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The Ultra-Right: Media, Discourses, and Communicative Strategies

Introduction

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This article provides an introduction to the themes, issues, and approaches examined in more detail in this Special Section. We first outline what is specific to the discourses of extreme and ultra-right political actors, and what—we argue—has been missed, or occluded, in academic discussion typically focused on radical-right populism. While we reject media-centric explanations, it is vital to examine, and take seriously, the communicative processes through which the media produce and circulate symbolic messages. Representing a range of disciplinary traditions, the articles included in this section analyze ultra-right communication, media, and discourses in different settings and geographical locations. Collectively, they help us make sense of the extreme-right's continued influence on contemporary life.

Keywords: extreme right, ultra-right, media discourses, affordances, critical discourse studies, hegemony critique

This Special Section approaches the study of extreme and ultra-right political actors from the perspective of critical media discourse studies. Specifically, and building on recent work (e.g., Lorenzo-Dus & Nouri, 2021; Machin & Richardson, 2012; Padovani, 2016; Richardson, 2017; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017; Westberg & Henning, 2019; Wodak & Richardson, 2013), the collection focuses on the extreme or ultra-right—rather than the populist radical right—examining discursive ideological strategies, historical continuity and change, and the affordances of genre and medium.

With some notable exceptions (see *International Journal of Communication* Special Section issue on antifeminism and the far right in Europe [Gutierrez, 2024]), most of the extant scientific literature in the field has focused on right-wing populism (for critiques of this tendency, see Brown & Newth, 2024; Brown & Mondon, 2021; Brown, Mondon, & Winter, 2023). The term *populism*, famously defined as an

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"empty signifier" (Laclau, 2005), has been used to categorize a large variety of political movements, ideologies, and phenomena: From the right-wing populist Lega (previously Lega Nord) in Italy and the United Kingdom Independent Party, to the radical and extreme-right, including its neofascist renditions. Although we agree that definitions must account for the fluidity of political ideas and formations, we also contend that the focus on radical-right populism and its "rise" has, at times, obscured the distinctions between the radical right and extreme right political actors (Ferraresi, 1996; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Newth, 2024; Padovani, 2016; Richardson, 2017). The attention to the growing visibility of populisms has, in other words, somewhat diluted the significance of the fact that, in their shadow, neofascist ideologies and actors have continued to thrive. Therefore, it is important to highlight that, whereas neofascism might ride the wave of right-wing populism, it does not coincide with it. Thus, there is a need to analytically distinguish among these terms.

As Feldman & Jackson (2014) have emphasized, extreme right political actors have adapted and restyled their old ideological positions through a discerning use of "verbal judo techniques" (Feldman & Jackson, 2014, p. 11), as well as an increasingly professionalized production of media and communication formats. Extreme right discourse is especially complex at the semantic–pragmatic interface, given the ways that parties and individuals use vagueness, euphemism, linguistic codes, and falsehood as part of manipulative discursive strategies (Billig, 1978; Engström, 2014). The extreme or ultra-right uses strategies of calculated ambivalence (Engel & Wodak, 2013) in order to "allow for multiple readings and denial of intended discriminatory messages" (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014, p. 249), and they are getting better at doing this (Wodak, 2021). For example, Edwards' (2012) comparative analysis of British National Party Election manifestos, from 2005 and 2010, shows how their discourse has changed through the years, "growing more sophisticated in its knowledge of techniques of disguising racial prejudice" (Edwards, 2012, p. 256).

A plethora of social, political, and discursive factors have contributed to the rising visibility and influence of these actors, including: their own communicative strategies (Caiani, della Porta, & Wagemann, 2012; Conway, Macnair, & Scrivens, 2019); a political climate where elected radical-right populists often speak a language that is similar to that of the extreme right (Feldman & Jackson, 2014); an overall communicative context which, despite the abundance of platforms and channels, continues to accelerate its pace toward consolidation in the hands of fewer firms and individuals (Noam, 2016); and where the imperatives of profit making shape much of what we watch, read, and listen to.

The circulation of ultra-right ideologies in our societies is not just a matter of communicative styles and key words—what one could label a "media-centric" approach—but also encompasses political ideologies and cultural and material history. As such, media need to be understood as part of the *processes of signification* rather than simply as communication platforms or transmission *channels*. For this reason, our analysis of extreme right-wing discourse, including the analysis of the communication processes that surround it, places hegemony critique at its center (Padovani, 2018). This means that, in order to better analyze the reemergence of the extreme right, we need to contextualize such reemergence within the broader political and economic context. According to Gramsci (2014), hegemony critique distinguishes itself from other forms of critique as it differentiates the "permanent" from the "occasional" (Notebook 4, paras. 35, 38; see also Padovani, 2018). This distinction is particularly relevant when we

deal with regressive, ultra-right political cultures and their use of contemporary media, as both (ultra-right ideologies and the media) deepen their roots in a series of structural conditions (historical and political-economic), which in turn shape their "occasional" manifestations. In other words, scholars should avoid the pitfall of holding communication platforms responsible for the spread of ultra-right ideologies and instead consider those platforms—their usage, affordances, and algorithms—as expressions and results of the overall cultural, economic, and political conditions. Furthermore, the focus on hegemony critique calls attention to the pragmatic and advocacy function of critique. It offers a perspective that shapes our scholarly work as well as our contribution to society and discourse more broadly.

