy or real-world consequences. Across all four platforms studied—X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok—disinformation was not just allowed; it was algorithmically amplified.

X (formerly Twitter)

- Verified Premium accounts were used by bad-faith actors to boost visibility and legitimacy of disinformation.
- Elon Musk’s personal posts (e.g., “civil war is inevitable,” #TwoTierKeir) were directly responsible for massive spikes in narrative spread, underscoring the influence of platform leadership.²⁷

Facebook

- Group dynamics enabled disinformation to be repeated across insular communities, creating the illusion of consensus.
- Sock puppet accounts infiltrated multiple groups to simulate grassroots outrage and stoke moral panic.

YouTube and TikTok

- Emotionally charged, visually dynamic content (especially short-form videos) played a key role in narrative virality.
- Both platforms struggled to detect context-based misinformation, especially where videos mixed factual reporting with misleading commentary.

Across all platforms, weak moderation and opaque algorithms allowed disinformation to persist and evolve, even when initial claims were debunked.

Lack of Cross-Platform Accountability

A core challenge is that regulatory oversight is fragmented, while disinformation campaigns are inherently cross-platform. The same narrative might be seeded on Facebook, amplified on X, framed into emotional storytelling on TikTok, and legitimized through long-form commentary on YouTube, all within a few hours.

Current UK regulations lack:

Shared standards for data access between regulators and platforms.

Unified escalation protocols for disinformation with real-world consequences.

Tools to track actor networks, rather than individual posts or platforms in isolation.

This disconnect allows malign actors to adapt and migrate their strategies across platforms with minimal resistance.

²⁷ The Guardian, “No 10 Criticises Elon Musk for ‘Civil War Is Inevitable’ Post on England Riots,” August 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/05/no-10-criticises-elon-musk-post-x-riots>; The Guardian, “No 10 Criticises Elon Musk for ‘Civil War Is Inevitable’ Post on England Riots,” August 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/05/no-10-criticises-elon-musk-post-x-riots>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Southport Riot was not simply a tragic, isolated event but was a product of long-standing disinformation campaigns, enabled by systemic weaknesses in both social media ecosystems and regulatory frameworks. This study shows that disinformation is not confined to isolated actors or rogue content; it is part of a coordinated, always-on network effect fueled by platform incentives and political opportunism.

Anti-immigrant narratives were not only pre-seeded and systematically amplified by right-wing actors. They were also mainstreamed, reshaping public discourse and influencing real-world behavior. The result was a national wave of unrest, heightened hostility toward immigrants, and a measurable shift in the UK's political landscape. These outcomes illustrate the real-world harm that online disinformation can produce when left unchecked.

Importantly, the mechanisms behind this harm are often invisible to current regulatory tools. Content moderation, while necessary, is not sufficient. What's required is a more holistic approach that can understand, track, and respond to the ways disinformation narratives are constructed, networked, and emotionally weaponized.

Given these realities, we recommend the following:

Move Beyond Content Moderation: Shift from reactive, post-level moderation to proactive disruption of coordinated disinformation networks and narrative cycles.

Enhance Cross-Platform Accountability: Establish unified standards and coordinated enforcement protocols across social media platforms to tackle disinformation campaigns that seamlessly transition between digital spaces.

Regulate Algorithmic Amplification: Require greater transparency and accountability from platforms regarding how their algorithms amplify harmful and polarizing content.

Secure Reliable Data Access: Ensure platforms provide timely and affordable access to critical data for independent researchers, civil society, and regulatory bodies, creating mechanisms for ongoing scrutiny and accountability.

Build Public Sector Capabilities: Invest in dedicated governmental units equipped with advanced narrative-monitoring tools and open-source intelligence (OSINT) capabilities, enabling early identification and rapid response to emerging disinformation threats.

Ultimately, addressing the root causes and mechanisms behind digital disinformation is essential, not only to safeguard online discourse but also to prevent the tangible, harmful consequences witnessed in events like the Southport Riot.

