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The Extreme Right and Its Media in Italy

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Introduction [1]

Various factors have contributed to the growth of the openly racist, neo-fascist and neo-Nazi movements and parties in Europe since the early 1990s. Fast-paced social and cultural changes due to globalization of economics and communications; intensification of migration fluxes from former Soviet republics, North African countries and the Balkans into Western Europe; the process of European unification and expansion; as well as the crisis of traditional systems of political representation are just some of these factors. No longer at the margins of the political system, the galaxy of extreme right parties includes: *Le Front National* in France, the *NPD Nationaldemokraten* in Germany, *Democracia National* in Spain, the *Freiheitliche Partei Osterreichs* in Austria, and many others. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Fascism or Nazism, and nationalism are some among the main characteristics of these political formations.

Italy is no exception. Indeed, various observers (Ferraresi, 1996; Caldiron, 2001; Tarquini, 2006; Rosati, 2006) are concerned that fascist groups and parties are on the rise. Men and women who openly claim their fascist inheritance sit in the Senate and in the Chamber of Deputies. Some are also in the European Parliament while exponents of the "post" fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) and the racist party *Lega Nord* occupy positions of power inside the newsrooms and the board of directors of the Italian main cultural industry (RAI *Radiotelevisione Italiana*, the public service broadcaster).[2]

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, I will interchangeably use the adjectives "far," "extreme" or "ultra" to characterize the Fascist, militant right, that is eager to "work outside the system, including the use of targeted violence" (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 61).

[2] The visibility of right-wing leaders and members (including those of AN and *Lega Nord*) in the public broadcaster's newsrooms and management is a phenomenon that began in the late 1980s, and was due in part to the Socialist Party's openness to the right. Since the early 1990s, right-wing parties have enjoyed an even easier access to the public broadcaster. In fact, in line with the well-established *lottizzazione* tradition (*lottizzazione* refers to the partitioning of positions of power on the part of political parties within the public service broadcaster), representatives of AN were assigned to key posts within the broadcaster, including the position of anchor of the news bulletin on RAI's second channel;

Already during the time leading to the national elections of April 2008, analysts had expressed concern with what the French daily *Le Monde* (Feb. 18, 2008) defined as the *droitisation*, or the shift to the extreme right, of Silvio Berlusconi's coalition led by the *People of Freedom* party and characterized by powerful allies to the right, which included *Alleanza Nazionale* and the neo-fascist *Alternativa Sociale*, the party founded by Benito Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra. With the promise of putting an end to illegal immigration, cutting state spending, promoting federalism, and restoring the battered economy, Berlusconi's coalition won national elections by a wide margin over the center left alliance led by Walter Veltroni. The xenophobe *Lega Nord*, which joined forces with Berlusconi, obtained an impressive success (8.3% of the vote), becoming Italy's third largest party (after *People of Freedom* and the center left, *Partito Democratico*). Leaders of *Lega Nord* were given important positions in the Berlusconi government: Roberto Maroni (one of the founders of *Lega Lombarda* and *Lega Nord*) became Minister of the Interior; Umberto Bossi (the old leader of *Lega Nord*) was named Minister for Federalist Reforms; Igazio La Russa, a former militant of the extreme right, was appointed to the Ministry of Defense. Following a series of political setbacks for the Italian left, in April 2008, Gianni Alemanno, the son-in-law of fascist leader Pino Rauti, and a former member of the Italian Social Movement, won elections as mayor of Rome.

Young people chanting racist and fascist slogans in the streets and holding hands in the Roman salute at soccer matches or during political manifestations, have become common sights. In Predappio, *il duce*'s native village in the center north region of Emilia Romagna where his remains are buried, thousands of people congregate every year to celebrate his birthday, and his tomb is constantly guarded by young militants. Compared to the period from the end of World War II to the mid-1980s, when the expression of one's fascist beliefs was mostly a matter for private display and secretive activities, the increased publicity and visibility that far right wings and parties are acquiring in recent years is of concern. Far from saying that Fascism was any less present in the previous decades (the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI, was the "fourth largest party in Italy, [and] the most enduring neofascist organization in any advanced industrial country" (Ferraresi, 1996, p. 3), the far right has now become more visible. It appears as if its presence in the Italian political, cultural, and social fabric, has gradually become normalized, accepted, certainly more tolerated than before.

This phenomenon merits attention. Indeed scholars, political activists and civic organizations (Roversi, 1999; Roversi & Balestri, 2000; *Osservatorio Democratico*; *Indymedia Italia*; *AntiFascismo Militante*; etc.) have been monitoring, archiving, and analyzing the fascist right in an attempt to counteract or slow down its reemergence.

The academic literature on the resurgence of the fascist right has increased from the time when political scientist Franco Ferraresi (1996) noted a "lack of attention to this area of the Italian political system" (p. 3), which, according to him, was one important reason why many had been caught by surprise when the MSI obtained an astonishing victory in 1994, winning 14% of the national vote. However, during the 1990s, analytical and historical work on the evolution of the far right remained limited compared to the attention that scholars gave to other trends characterizing Italy's post-1993

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member of RAI's board of directors in 1998; director of RAI2's news bulletin in 2002; and director general of the corporation in 2003.

political situation. In particular, much of political scientists' attention was devoted to the "clean hands" scandal and the political successes of Silvio Berlusconi, owner of a media empire and prime minister of Italy on various occasions (1994; 2001-2006; 2008-).