Mediating the Extreme Right

Even though we do not want to fall into the trap of a media-centric approach, it is the case that we might not fully understand the power of contemporary ultra-right discourse without examining, and taking seriously, the communicative processes through which the media (including social media) produce and circulate symbolic messages. As Seargeant (2020) has pointed out, (mass) mediated narratives possess a particular ability to both encapsulate and engender political/ideological aims. Indeed, the power of extremist political narratives is such that governments, policy practitioners, and nongovernmental organizations have responded by developing counternarratives—that is, discourse intended to demystify, deconstruct, or delegitimize extremists' communicative strategies (see Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). In the United Kingdom, for example, this has taken the form of the Home Office's CONTEST counterterror strategy. The architect of this policy, Sir David Omand, has suggested that we "badly need a counter-narrative that will help groups exposed to the terrorist message make sense of what they are seeing around them" (Omand, 2005, p. 109). Similar initiatives have proliferated elsewhere: In the United States, the Southern Poverty Law Center continues to provide a crucial point of reference for monitoring and responding to right-wing extremists (Rivas & Ward, 2024). In Italy, the militant antifascist league, among others, offers up-to-date information on ultra-right activities and ways to contrast it (Antifascismo Militante, 2024).

As various terrorist attacks in the United States, Europe, and New Zealand have shown, narratives—even self-evidently fictional narratives—propagated by extreme right actors can inspire violent (and often deadly) political action. William Pierce's first novel, *The Turner Diaries* (MacDonald, 1978), published under his pseudonym, Andrew MacDonald, has been enormously important to ultra-right activists in the United States, providing an example of how a small number of people might overthrow a democratic government.[1] Timothy McVeigh—the American domestic terrorist who murdered 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995—was inspired by *The Turner Diaries* (MacDonald, 1978), as were Germany's National Socialist Underground, who murdered 10 people in a lengthy terror campaign (2000–2007), mostly against German-Turkish citizens.[2] Several of the methods used in the book were

[1] Pierce was the founder of the *National Alliance*, a neo-Nazi, White suprematist group in the United States.

[2] This dialectic between fictional and material worlds also moves in the opposite direction. The neo-Nazi Joseph Paul Franklin, who targeted Jews and mixed-race couples in the late 1970s, killing up to 20 men, women, and children, was the inspiration behind Pierce's second novel, *Hunter* (MacDonald, 1989)—which is dedicated to Franklin.

represented in the January 6, 2021, insurrection in Washington D.C.—not least the attack on the U.S. Capitol, the point of which was not to cause mass casualties but to demonstrate, to supporters and opponents alike, that *even* the Capitol could be attacked.

Online media platforms have become pivotal for the reemergence of extreme and ultra-right ideologies (Askanius & Keller, 2021; Conway et al., 2019; McSwiney, Vaughan, Heft, & Hoffmann, 2021), especially for recruitment (Hermansson, 2020; McNamee, Peterson, & Peña, 2010) and the formation of extreme right collective identities (Gaudette, Scrivens, Davies, & Frank, 2021; Rieger, Kümpel, Wich, Kiening, & Groh, 2021). Ample evidence shows that the algorithms used by social media applications amplify dehumanizing, racist, and extremist content (Poole, Giraud, & De Quincey, 2021; DeCook, 2018; Evolvi, 2018; Miller et al., 2016), which are then exploited by extreme right political actors (Leidig & Bayarri, 2022; Schradie, 2019; Siapera, Boudourides, Lenis, & Suiter, 2018). Anonymous forums have become especially significant for the extreme right *milieu*, with the creator of 8chan declaring that the site functions "as a megaphone for mass shooters" (Roose, 2019, para. 6; see also Tuters & Hagen, 2020).

The examples of individuals and organization whose significance, and prominence, has been fostered by online communications are too many to cite: suffice to mention that groups like Generation ID (especially visible in the late 2010s), the QAnons (born from the "guts" of the Internet in the late 2010s) or the Proud Boys (who have acquired visibility as outspoken supporters of Donald Trump and the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol), would not exist in their current form without their online representation. Although their core ideas (anti-immigrationism, racism, extreme individual freedoms, white supremacism, "anti-Sorosism," etc.) can be traced back to over-used neofascist tropes, their presentation and exploitation of digital media communications has been unprecedented.

