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Introduction

Stephen Albrecht, Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston

THE RIGHTWARDS PRESSURE

Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media platforms enable user-generated content to be shared instantly via networks that record their own searchable archives. This advent has accelerated and deepened the effective reach of activists and organizations from across the political spectrum. However, in the neoliberal democracies of Europe and the US the most alarming surge of online political pressure in recent years has come from the far right and been felt in the centerground. Far-right movements from around the world have relentlessly intervened in both the private and public spheres of our digital worlds, from the deep web to the surface net, from public chat rooms to multi-player gaming environments. Digital platforms that bypass traditional editorial and governmental controls yet overlay our traditional political milieus have empowered such groups to directly broadcast their content globally to witting and unwitting audiences alike. What this extent of fluid connectivity generates is the dream of all digital marketeers: it motivates reciprocation and sharing among users who become communities bonded in tribal ways (Roberts 2017; Seemann 2017). Those communities have digitally-driven ecosystems whose filters favor the reinforcement of shared terms yet facilitate inter-community collaboration at any level. Those levels range from the local and interpersonal spaces that we inhabit to the imagined communities and coalitions that we can create across cyberspace.

With growing confidence, bolstered by the electoral successes of right-wing politicians across both continents and beyond (India, Russia, Brazil and Turkey), far-right activists online now openly share offensive content and promote incitements to violence against vulnerable people. They use a range of harassment methods, from the blunt to the innovative, harness-

ing the pooled click-power of such communities to loosely coordinate propaganda and intimidation campaigns. Not only do these “tactical media” (Raley 2009) publishing strategies normalize access to far-right ideas, they also normalize the ideas themselves. These ideas blur into, or sometimes brazenly constitute, ‘dangerous speech’, which are expressions that go beyond the fuzzy category of ‘hate speech’ because they increase the risk that audiences will condone or participate in violence against the targeted group (Benesch 2018). They typically exploit a fear of the unknown to build on a patriarchal foundation of anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ+, racist and anti-minority scapegoating.

The quantity, sophistication and inter-connectedness of both unofficial activists and official party channels online has made it more and more difficult to carry forwards established academic categories to explain the far-right’s renewal. Virtual activists celebrate their transgressive behavior while political parties veil their ideological agendas with rhetorical trickery (Feldman/Jackson 2014), both blurring their traditional roles. The categorization of these actor positions on a spectrum running from the socially accepted and legally protected ‘radical right’ to an anti-constitutional and violent ‘extreme right’ is now obsolete. To avoid exhausting debates about terminological essentialism, throughout the chapters that follow, contributors work on or under the umbrella idea that the far right is a “political space whose actors base their ideology and action on the notion of inequality among human beings, combining the supremacy of a particular nation, ‘race’ or ‘civilization’ with ambitions for an authoritarian transformation of values and styles of government” (Fielitz/Laloire 2016: 17–18).

Many far-right groups were early adopters of the internet as a space in which they could create their own ideological publishing frames (Foxman/Wolf 2013). For example, the world’s largest white supremacist website, Stormfront, was established in 1996 and preceded by a bulletin board system that operated during the early 1990s. Indeed, the development of early online far-right subcultures forecasted political changes in the organized far right (Kaplan/Weinberg 1998). We have witnessed the potency of their new operational models on the streets and in parliaments since the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015. These changes are measurable in terms of their policy impacts, including the pressure to close borders in Greece and Germany, the ongoing rightward shift of political cultures in Italy and Austria, the installation of

authoritarian regimes in Hungary and elsewhere, and explicit collusions between governments and far-right influencers that have become common knowledge in the US.

Having expanded on to the world wide web, far-right activism evolved from the grounded street marches of previous protest eras to take on different characteristics. Generally speaking, early accounts stress how it became more individualized, anonymized and geographically scattered (Köhler 2014; Bennett 2012). Too often these accounts ignore how the networking aspects of the technology empowered the creation of broad-brush alliances with pan-national ambitions (Margetts et al. 2018). Terms like ‘clicktivism’ and ‘slacktivism’ became popular in the early 2010s as a way of dismissing the credibility of online campaigning. We now know that these atomization arguments created blind spots in mainstream thinking and power vacuums online, both with dangerous repercussions.