Since the early 2000s, comparative analyses have highlighted, on one side, the international links of the Italian fascist right, and on the other, the powerful connections that fascist parties and movements have established or reinforced with local communities in Italy (Melilli, 2003). Developing Ferraresi's thesis, according to which one major reason for the persistence of strong fascist parties and movements in Italy is the protection they have historically received from state apparati and mainstream political parties, Caldiron (2001) points out that Silvio Berlusconi's coalitions have often represented an "alliance of shared values [where] the rights of radical inspiration [have] maintain[ed] a noteworthy weight" (p. 10), thereby providing the ultra right with an ideological opening – a normalcy.

Research on the far right's use of the Internet has concentrated on the debate over immigration as it has developed on extremists' Web sites, concluding that the heavily racist tones of *Alleanza Sociale*'s Web site, for example, reveal a "political model [for understanding immigration] that goes back to the [notion of the] plural European Reich, hierarchic and differentiated" (Cavina, 2005). Other studies have analyzed how some fascist Web sites portray the history of Fascism (Criscione, 2003), bringing to light the fact that, of 20 years of dictatorship, most sites concentrate only on the last two years (1943-1945) of what they define as a "civil war." According to Criscione, this choice is dictated by the determination to associate the end of Fascism with the beginning of Italy's subservience to the Anglo-American bloc, and the end of Italy's identity and culture. Finally, Biorcio (2003) explored the communication strategies of *Lega Nord*, highlighting, on one side, how the party's leadership exploited the rather negative coverage that it received in the early 1990s from the mainstream media; and on the other, how *Lega Nord* has been successful with its alternative media (including its own newspaper, *La Padania*, and some small radio and television channels in the North). More research, however, needs to be done in order to better understand the extreme right's organizational activities, their communication strategies, and the use they make of communication technologies.

The Far Right and Radical Media

There is no doubt that the visibility and normalization of the fascist right in Italy has been supported by the legitimization given to it by the right-wing coalitions that have governed the country in the mid-1990s and 2000s. Communication technologies, however, especially those which are easily accessible and relatively inexpensive like the Internet and cellular phones (with their instant messaging, text messaging, picture and video-recording capabilities), have also played an important role. No political movement can exist "without communication processes" (Downing & Brooten, 2007). Indeed, communication technologies are crucial as they "afford opportunities within political movements to debate, mobilize, reflect, imagine . . . critique, archive, and inform . . ." (p. 538).

How, then, has the extremist right been making use of communication technologies, and how much have those technologies supported its increasing visibility? Implementing Downing's (Downing et al., 2001) definition of "radical media" as alternative media that are "relatively free from the agenda of the

powers that be and sometimes in opposition to one or more elements in that agenda" (p. 8), in this paper, I will explore how some of the extremist right-wing movements in Italy use their Web sites. In fact, it is very important that the activities carried on by these groups *via* the Internet and other technologies (cellular phones, text messaging, etc.), as well as more traditional forms of communication (graffiti, marches and manifestations, camps and recreational activities, including soccer fan clubs, community activities, etc.), are studied with regard to their historical, social and political significance. In this paper, I will analyze how a selected number of far right groups use their Web sites.

As scholars, it is crucial that we dedicate research energy to studying how the far right uses alternative radical media. In fact, the process of contrasting the normalization of Fascism requires our full attention: As Pierpaolo Pasolini (quoted in Caldiron, 2001) pointed out, "It does not take much strength to challenge Fascism in its crazy and ridiculous forms, where much strength is needed is to challenge Fascism as normalcy" (p. 9).

The Layout of the Study

In an effort to look at Fascism in its 'normalcy,' I will briefly introduce the history of the Italian right, with an emphasis on the evolution of right-wing movements from the end of the first Republic (1992-1993) until 2007.[3] This history is fundamental to understand how, from being more of an outcast, Fascism became normalized or "*sdoganato*" (literally, "cleared of custom") through the years. After the *Mani Pulite* (clean hands) scandal, which by 1994 had brought down most of the post-World War II political parties and their leaders, neo-fascist parties emerged almost purified of their evil history. In fact, the winner of the 1994 national elections, Silvio Berlusconi's *Freedom Pole* coalition, included *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), the very first "neo-fascist party to get into a democratic government in postwar Europe" (Ferraresi, 1996, p. 3).

Following this historical introduction, I will proceed to analyze a selection of Web sites operated by far right-wing groups and parties. I certainly do not argue that the Internet is a cause for the process of normalization of the far right. Rather, what I want to underline is how the Internet, and some of the particular Web sites I have selected, reinforce the revisionist history that depicts Fascism as a normal human condition, thereby contributing to creating an environment conducive to its rationalization and normalization. Although it is clear that the function of these fascist Web sites is not to proselytize (in fact, it is reasonable to assume that most of their users are already sympathizers), they contribute, I argue, to creating, among those who use them, a feeling of belonging to a broader community. They bring a purpose and a renewed commitment, a sense of shared identity within an ideology whose history is revisited and presented as a rational alternative to mainstream political parties – one that vindicates the homeland assaulted by people of all races, one that is able to speak to the underprivileged, the youth, the marginalized. Only a more careful and in-depth exploration of the Web sites reveals the hateful, authoritarian, and heavily racist characteristics of the fascist ideology.

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[3] For an in-depth historical background of the fascist right in Italy, see F. Ferraresi, 1996; T. Gallagher, 2000; and P. Ignazi, 1989. For a comparative analysis of the Italian fascist right with its European counterparts, see M. Melilli, 2003 and P. Ignazi & C. Ysmal, 1992, pp. 101-120.