The Special Section in Outline

This collection of articles builds on the work of Wodak & Richardson (2013) and calls attention to the extreme or ultra-right rather than the populist right and focuses on that which might have remained hidden or understudied: historical continuity and change, the relationships between discourse and violence, and contextual peculiarities. Analyzing the extreme or ultra-right certainly requires us to engage with questions of power, ideology, and political discourse; however intertextuality and interdiscursivity are also important, especially for examining how ideas, arguments, and attitudes are transposed over time (Burnett & Richardson, 2021). The best of the recent research on extremist discourse addresses its complex levels of signification, viewing the semantic–pragmatic content of extreme or ultra-right discourse as a social semiotic accomplishment, in which cultural, political, and historic contexts prove particularly salient. In short, right-wing extremists frequently do not say what they mean or mean what they say, and knowledge of the complex intertextual, interdiscursive, sociolegal, and organizational histories of fascism is required in order to fully make sense of their discourses.

The papers included in this Special Section approach the study of ultra-right communication from a wide palette of related media uses and discourses: Each contribution analyzes the use of media affordances in different settings and from different points of view. The authors come from a variety of disciplinary traditions (critical media studies and discourse analysis) and geographical locations. As such, this Special

Section is interdisciplinary and multithematic and offers a range of perspectives on contemporary ultra-right discourses, all of which shed light on how the ultra-right has been able to acquire visibility in the public sphere. All authors share the commitment to contribute their research to broader efforts to counter the extreme right.

Padovani's "Social Media, the Ultra-Right, and Freedom of Speech: A Case Study of CasaPound Italia and Facebook," takes a case study approach to discuss the discursive implications of social media regulations and ultra-right speech online. The author investigates the thematic articulation of the discourse on freedom of speech and social media regulation and unearths the contradictions between the seemingly democratic elements of ultra-right organizations' pro-freedom of speech discourses and the regressive, conspiratorial elements of their underlying ideologies. Specifically, Padovani draws from the Discourse Historical Approach to study the neofascist CasaPound Italia (CPI)'s response to Facebook's decision to shut down the organization's accounts, as well as mainstream news media coverage of the issue. The parallel exploration of CPI self-representation, on one side, and news media coverage on the other, details the intricacies of the public debate on the issue of freedom of speech, social media, and the ultra-right. The conclusions highlight the need for a firm antifascist stance on freedom of speech, one that should include the discussion on freedom *from* hate speech, as a communal and consequential right.

Askanius, Brock, Kaun, and Larsson take us to Sweden to explore the discursive linkages between violent misogyny and right-wing extremism on *Flashback*, a popular online forum in that country. In their article, "'Time to Abandon Swedish Women': Discursive Connections Between Misogyny and White Supremacy in Sweden," the authors focus on the interplay between misogyny, antifeminism, and White supremacist ideologies through the analysis of selected threads of users' comments online. Building on previous work on the discursive contributions of online ultra-right audiences to the strengthening of neofascist ideologies (see, e.g., Padovani, 2016), the article unpacks the logics of conspiracy and male entitlement that go hand in hand with the idealized projections of Swedish women as both "race traitors" and "victims." This research highlights the fact that misogyny lies at the heart of contemporary extreme right discourse and contributes to the ongoing debate on antifeminist discourse in Sweden and beyond.

In their piece titled "Transnational Conspiracies Echoed in Emojis, Avatars, and Hyperlinks Used in Extreme-Right Discourse," Baider and Constantinou analyze various conspiracy frames enacted by followers of the movement *Greeks for the Homeland* (founded in 2020 by the former spokesperson of the infamous Golden Dawn party), during the COVID-19 emergency. The article studies users' lexical choices, emojis, avatars, and hyperlinks on the movement leader's YouTube channel. Through a detailed analysis of the various affordances, Baider and Constantinou bring to the surface a pattern of conspiracy-related, nationalistic-inspired rhetorics enacted by the commentators. The findings highlight a discursive focus on cultural values (like religion and the traditional family) and an interesting reframing of the relationship between the in-group and the out-group, seen more as protection of the Self than an aversion to the Other. Furthermore, the article underlies the ultra-right's ability to recontextualize contemporary events—in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic—within deep-seeded ideological beliefs.

In "'Our Only Weapons Are Good Arguments and Dissemination'—The Austrian Identitarians Taken at Their Word," Goetz focuses on the Austrian Identitarians as a case study to investigate right-

wing extremist use of linguistic strategies in an effort to influence the public discourse and propagate a "culture war" within the extreme right. The author proposes the concept of "meta-politics" to analyze these activists' self-descriptions on their group's website in 2017 and 2021. In particular, the research is concerned with the modernization of language as well as the strategy of reinterpreting certain terms and ideas, for instance, "re-migration" and "Great Replacement." Goetz argues that these ultra-right activists' use of language performs the function of a "ferry" across political and media discourses. This is how, from a meta-political point of view, existing concepts are then connected with new dimensions of meaning that in turn take root in society becoming entrenched in the public awareness. The author concludes with a call to action aimed at intellectuals, politicians, and journalists alike, encouraging them to recognize the expressions of the ultra-right and respond with interventions and "(discursive) countermeasures" aimed at fostering a more egalitarian society based on solidarity and respect.

In conclusion, the ambition of this Special Section, in line with the theoretical and methodological frameworks that inspire our work, is not only to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate for purely academic purposes. Our intention and hope, indeed, is also that of offering a key to help us make sense of the extreme right's continued influence on contemporary life.

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