The Berlin-based Amadeu Antonio Foundation has come to call what has heated up since the 2010s a conflict over digital civil society (2017). This book goes further by thinking holistically about contemporary civil society as a context that is being re-defined by the normalization of digital networked technologies in everyday life, a context that demands we take online actions seriously if we are going to better understand their offline consequences and vice versa.

Social media tools like Twitter and Facebook are now considered indispensable by protest groups from across the spectrum (Gerbaudo 2012) and have generated (or at least significantly intensified) their own playbooks, led by click-swarm tactics like trolling and doxing (Bartlett 2015). On the far right in particular, at a macro level, the symbols and icons that anchored such communities have shifted from the tropes of National Socialism to re-coded hipster emblems (Miller-Idriss 2018) and humorous memes (Lovink/Tuters 2018). Just as the means of communication were brought up-to-date, so too were the vocabularies and outreach agendas of the larger far-right movements and parties (Mammone 2009). At a micro level, time and again we can trace the planning of anti-migrant protests, vigilantism and anti-Muslim squads back to social media crusades (Awan/Zempi 2016; Busher 2016). These evolved macro and micro tactical changes demonstrate that there is no longer a simple distinction between online and offline campaigning practices – in fact, that the two are now evermore inter-effecting and that contemporary protest politics is fundamentally post-digital.

THE POST-DIGITAL FAR RIGHT

In the social sciences, much has been written about why the far right has tipped the balance of online political discourse rightwards, away from the supposed ‘liberal hegemony’ they rail against, including, for example, several publications on the use of the internet by far-right extremists (Caiani 2018; Caiani/Parenti 2013). Such studies tend to focus on the communication potential of digital networks as something subsequent to the politics of the actors using that channel, thus reducing the digital to a ‘means to an end’. Relatively little has been written in accessible terms to explain how the far right is tipping that balance. Less still has been published to explain how or why such technologies have transformed the very nature of contemporary far right political action and discourse. This book offers thirteen perspectives on these developments, exploring the ways in which their entwinement is reciprocal and urgent in different national contexts with ramifications that are felt around the world. It re-casts official and unofficial far-right groups, movements and parties as activists in a post-digital world, one where they seem to be winning many of the ideological battles.

Most media historians agree that we are living in an era in which so-called ‘new media’ are ever-present and no longer new in the sense that theoretically sustained the category distinctions of old and new media. Our technical era is intermedia and digitally driven – one in which old and new interact – and our intermedia tools run software that allow multiple simultaneous user-tool and user-user interactions with “glocal scope” (Hampton/Wellman 2002). This connectivity makes the online and offline responsive to one another, and their growing augmentation makes them increasingly inter-dependent. This book introduces the concept of the ‘post-digital’ to social science discussions about the resurgent far right, re-contextualizing their shocking power to mobilize online and offline in terms of this pervasive inter-effectivity. It therefore promotes a network-oriented, sociological account of the nearing far right.

The term post-digital was coined in 2000 by American composer Kim Cascone to describe an aesthetic tendency in contemporary computer music that champions processing glitches as a source of unique sounds (Cascone 2000). That tendency is now more commonly labelled by the pan-arts term “glitch aesthetic” (Applegate 2016), and media theorists including Geert Lovink and Florian Cramer have re-directed post-digital to

describe a bigger, deeper phenomenon: “‘Post-digital’ ... refers to a state in which the disruption brought upon by digital information technology has already occurred. This can mean, as it did for Cascone, that this technology is no longer perceived as ‘disruptive’” (Cramer 2014: 12–13). Here, the prefix ‘post-’ signifies a dependent break from the word it precedes, in much the way we might talk about the post-modern or post-human. The post-digital names a technical condition that followed the so-called digital revolution and is constituted by the naturalization of pervasive and connected computing processes and outcomes in everyday life, such that digitality is now inextricable from the way we live while its forms, functions and effects are no longer necessarily perceptible.