Historical Background: The Right in Italy

Thanks to the "clean hands" investigations of the early 1990s carried out by a pool of magistrates from Milan, corruption of political elites was uncovered and many of the old political leaders were forced to step down or went into self-imposed exile. At a time when the collapse of the Soviet Union was interpreted by many as signaling the "end of ideologies" and the triumph of capitalist democracies around the world, the so-called mass parties of the post WWII era were also losing their legitimacy, and many of them were being dismantled. As was the case for other parties, the MSI also had to come to terms with what appeared to be the dawn of a new era. Although the party had obtained an unprecedented electoral success in 1994, its leadership had become persuaded that, in order to be a credible political partner of any future government coalition (the government of 1994 had survived only for a few months), it had to renounce, at least publicly, its fascist past. In 1995, on the occasion of its national convention in Fiuggi (a small resort town in Lazio), the MSI's Secretary General Gianfranco Fini declared the party's future would be a modern conservative organization in line with other, non-fascist right-wing parties in Europe. The idea was to create a national alliance among all conservative forces. The new party, *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) with Fini as its new leader, soon joined the *Polo delle Libertà* coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party, and Fini served as Italy's Vice Prime Minister from 2001 until 2005. At the 2006 national elections, the AN party received the third most votes, and late in 2007, it joined Berlusconi's new coalition *People of Freedom*.

Notwithstanding its political successes, a conspicuous number of former MSI members and leaders remained bitter about the so-called "Fiuggi turn" and created, or joined, new parties. In 1995, Pino Rauti, a historical leader of the most militant arm of the old MSI (responsible for tragic acts of terrorism during the so-called *anni di piombo*),[4] founded the neofascist *Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore*. A variety of other small parties and movements were also born in those years, including *Forza Nuova* and *Fronte Sociale Nazionale*, both founded in 1997 by exponents of the militant right, also implicated in the so-called "black" or fascist terrorism of the previous decades.

To many, Fini's decision, in 2003, to visit the Holocaust Memorial in Israel was a further confirmation that the former leader of the Italian fascist right, son of a volunteer of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (the small republic in Northern Italy backed by Nazi Germany and founded in September 1943 by Benito Mussolini), had completely rejected his roots. In fact, although on various public occasions the AN's secretary general had expressed his respect for *il duce*, during his visit to Israel, Fini referred to Fascism as *il male assoluto*, the "Absolute Evil." Reactions on the ground were harsh: Among various initiatives and manifestations, graffiti in Rome and other major cities made clear the mood of alienated fascists for whom Fini had now become "un servo degli Ebrei" (a slave of the Jews). In response to Fini's perceived betrayal, people marched while holding signs that thundered, "We Are the Absolute Evil!" and "The

[4] *Anni di piombo*, or the "years of lead," refers to the decade of domestic terrorism (1969-late-1970s) when extreme fringes of the organized working class and extraparliamentary organizations of the extreme right carried out terrorist activities. One of the first episodes of terrorism was the 1969 bombing of Piazza Fontana in Milan, for which Pino Rauti's *Ordine Nuovo*, a radical right-wing group, was responsible.

Absolute Evil Is Back!" As further sign of protest against Fini's visit to Israel, more far right parties were founded in the mid-2000s, including *Azione Sociale* by Alessandra Mussolini, and *La Destra*, established by Francesco Storace in 2007. Meanwhile, in 2003, Pino Rauti had been expelled from *Fiamma Tricolore* and had founded *Movimento Idea Sociale (MIS) con Rauti*, another small, but very active group of hard-core fascists.

The Perfect Petri Dish

Although Fini's strategic attempts to create a more "presentable" image for the party had apparently not been welcomed by the fascist nomenclature, his actions simultaneously led to a far right that enjoyed the benefits of being integrated in various ways into the hegemonic bloc governing the country. Men and women with a militant background occupied strategic positions as elected politicians at local, regional, and national levels. Indeed, for many fascists, the end of the first republic was celebrated with a sign of relief as it marked the conclusion of an "unfortunate" (for them) phase of the country's history: a republic that had been founded upon the values of anti-Fascism (one of the pillars of the 1946 Italian Constitution) and that was now the dawn of a new era.

The new era was going to be one of reconciliation with the country's fascist past, a post-fascist republic. The power bloc formed around Berlusconi's *Polo delle Libertà* coalition of the 1990s, the *Casa delle Libertà* coalition of the early 2000s, and the subsequent *People of Freedom* coalition of 2007, provided AN, as well as other smaller far right parties, including Alessandra Mussolini's *Azione Sociale*, with the opportunity to come to full public light as part of the mainstream political establishment for the first time in Italian post war history. This was a result of a process begun in the 1990s and defined by the press as the "*sdoganamento*" of Fascism. After decades of underground militancy, Fascism had now finally "paid its dues" and could therefore re-emerge to the surface of public light. Former fascist leaders had become "respectable," or as the Italian press put it, "presentable" members of the Parliament and the House of Deputies, Ministers and Vice Ministers, and even members of the European Parliament.

While some might argue that becoming part of the political establishment after 50 years of "domestic exile" was something to be celebrated, this assimilation into the mainstream also provoked a backlash of reactions. In opposition to the whole political establishment, various groups, movements, and small parties emerged. True fascists, those who could not even accept the definition of "right" or "extreme right," had found the perfect environment to grow, the ideal dosage of antagonism in combination with the much hated, but necessary, protection of a sympathetic political establishment.

As far right groups and parties increased, hatred and political crimes against leftist youth "social centers," political activists, Roma's camps, immigrants, and homosexuals intensified. According to the archives of *AntiFascismo Militante* (http://isole.ecn.org/antifa/), a Web site that monitors the trend of fascist violence in the country and other sources (Ferrari, 2007), there were 97 cases of violence (including murder) against persons and acts of vandalism against property in 2006, a total of 35 more than those recorded in 2005. In 2007, attacks against "communist" and gay students in various lyceums in the capital continued to be perpetrated by self-defined fascist youth groups. Tragically famous in July 2007, was the incursion in the Roman park of Villa Giulia of a group of *squadristi* (from the name of *il*

duce's death squads) who, after the concert of a left-wing rock band (*Banda Bassotti*), assaulted and seriously injured many people in the crowd. In May 2008, in downtown Verona (a wealthy city in the north eastern province of Veneto), a young man was killed by members of extreme right groups (the ultras fan club of the Verona soccer team and of Veneto Fronte Skinheads). These violent episodes are part of a trend that had peaked in the late 1990s with attacks against left-wing dailies (the bomb at the Rome headquarter of the Communist newspaper *Il Manifesto*, November 1999), anti-fascist cultural centers (the bomb at the *Museo Storico della Liberazione*, in the capital, November 1999); cultural events (an explosion against a cinema in downtown Rome where a film on the Shoah was being shown, November 1999), and against Jewish cemeteries (including acts of vandalism against the cemetery of Prima Porta, in Rome, 1997).

The Far Right and The Internet

How are these fascist groups organizing themselves? What are their communication strategies? How do they use alternative media and communication technologies, and, in particular, the Internet? How do they use their Web sites, and what can be learned from the ways in which they portray themselves there?

According to some estimates, there are about one 150 far right Web sites operated by Italian groups and political parties (Criscione, 2003; Cavina, 2005). Of those, I selected only the sites that are operated or affiliated with recognized political parties or social movement. This was done in order to limit the sample to those sites that lend legitimacy to their (overt or covert) far right content through affiliation with institutionalized political parties.

After a preliminary exploration, I organized the Web sites according to: 1) their targets (separating those that reach out to young people from those targeting older users); and 2) the qualitative contents of their homepages (separating those sites that contain overt fascist symbols or language from those that portray themselves in a more benevolent way (by using pastel colors for their backgrounds and headlines, by omitting clear references to Fascism on their homepage, by filling the homepage with links to information, news, and commentaries to present themselves as rather mainstream "news sites," etc.).

Out of this population, I chose to concentrate my qualitative analysis on a couple of Web sites representative of the wider sample. One of them is operated by *Blocco Studentesco* (www.Bloccostudentesco.org), the youth organization of *Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore*; the other is *LaDestra.Info*, the self defined "portal to the Italian right" (www.ladestra.info), operated by the political party *La Destra* and aimed at a more mature audience. The most important common characteristics of these sites are:

- They are freely accessible (i.e., they do not require any sort of subscription). Only one discussion forum hosted by Bloccostudentesco's Web site is reserved to registered members;

- They are used to mobilize activists rather than as recruiting tools;

- They are designed to provide opportunities for users/sympathizers to network among themselves (this is particularly the case for youth-oriented Web sites like Bloccostudentesco.org), as well as among different groups of like-minded groups, providing links to local, national, and international organizations of the far right;

- Their main function is to forward information about local, national, and international events of political, social and/or cultural relevance for the movement;

- Periodically, both sites support campaigns of various kinds, and at time, the same campaign (like the "Affordable Housing for Italians First" campaign, or political campaigns in support of neo-fascist candidates for national or local elections, or international campaigns in support of national movements, like the campaign for the Karen people in Burma), providing educational brochures, pictures, a wealth of background and archival information, and flyers that can be downloaded for free;

- The sites are routinely used to solicit financial contributions for long term causes and/or for emergency situations (like when *Casa Pound*, a cultural organization based in Rome and named after the poet Ezra Pound, one of the major ideologues of the extreme right in Italy, was shut down by the authorities in Fall 2007);

- Both sites are frequently updated, in most cases, on a daily basis.

However, the two Web sites differ between themselves in some significant ways as well. *Blocco Studentensco*'s Web site, for instance, provides its visitors/members (most of them presumably in the 15-20 age brackets) with the opportunity to communicate among themselves and make friends with like-minded individuals. In contrast, *LaDestra.Info*, oriented at a more mature audience, does not provide discussion forums. Its communication model is top-down, and its aim is primarily to inform its users about upcoming events and campaigns, and to forward information. Another significant difference between the two sites, which reflects a difference in the broader sample, is their visual appearance. *LaDestra.Info*'s graphic style, content and overall appearance are friendly and rather ordinary, with plenty of news analysis, commentaries and information, without any explicit fascist or neo-Nazi symbols or language (at least, on its home page). Indeed, the more radical content can be found only if one goes beyond the home page. This characteristic of covering more radical content under an umbrella of respectability and benevolence, is common to other Web sites, like the *MIS con Rauti* Web site (http://www.misconrauti.it/), where a benevolent Pino Rauti — one of the leaders of the militant right responsible for heinous acts of terrorism in the 1970s, now in his 70s — is portrayed smiling warmly from the top left corner of the home page, on a light blue background surrounded by light green, white and red (the colors of the Italian flag).