This ‘naturalization’ has been accelerated by the growth in computing power, internet-enabled mobile devices, the low participation barriers to internet culture, as well as the push within that culture towards an emphasis on mass postproduction, compressed expression, images and “circulationism” (Steyerl 2013). For those post-digital far-right actors leading the current resurgence, intermedia systems are not neutral communication tools. Rather, they are a catalyst for highly social processes and forums where political opinions are created, expressed and practiced. These media are mediating politics. They connect larger audiences more quickly and widely, allow for autonomous spreading, circumvent regional and national restrictions, can host parallel channels that range from open access to the encrypted, and use overlapping frames, feeds and windows to keep politics, digital citizenship and users’ personal lives in constant contact. Every contributor to this book has tried to analyze these dizzying layers of relationships through a real and recent case study, contextualizing the national and historical frame of their sample in an engaging narrative, and doing all of this in a medium-length essay.

MAINSTREAMING THE EXTREME

A general climate of fear and political despondency seems to be percolating through societies in Europe and the US, which must play some intangible role in making both contexts amenable to reactionary extremisms, especially of the conservative sort that promises to restore some mythic version of proper order. In traditional political milieus, this despondency has been coupled with a failure on the part of civil society and the Left

to act collectively. In non-traditional milieus, the far right has excelled, heeding Breitbart's often-quoted maxim that "politics is downstream from culture" (Meyers 2011). As well as the ease with which different far-right subcultures can share news using the internet, it has also proven a rich playground for the adaptation of propaganda material (Whine 2012) and visual content (Doerr 2017) across contexts, flattening circumstantial differences in favor of general ideological alignment. For example, memes have become one of the most common ways that far-right content gets shared, often playing with a cynical or ironic stance relative to current affairs to recruit new sympathizers and make its messages attractive (Miller-Idriss 2018). Through forceful play and distributed action the far right, as a political space, has established unity in difference, in ways that the liberal center and Left have failed.

In an always-connected content-saturated era, attention becomes distracted. Understanding the attention economy and designing campaigns responsively to manage audiences' attention has become a hallmark of successful far-right movements. This typically involves offering an array of content-type choices simultaneously, which mimic variety, even disagreement, but actually all share the same narrow ideological range. Compressed and dogmatic forms of social media posting have risen in importance alongside public message boards such as 4chan that were a hotbed for the American Alt-Right when it was organizing in support of Donald Trump's 2016 election bid (Nagle 2017; Wendling 2018).¹ Yet other, semi-discrete publishing platforms like moderated web forums can accommodate public and private exchanges. As such, they are the tip of an iceberg of more invisible communication channels used by far-right activists on the dark web (Bartlett 2015) and encrypted messenger services (Ebner 2017). What has become abundantly clear is that the far right has a core of tech-savvy participants who are willing to teach and advise, and their post-digital strategy is flexible enough to migrate from one platform to the next (Donovan et al. in this volume). The Alt-Tech movement is an important example of how and why this works. Its aim is to provide a self-sufficient safe haven for right-wing communities to freely express their opinions, as a response to what they

1 | The convention of bracketing the name 'Alt-Right' in speech marks to question that group's status claim is one we support, and is discussed in this volume by both Fledman/May and Miller-Idriss. However, unless it is a subject of discussion, in this book we have chosen not to follow that convention for the sake of clarity.

consider the unjust censorship of their right to free speech by mainstream providers. Alt-Tech works to achieve that goal by creating its own technological infrastructure (Roose 2017).