On the other hand, *Bloccostudentesco.org* utilizes aggressive designs and graphic styles. The background of its home page is completely black, in a style that is typical of other youth-oriented Web sites, like *Ordine Nuovo Nazionale* (http://www.nuovo-ordine-nazionale.org/). This last one, for example,

portrays Giuseppe Mazzini's *Fascio Repubblicano* with an axe in the middle, one of the emblems of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* and a powerful symbol of Fascism, on its home page. Furthermore, one has to click on an entrance button to get inside the site. This expedient, common to other youth-oriented sites, is perhaps designed to reinforce a sense of belonging to a group of selected few; as if the site were exclusive, available only to those brave enough to enter!

Bloccostudentesco.org

Among the youth groups and movements, *Blocco Studentesco* (Students' Block) occupies a prominent position as the main students' organization of *Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore* (founded in 1995 by Pino Rauti). *Blocco Studentesco*, which is a national organization with many local chapters spread across the country, appears to be very active in high schools and lyceums. Often local and national mainstream media report on episodes of intimidations and aggressions perpetrated by members of the *Blocco* against left-wing students. *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site rejects such accusations and portrays those as attempts by the establishment to victimize the members of the far right group. Nevertheless, as the Web site emphasizes, this "repression will only stimulate [our] growth" (www.bloccostudentesco.org).

Their Web site is intimidating. Like many other extreme right-wing Web sites aimed at younger audiences, the colors are predominantly black. The mascot of *Blocco Studentesco* is a cartoon character who appears in many of the fliers that can be downloaded from the site representing a young and visibly angry man holding a sword, curiously drawn in the classic Japanese cartoon style, a skeleton on the front of his shirt. The movement's motto, which appears on the Web site's main page is intended to be threatening. It reads, "La ricreazione è finita!" (Recess is over!) These people are ready to take action, including, of course, violent actions, in order to restore national pride, obedience to conservative moral values, and their own version of Italy's fascist past. Other students and the teachers are warned, "The fun is over!"

Blocco Studentesco demands more physical education in schools (physical education is certainly a very good activity, but I suspect that the *Blocco*'s interest in it is determined by the traditional fascist emphasis on order and discipline, an obsession with physical fitness and an absolute rejection of any physical disability); the abolition of all private schools from kindergarten to college; and the adoption of one single textbook for each subject in each regional school district.

In its mission statement, *Blocco Studentesco* uses plenty of seemingly progressive language as it emphasizes its commitment to respect the environment and a "return" to nature. Its environmentalist movement (a recurrent theme among various far right groups), can have powerful traditionalist and nationalistic connotations. In fact, the return to nature indicates a connection with one's birthplace and the reinforcement of the "spirit of connection to one's community and belonging" (*Bloccostudentesco.org*, "Mission Statement").

However, this apparently innocuous and ostensibly progressive language should not be misleading. These same ideas (respect for the environment, a return to nature and to traditional ways of living) are recurrent themes in many other contexts (newsletters, news analysis, programs and mission

statements) of other far right groups. In fact, respect for the environment and the emphasis on the connection to one's birthplace are fundamental to informing a certain vision of the world that serves to justify these groups' anti-immigration stance. While vehemently rejecting multicultural societies, which the far right sees as some of the most negative results of global capitalism, fascists do not think of themselves as "racists." Rather they invoke the principle of "ethno pluralism," according to which each race belongs to a given nation and land. As Roversi (1999) underlined in his study of young members of right-wing groups, the positions of the far right with regard to immigration is one that combines their "instinctive xenophobia" with "ethnopluralist positions" (p. 616). According to an oversimplified vision of the world, it is only by giving an "absolute priority to natives" that most social problems will be solved. As one of the young people interviewed by Roversi (1999) points out, "As Adolph Hitler used to say, everybody should remain in their own native land. . . . After all, Europeans are white, Africans are black . . . the world is beautiful because it is varied" (p. 616). For this to work, however, it is necessary that "everybody stay in their place" (p. 616). This is where the support for various nationalist groups finds its context: links to nongovernmental organizations supporting native populations such as the Karen people in Burma and the Native Americans in North America, which exemplifies national struggles against capitalism, corrupt regimes, and the Federal government of the United States, appear in various fascist Web sites. Indigenous populations are celebrated for their courageous fight and their "national pride," and requests for donation to support them abound. Indeed, as long as any of these groups do not migrate to the "White Country" and mingle with White Europeans, they are worthy of respect. Here, we find a common ideology pointing towards a global racial solidarity among White Supremacist movements in the rest of Europe as well as in the United States. The language is the same: any race needs a homeland; immigration, legal or illegal, must be banned because it is inherently "unnatural"; and interracial relations are a threat to the survival of the "almost extinct" White race; multiracial and multicultural societies are a cancer that must be stopped.

Blocco Studentesco.org and Its Users

The main function of *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site is to distribute information regarding actions in local high schools (especially in some northern cities and in the capital). Activism in high school might include occupying schools, distributing fliers, and participating in the elections for students' representatives. In various lyceums, especially in the capital, exponents of *Blocco Studentesco* serve as students' representatives on schools' governing bodies causing much concern among democratic and anti-fascist parents, political and civic organizations (*La Repubblica.it*, Oct. 5, 2007).

Indeed, whereas *Blocco Studentesco*'s mission statement does not call for acts of violence and does not contain racist slurs or typical fascist phrases, it would be a mistake to think that this is a benign and peaceful gathering of young people. By exploring *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site, its fascist and intolerant philosophy become apparent. For instance, in the "photos" section of the Web site, one can view images of young men hitting and kicking other youngsters, as well as parades where youth in bellicose posturing are shown wearing black clothes (the color of choice of Mussolini's *squadristi*) and holding bats as if ready to attack.

The Web site also hosts three different forums, including "Blocco Studentesco," "Pensieri in Libertà," (Free Thinking), and private sessions of the "International Block."[5] Any message posted on the first two forums can be freely accessed, whereas those posted on the International Block forum can only be read by registered users.[2] Furthermore, posting messages on any of these forums requires registration. As of June 2008, according to *Blocco Studentesco*'s users list, there were more than 16,000 registered users,[3] although only a small portion (about 2.5%) of them could be defined as "active users" (active users are those who have posted at least one message). However, even though their numbers might be small, the users of the *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site have been very active, producing more than 11,000 postings between October 2006 and June 2008.

There can be no doubt about the political affiliation of these active members. Most of the nicknames, avatars, and users' self-descriptions speak for themselves and provide some details as to how the youth of the extreme right likes to portray itself. Some of those who post define themselves as "independents," or *cani sciolti* ("loose dogs": those who claim not to belong to any formal group or party); many of them are students, according to their own self-descriptions. Their main interests are: "revolution" and "Fascism." For instance, one user who, on his page, identifies himself as "Skrewdriver," uses a photo of a man holding a young boy both doing a Roman salute amidst a crowd of ultras at a soccer match as his picture. Skrewdriver's place of residence is: "Inside the Nation, and Against the State!" His occupation is "Skinhead." Another member, "MeNeStrafotto" ("I don't care," a famous motto of Mussolini's *squadristi*) posts what appears to be an original picture in black and white of a group of *squadristi* holding black fascist flags. "Marchetto88" has chosen an image of a kamikaze pilot tying on his forehead the traditional honorary ribbons with the Japanese national symbols. Other users post pictures and drawings that resemble swastikas, although pictures as well as drawings of Celtic cruxes, a symbol that the radical right has co-opted, are among the most favorite symbols used on many members' home pages.

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[1] The "International Block" uses a parallel nomenclature to the Anarchist "Black Bloc." This should not be surprising as often radical right-wing groups use terms borrowed from the language of radical left-wing movements.

[2] For the purposes of this research I analyzed data that are publicly accessible on the *Blocco Studentesco* Web site. I read selected postings on the *Blocco Studentesco* and *Pensieri in Libertà* forums (which included discussions about ultrà soccer fan initiatives, press reviews of contemporary news of interest to the far right, information about Nazi rock concerts, etc.), and collected registered members' information. I also submitted a request to become a registered member (one's name, user name, password, and a working email address are required) but have not been approved by the administrator of the forums. Therefore, I have been unable to access any message posted on the private sessions of the International Block forum.

[3] *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site keeps an updated list of registered users. The list includes the members' residence, a link to their homepage, and their avatar; it also keeps count of the number of messages that each member has posted. This list is accessible to all, no membership status is requested. See http://www.bloccostudentesco.org/forum/memberlist.php

The geographical distribution of the Blocco Studentesco's active users is also interesting. Of the 143 active users, 37% indicate their place of residence. The majority of those (59%) come from central regions, in particular from Rome and from some of the towns surrounding the capital (including *Castelli Romani*, at the south east of Rome, a traditional breeding ground for the far right in Italy). The rest of the active users are from the north (23% of them), with most of the "northerners" coming from the wealthy cities of Verona and Piacenza, but also Bergamo, Trieste, and Milan. Less than 8% of users indicate the continental south or the islands as their residency. The remaining 10% fantasize: For instance, one member simply describes his home as "White Country" ("Fascinazione," *BloccoStudentesco.org*); another's residency is provocatively listed as "Pzza Bologna" (*sic*, "Dandiboss," *BloccoStudentesco.org*).[4]

Racist slurs against immigrants and "colored" people are frequent in the postings. It is not just immigrants who should be banned from the land of the Whites, there is noticeable intolerance toward anybody who might be different, including homosexuals, who are frequently ridiculed. In fact, there is a sense that members of *Blocco Studentesco* should consider themselves superior to others. "Hate the Stupid!" is one of their mottos, printed on mugs and shirts for sale on their Web site.

LaDestra.Info

La Destra.Info, the portal of *La Destra*, a party founded in July 2007, claims to provide the best access to the Italian right on the Internet. Contrary to *Bloccostudentesco.org*, its appearance is reassuring. Even the respectable, certainly mainstream economist.com (the Web site of the London-based magazine *The Economist*) has a link to www.ladestra.info on one of its pages.[5]

La Destra.Info is strikingly different from the usual black-hued sites of the militant youth groups. It is more colorful and its graphic interfaces are warm, welcoming. However, one should not be swayed by its benevolent look. Indeed, the way in which *LaDestra.Info* is structured (i.e., an apparent benign home page for a very inflammatory and openly fascist and racist content), well symbolizes the close relationship that exists between the institutional right and the radical right in Italy. It is as if *LaDestra.Info*'s home page represented the reassuring façade of the institutional right, covering up the ugly reality of the ultra right. After all, the two are well-connected. As observers have pointed out, the "border between the 'radical' [right] and the 'moderate' [one] is becoming [increasingly] meaningless" (Ferrari, 2005).