The startling result of this attention management approach – its fake variety, constant multiple channels, and mix of content types – is the gradual mainstreaming of ideas, expressions and behaviors that would have previously been considered extremist. Here this active verb, ‘main-streaming’, describes a confluence of processes that together cultivate sympathy amongst large portions of the general public for social attitudes that would otherwise be considered beyond the pale, then tries to mobilize that sympathy to institutionalize those attitudes in policies, legislation and public opinion about what is considered normal. Although the factors at play and their success are always difficult to pinpoint, their impact does not need to be complete or explicit for the strategy to have influence. The payoffs from shifting the frame of what is acceptable in mainstream discourse are demonstrated by the frailties of hate speech legislation. If the range of what is considered normal can change, and change differently in different contexts simultaneously, then so can its opposite, the range of what is considered prejudicial and unacceptable. This contextual dynamism, plus the complicated issue of free speech in democratic countries and the global reach of online media, make it incredibly difficult to define and enforce what constitutes hate within national jurisdictions.

Across Europe and the US, this gradual rightwards shift in the frame of what is normal has also had an array of knock-on effects (Davey et al. 2018). A strange mix of subcultures have been absorbed by the far right, from particular fashion brands (Idriss-Miller 2018) to anonymous and pseudonymous sections of the deep web (Tuters in this volume). The far right has its own internet stars and social media influencers, including Lauren Southern and Milo Yiannopoulos, who use their accounts like independent media channels that blur the distinction between lone actor activism and strategic movement campaigning in a manner best described as “post-organizational” (Mulhall 2018). Such ideologues often publish shock-tactic content as click-bait to compete for audience attention – the more controversial the better. In a highly politicized climate like ours, no matter how independent or distasteful these accounts are, they seed ideas and hyperlinks that attract more attention to local far-right organizations in the real world, often becoming a news story in themselves and so serving as a gateway to radicalized cultural spaces. The scope of other, more

collective efforts has also been stretched by the technical affordances of overlapping networks. Militant far-right groups have become more agile and are quicker to re-organize after their websites are deleted or banned (Hess 2018). InfoWars, Rebel Media and Breitbart represent the growing importance of alternative right-wing news platforms, while book presses like Arktos give a semblance of intellectual credibility to the European New Right's worldview (de Keulennar 2018).

COUNTER-THOUGHT AND COUNTER-ACTION

No book can exhaustively catalogue let alone solve these problems. In fact, a hero politics based on strongmen who save their people through sovereign action is a recurring feature of our current mess. This book has been developed in the opposite spirit. It is a collaborative attempt to pay close critical attention to a complex tangle of urgent problems, and to share the informed research of a range of academics, policy advisers and activists who want to communicate with broad readerships. The main body is organized into two sections, yet all of the contributors use grounded examples and try to offer actionable advice.

Section One gathers seven chapters that focus on 'Analyzing' various far-right strategies and collaborations that have involved a blend of virtual- and actual-reality campaigning, which are either little known in themselves or have had an under-discussed impact on national or international debates. Understanding exactly how online communities function requires a kind of double literacy: a technical appreciation of how the media operate has to be paired with a cultural awareness of what the content it mediates is trying to represent.

Rob May and Matthew Feldman together unpick the online strategies of the infamous Alt-Right. They explain how the apparent breadth and lightheartedness of the US-based movement has allowed fascists and neo-Nazis to hide in plain sight among its ranks. They trace the links between the supposedly jovial culture of online LOLs, their sharpened derivative lulz, and the booming popularity of pseudo-comic shaming tactics used by activists including Richard Spencer. Closely tied to all of this is the Alt-Right's weaponized use of irony and subcultural idioms, which Marc Tuters takes up in a detailed account of the connections between gamer culture, fan culture, the deep web and the far right. Tu-

ters introduces his concept of the “deep vernacular web” to explain the affinity or sense of existential threat shared by some online subcultures with white supremacists. He also deftly explains how the gatekeeping practices common to the former have been adapted by the latter, such that inclusion and exclusion are constantly reinforced through “live action role play” or LARPing protests that distinguish those ‘in the know’ from the enemy. Joan Donovan, Becca Lewis and Brian Friedberg critique the free-speech and market-disruption claims of the Alt-Tech movement. They unpack how its participants have created and stabilized new tools by cloning and consolidating popular features from corporate platforms that have blocked extremist users and advertisers. While platforms might be sociotechnical infrastructure that adapt to the norms of their users, ideological bubbles like Gab show that the moral values of their design teams are encoded in each system.

One of the most thriving platform types is, of course, social media, and two further contributions take up case-studies that concentrate on how European far-right political parties have successfully innovated social media strategies that enhance their offline authority. Philipp Karl investigates the post-digital promotion of a family-friendly, youth-oriented nationalist message that elevated Jobbik into position as Hungary’s main opposition party. He explains the simple but consistent messaging that framed Jobbik’s annual Nationalist May festival. These celebrations of Hungarian culture mobilized food, drink and music in support of a populist agenda, but relied on Facebook and Twitter to cash their lasting symbolic impact as political capital. Lynn Berg presents a damning assessment of the anti-feminist views and standards expressed by Germany’s far-right AfD party through speeches, adverts and constant micro-aggressions online. She shows how the perpetual reinforcement of regressive gender roles by male and female party representatives and supporters typifies the tandem bond between far-right ideology and a patriarchal understanding of gender norms. Further, she connects this to an on-going ethnicization of sexism in the culture war being waged by far-right actors across Germany and elsewhere.

Caterina Froio’s and Bharath Ganesh’s co-authored chapter reminds us that far-right activism has always had a transnational dimension, but shows how Twitter has opened up new opportunities for parties, movements and organizations with cross-border interests. They use a dataset of re-tweets by far-right parties in France, Germany, Italy and the UK to

assess what does and does not garner international attention. Their findings are surprising in many ways, especially at the level of take up. Yet they also re-affirm some sadly familiar trends, including the importance of hash-tags and issues-led posting for international circulation, and the ubiquity of anti-Muslim prejudice among such groups. Kaja Marczevska flips our focus to consider the booming zine culture amongst factions of the far right in contemporary Poland. She contrasts the pseudo-slick stylistic features of her examples against the traditional cut-and-paste aesthetic that was a signature of zine-making in its leftwing origins. Rather than dismiss the limited online presence of this strange boom as a failure to migrate to 'new media', Marczevska credits the offline limited circulation of such zines with being generative of a powerful safe space for community building.

Section Two has the intentionally ambiguous title 'Unmasking' because the six chapters it gathers try, in various ways, to draw the background practices and convictions of far-right communities into the foreground so that we can think critically about what actually unifies their memberships. Much of what unfolds in this section involves sensitive forms of disentangling and disambiguation. These are critical skills that are becoming all the more necessary in an era when digital networking makes the propagation of obfuscation, misinformation and 'fake news' a media strategy in itself for those who care more about power than truth.

Processes of meaning-making are always contextually specific and depend on shared terms and tools for understanding. Deciphering meanings, particularly of the symbolic sort, connect individuals to specific collective histories. They can fortify a community against the unversed, and also encourage a sense of belonging among the versed. As Cynthia Idriss-Miller explains in her chapter on youth culture and fashion, both of those payoffs make the symbology of far-right cultures a powerful aspect of how they define themselves, caricature their enemies and perpetuate the anxieties and obsessions that give them (positive and negative) continuity. She shows how iconography is adapted, commercialized and traded, and how consumer goods can become a symbolic force for political messaging on image-driven platforms like Instagram. Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz study the power of visual memes used by the German far-right project *Reconquista Germanica*, which mobilizes troll armies by remixing generic tropes of white nationalism. Cartoons, the crusades, nature and motherhood get spun through Vaporwave visual distortions or

neo-Romantic collage techniques. Bogerts and Fielitz find a “humorous ambiguity” to be so consistently deployed that it qualifies as a strategy, one that continues the long history of fascist movements aestheticizing politics. Alina Darmstadt, Mick Prinz and Oliver Saal survey a disinformation campaign that hijacked the tragic murder of a 14-year-old girl in Berlin in 2018 to fuel xenophobic fear about migrants and to stage overtly racist rumours about refugees. Politicians and citizens swarmed to echo the misleading claims that were drip-fed via social media about the ethnicity of the perpetrator. Darmstadt, Prinz and Saal show how this case is sadly typical of the politics of fear being sown by the far right in Germany and beyond, whereby suspicion becomes a racialized social lens. They also offer a clear-sighted list of everyday counter-actions that civil society can engage in to offer some push back.