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[4] Piazza Bologna, the square in front of Bologna central railway station, is tragically famous for the massacre that occurred on Aug. 2, 1980, when explosives went off killing 85 people. After controversial and long trails, in 1995 two members of the fascist terrorist organization *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*, Valerio Fioravanti and Franscesca Mambro, were convicted to life in prison for executing the bombing. In 2004, Luigi Ciavardini, at the time of the Bologna massacre a young member of *Terza Posizione*, another fascist organization, was also convicted. Far right groups, including users of the *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site, have always refused the accusations.

[5] "The politics of mosque-building Constructing conflict," Aug. 30, 2007. Retrieved Oct. 6, 2007 from http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9725332

Therefore, it would be a mistake to take the content of this Web site lightly, or to think that it represents an innocuous, "post" fascist right. Openly racist comments against immigrants as well as the Roma population are posted daily. For instance, an article posted on Oct. 5, 2007, defined the 30,000 Romas living in Milan as "barbarians" invading the city and destroying the "healthy Milanese society . . . of the peripheries." But who is it that makes up this celebrated Milanese society of the periphery? Most likely the "healthy Milanese society" consists of working and lower middle class second or third generation immigrants from the South, the same ones who have been the traditional targets of racism and have now apparently been rehabilitated, embraced as members of an "elite" society, and, therefore, 'Milanesized.' The notion that immigrants (including Romas, many of whom, however, are Italian citizens although continue to be considered as foreigners – not belonging to the Italic race!) are invading our cities and corrupting our society is reinforced throughout the site. In addition to the news analysis section, reports and links to local events sponsored by skinhead groups (like the international concert in Bologna in October 2007 where Italian, Hungarian, German and U.S. skinhead rock bands played together) further clarify the fascists' vision of "ethno pluralism." It is simple, as the ad for the skinheads' concert displayed on one of the pages of *LaDestra.Info* reads, "Protect your kin, destroy the rest!"

Local Connections

Besides their forwarding and information-sharing functions, the Web sites I have explored also serve another important role, which is to provide support for local actions and a connection to local events. Indeed, all the sites give ample relevance and high priority to local events and political intervention, reinforcing what we know to be one of the strengths of Fascism in Italy: its capillary penetration, its territorial presence. All Web sites, especially those operated by and aimed at young militants encourage their users to take it to the streets, to make themselves visible, to be proud of their history, to freely express who they are, their "powerful, lasting, unshakable" ideology.

To this end, their physical, geographical presence is fundamental: As a Web site of a skinhead rock band based in Rome reads, "We *are* Rome and only *we* represent what it means to be a *Roman*!" (www.lapeggiogioventu.org, *my emphasis*). In fact, the connection between the various organizations and the territory is one dense with symbolic value. For instance, *Blocco Studentesco* is headquartered in Piazza Vittorio in Rome, and indeed the choice of this location is a provocative anti-immigration stance. In Piazza Vittorio, at the center of immigrants' communities, *Blocco Studentesco*, in the words of its spokesperson, represents the "last Italian Embassy" (Tarquini, 2006). Students' parades, occupations of schools, concerts by fascist and naziskin rock bands, ultrà activities during soccer matches, represent other important venues for these movements to make their presence known and visible. For instance, *Blocco Studentesco*'s Web site has a whole section dedicated to soccer fan activities. The section is called "calcio mattanza," which refers to the infamous ultras' activities, which sometime result in violent deaths among fans of the opposite team and/or the police, during matches.

Political activity, as the *Forza Nuova*[6] Web site underlines (http://www.forzanuova.org/), never takes a vacation. Militants are on-call, 365 days a year, ready to intervene wherever and whenever needed. Whether it is about carrying out vigilante activities in the ghettos of Milan or Padua, protecting grade schools and day care centers against the "barbaric" invasion of immigrants and their children in the Tuscan country side, or distributing flyers in support of the "Affordable Housing for Italians First" campaign in Italy, these Web sites have it all and are updated daily. There is no time to waste: As a motto on *LaDestra.Info* Web site (the same motto can be find on other Web sites including http://www.forzanuova.org/) explains, "Direct action is needed every day against the multiethnic and neo-communist society!"

The "Affordable Housing for Italians First" Campaign

The MSI's tradition rooted in populism and social nationalism has been reinforced through the years, allowing the fascist right to get closer to those strata of the population that might have been feeling "abandoned by the Left" (Caldiron, 2001, p. 51). It is not uncommon to see great numbers of unemployed, peasants and working class people from Naples and Sicily, marching in the manifestations organized by *Forza Nuova*, for example. In Naples, a stronghold of the right in the South where Alessandra Mussolini came very close to becoming mayor in 1995, the right-wing party *Movimento Idea Sociale (MIS) con Rauti*, together with Mussolini's party, *Azione Sociale*, fight in favor of low income Italians by helping them to rent affordable apartments. The exclusive beneficiaries of this campaign, of course, are Italian citizens. The argument is that lax immigration laws of local and central governments have made it impossible for working class Italians to live with dignity. Their claim is based on a very specific interpretation of citizenship: *Ius sanguinis*, not *ius soli*, must be the main criterion to qualify for affordable housing.

Forza Nuova, with its militarist, anti-globalization, and anti-capitalist positions is a formidable force in the "affordable housing for Italians first" campaign. On its Web site, the ideological reasons behind the campaign are explained in detail. Information and a network for organizing the local chapters of the various movements in support of the initiative are provided. A flyer showing contemporary pictures of militant groups holding flags with swastikas in front of buildings built during the fascist regime can be downloaded. The message is clear: Benito Mussolini was able to provide every Italian in need with an affordable and dignified place to live and raise a family. The flyer quotes some of *il duce*'s writings in which he warns of the danger of massive urbanization and migration. The conclusion is evident: Immigration is the main culprit for urban degradation, increasing criminality, and for the difficult living conditions in which Italians are finding themselves.