The question of counter-action is central to the last three chapters in this book. Julia Ebner develops an analysis of far-right communication tactics and the ecosystem they create for cyber content, focusing on the use of satire, their odd claims to alterity, and the scary impact they are having amongst Generation Z digital natives. She maps out four pillars on which an international community could collaboratively build a framework to protect those who are targeted by radicalization, manipulation and intimidation practices. Gregory Sholette draws upon his long history as a participant and teacher in activist art communities to give a theoretical overview of the challenges now facing socially-engaged arts practice. Situating these challenges relative to capitalism’s precarious prevalence, he contrasts two rebel impulses. One is an essentialist push towards a homogenous, white concept of identity. The other faction are bonded by the long struggle for equality, which demands some space for uncertainty so that more equal futures can be imagined, a space that art might be well-suited to creating. Lastly, Nick Thurston loops this book project back to its starting point, an artwork called *Hate Library* (2017). His chapter connects the importance of sociable settings for reading, like libraries, with the value of pausing fluid streams of online language in print. Drawing on documentary poetry, file-sharing practices and the choreography of installation art, he outlines some of the roles that the arts might play when societies are faced by fundamental questions about who is responsible for the consequences of public expressions.

ENGAGING APPROACHES

One paradox of editing any collection of new essays is that there is always more to say and more people who deserve to be read, but you have to stop somewhere to publish the book. A second paradox of the form, exacerbated by a topic like ours, is that in an era of accelerated change grounded analyses are outdated pretty quickly by real life events. This book has been developed reactively, with the aim of sharing some informed opinions about a growing problem that has been all-too-easily ignored by people with power. Those opinions bridge art, activism, policy research and political science. As such, the editors and authors who have worked quickly and ambitiously to create this book have chosen to engage with the post-digital cultures of the resurgent far right – from a range of novel perspectives – rather than bury their heads in the sand, against the academic trend for quietism or socially-detached scholarship.

We are sensitive to the many problems that come with an engaged approach to researching global issues. Publishers face economic struggles, sensationalist media coverage about current affairs circulates everywhere, and attention spans of readers are supposedly decreasing. Social science literature is trying to keep up with these trends, as is research funding, but what sells is policy-oriented studies of causes, consequences and best practices. Similarly in art, so-called socially-engaged approaches have to accept their complicity with the structural inequalities that underwrite their industry. For example, discussing the co-option of artists' critical conscience by institutions who have different priorities is now a platitude. Nonetheless, we hope that the many original insights offered by this book will strengthen the great work already being done by civil society campaigners and contribute to a more sophisticated common understanding of how the personal and public, micro-action and macro-repercussions, online and offline behavior, are all tied-up in contemporary politics whether we like it or not.

As mentioned above, this book stemmed from the research into, and conversations about, an artwork by Nick Thurston called *Hate Library*, which was commissioned by Foksal Gallery in Warsaw where it was first exhibited in 2017. The advisory support of Matthew Feldman and curatorial trust of Katarzyna Krysiak on that exhibition were invaluable, as was the support of Inga Seidler and her colleagues for its next showing at transmediale 2018 in Berlin. We are sincerely grateful to all of them

for helping to develop this project. However, this book is worth reading because of the quality and intellectual generosity of the international mix of specialists who have contributed to it, to all of whom we owe endless thanks. Our editors at transcript Verlag recognized the importance of our topic and have supported us with great enthusiasm to start and finish this publication in less than 10 months, which would not have been possible without Florian Eckert's editorial care. We have remained determined to the end to make sure the length, variety and tone of this book makes it engaging and useful for specialist and non-specialist readers. To that end, it has been released in a post-digital manner, in a print edition and for Open Access download. Neither version would have been possible without the generous support of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, and we owe special thanks to Research Institute for Societal Development (FGW) for ensuring the digital edition would be available for free to readers anywhere in the world.

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