Forza Nuova's Web site encourages activists to distribute flyers where they are most needed, especially in the poor peripheries of major cities. The site also reassures its audience that appropriate "Nuclei d'Azione Casa" (Home Action Cells) are in place within each *Forza Nuova* chapter throughout the

[6] *Forza Nuova* is a neo-fascist political movement founded in the late 1990s by Roberto Fiore, already convicted for being a leader of "black" terrorist organizations in the 1970s.

country in order to ensure that actions are taken in defense of Italians' rights to live in decent and affordable homes.

Conclusions

Fascism maintains a strong social connotation and a powerful connection to local communities: the Web sites presented in this study emphasize those traits and reinforce that connection. Indeed, Mussolini's *Partito Nazionale Fascista*'s "quasi-socialist platform" (Downing et al., 2001, p. 91) and its social nationalist agenda continue to represent the backbone of newly emerging fascist parties and movements. From the defunct *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, to *Movimento Idea Sociale*, *Azione Sociale*, *Forza Nuova* and *Blocco Studentesco*, these groups portray themselves as those who will fight the system until the end while standing on the side of common people. In fact, national populism represents the most characteristic message conveyed by all the Web sites analyzed for this study.

As I detailed in this paper, some of the extreme right-wing groups (specifically *LaDestra.info* and *BloccoStudentesco.org*) use their Web sites primarily as tools for forwarding information for community engagement and mobilizing militants into action. These Web sites also provide a powerful source for identity-building and a connection among like-minded people and local communities — the streets, the quarters — where much of the militants' activities take place. Indeed, in addition to their national and international links, both sites offer localized content and information. But whereas the forums hosted by a youth-oriented site, like *BloccoStudentesco.org,* are also used for non political activities (such as making new friends) while other, more mature-oriented sites (like *LaDestra.Info*), are devoted to forwarding information, providing links to political events, and offering news analysis and commentaries.

Downing (et al., 2001) points out that we should define radical media used by the ultra-Right political movements as "repressive radical media" since they have no trace of the empowering characteristics of "democratic radical media" (p. 89). Indeed, the Web sites I presented herein do not engage the public in constructive and open dialogue. This inherently undemocratic aspect is embedded within the ideology of Fascism itself: order, obedience, a top-down communication model, and a rigid hierarchy colored with a sort of patriarchal benevolence which constitute the hateful and profoundly un-democratic bedrock of Fascism. In fact, forums are closely moderated. Whether they are targeting young or mature audiences, these sites aim at creating a strong, unquestionable identity that does not emerge out of a critical dialogue among its members; rather their identity becomes stronger and more solid in response to opposition.

The radical right does not use its sites as forums to promote dialogue, but to inform users, help them network with other like-minded people and groups, and to forward information. As Granjon (quoted in Downing & Brooten, 2007, p. 542) found out in his study of political movements' use of the Internet, this "forward" function means that the Web sites encourage activists to produce fliers for any given campaign they are engaged in and to distribute those fliers to anyone who might be interested. In fact, all these functions are very important in creating and supporting a sense of belonging, a sense of community. This is an especially important function played by all sites, especially the youth-oriented ones. As Roversi (1999) emphasized, far right groups have become increasingly characterized by a cohesive ideological

identity. As he points out, although the number of members, or users, as in the case of Web sites, might be small, they are "develop[ing] a higher and firmer awareness of their . . . identity" (p. 624).

More research needs to be done to analyze the role of audiences of right-wing radical media. Indeed, the relevance of those audiences should not be measured in numbers. They might be very small, but they might be "one of the strongest instances in the so-called 'active' audience, going far beyond simply an alert posture in regard to media content" (Downing & Husband, 2005, p. 69). Calls to action are one major function of these sites and it is reasonable to assume that audiences use the sites as they prepare for militant activities. The connection between the cyber world and the real world is reinforced by frequent (daily) updates of commentaries, news, information, pictures of events (manifestations, marches, interviews) that happen in the local communities.

Fortunately, as Downing & Husband (2005) underscore, the "fact that a Web site exists and is perceived by most as repugnant does not simultaneously and automatically lend it power" (p. 70). However, given the proliferation of racist, neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties and movements throughout Europe, and the raising visibility of the fascist right in the Italian political sphere, the presence of these Web sites is of concern. The public display of fascist symbols (for instance, Rome's mayor Gianni Alemanno is known for publicly showing off his necklace with a Celtic crux as a pendant), the devastating loss of the left in the April 2008 national elections, and the astonishing victory of the openly racist and xenophobe *Lega Nord* on those same elections, might further embolden far right groups and reinforce their sense of identity and their legitimacy. The increasing visibility of fascist groups, the rising number of hatred- and politically-related crimes, the growing variety of extreme right-wing groups and movements, their representation in schools and neighborhoods, and their influence among disenfranchised youth and within the poor urban peripheries must be considered important factors of the ongoing normalization of Fascism in Italian political, social and cultural life. In this context, the use of the Internet on the part of right-wing extremists needs to be constantly monitored and further studied in an effort to better understand how those groups organize themselves, while reinforcing their connections with local communities.

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