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Counter-Creativity: Innovative Ways to Counter Far-Right Communication Tactics

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Counter-Creativity

Innovative Ways to Counter

Far-Right Communication Tactics

Julia Ebner

"The left can't meme", is a common saying among the Alt-Right. Far-right efforts to mock the political correctness of the liberal left – who they call "libtards"[1] – and ridicule the conservative mainstream – in their words, "cuckservatives"[2] – have relied on transgressive jokes and funny visuals. In an unexpectedly inventive fashion, the far right has pioneered a new wave of taboo-breaking and controlled provocation, which they call 'triggering'. "We use the tactics of the left against them", many of them would say. Ironically taking inspiration from the civil rights youth revolts, their biggest scapegoat for everything they deem wrong in today's society, the far right has been imitating 1960's counter-culture strategies to protest against establishment politics. Their focus on lifestyle, youth culture and the arts can be seen as an attempt to reach the critical mass needed for any counterculture movement: in their case, this paradoxically takes the shape of a globalized counterculture that is opposed to 'globalism', and uses modern communication tools to spread anti-modern ideas.

While one can argue whether offensive Pepe the Frog memes (the symbol co-opted by the Alt-Right) and racist Synthwave tracks (the favorite music genre of white nationalists) qualify as art, it is self-evident that this new far-right counter-culture has successfully galvanized young people worldwide into supporting often openly racist and dangerous groups.

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1 | "Libtard" is a derogatory term used by the Alt-Right – combining the words liberal and retard – to describe left-leaning liberals.

2 | "Cuckservative" is a derogatory term used by the Alt-Right – combining the words cuckold and conservative – to describe center-right conservatives.

Has their offer for a collective identity that rejects the political, economic and societal status quo been sexier, faster and more innovative than the voices trying to counter it? Many counterspeech efforts against the Alt-Right have been declared ineffective or even counter-productive. Two major stumbling blocks for those of us who care about countering the far-right's growth have been our limited understanding of emerging subcultures on the internet coupled with a lack of creative and proactive approaches. Researchers, artists and concerned citizens can play a huge role in filling these gaps.

This chapter will outline a strategy to replace, optimize and complement current approaches to prevent, disrupt and counter online far-right activities. First, it will analyze the set of post-digital tactics employed by the far right when targeting different audiences and assess its current comparative advantages. In a next step, it will then suggest solutions to counter far-right post-internet campaigns, drawing on insights from research and evaluation projects that measured the effectiveness of different counter speech and interruption approaches. Furthermore, it will discuss a range of novel, experimental approaches that could potentially add to the range of current attempts being made to counter far-right activities in cyberspace.

FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

Over the past few years, far-right actors have been successful at exploiting windows of opportunity offered by the emergence of new media ecosystems and the novel interconnected information and communication cycles they afford. More specifically, they have leveraged the digital space for three different types of campaigns to reach their key audiences: radicalization campaigns targeting sympathizers, manipulation campaigns targeting the mainstream, and intimidation campaigns targeting political opponents.

Radicalization campaigns aimed at sympathizers involve the sophisticated use of micro-targeting, the hijacking of youth culture and the exploitation of tabooed and under-addressed grievances, fears and identity crises, which have enabled far-right actors to lure vulnerable internet users into their networks. Andrew Anglin, founder of the world's biggest neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer, which is now banned across the world,

has pioneered some of these tactics. By using troll armies and far-right influencers with large followerships as mouthpieces, Anglin has managed to inject his propaganda pieces into mainstream social media channels. His antisemitic conspiracy theories and neo-Nazi ideologies often come under the disguise of satire and transgressive internet culture (O'Brien 2017; Feinberg 2017; Marantz 2017).

Increasingly, far-right groups have learnt to segment their audiences, using micro-targeting tactics and tailoring their language to the different sub-cultures they want to reach. For example, the organizers of the white supremacist Charlottesville protest used entirely different sets of memes[3] and propaganda pieces for the different communication channels they targeted. Their rally trailers on fringe neo-Nazi websites and forums were much more explicitly racist and antisemitic than their propaganda contents on Twitter and Facebook. While the former featured Swastikas and called for the annihilation of Jews, the latter focused on topics such as freedom of speech and Southern heritage and addressed fears of immigration and the loss of cultural identity. The aim of these hyper-targeted campaigns was to appeal to different online communities along the far-right ideological spectrum and eventually 'unite the right' on the basis of their lowest common denominators (Davey/Ebner 2017).

Manipulation campaigns aimed at the 'greyzones' involve the creation, planting and dissemination of disinformation and the use of psy-ops style online campaigns, which have allowed far-right actors to influence mainstream discussions. Manuals circulated in American Alt-Right networks and their European equivalents include detailed instructions on how to 'redpill the normies' – a euphemism for hacking the minds of average users. Their strategy documents include guidelines on how to initiate conversations, build trust, exploit common grievances and tailor the language to the person they seek to bring closer to their ideologies. Generation Identity highlights that family members and friends might be the easiest target groups to start with (Generation D. 2017). The New Right Network has even hosted tutorials on Youtube, explaining step by step how to "redpill your girlfriend/wife".[4]

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3 | Memes are graphics of visual and textual remixes shared and widely distributed in online spaces.

4 | New Right Network (2018): "How to Red-Pill your Woman/Girlfriend/Wife or ANY woman PARTII", 26 June 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cdv1yDJfH_g).

Manipulation campaigns seeking to provoke the 'greyzones' to pick a side have become a particular priority for the international Alt-Right in the run-up to elections. 'Strategic polarization' is a concept the far right uses to deliberately sow discord, divide communities and spread binary world views. Its goal is to force the moderate middle to choose a side in order to expand the influence of the political fringes. At the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), we have monitored far-right trolling armies who sought to influence the elections in favor of far-right populist parties in the US, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden and found that the tactics they employed, their language and media ecosystems all followed roughly the same pattern (see graphic below). The campaigns usually start with Alt-Right users trying to mobilize and recruit sympathizers on messaging platforms such as 4chan and 8chan in English. Their next step has been to shift those conversations into encrypted applications such as Telegram and Discord, where they collect materials in the local language and plan campaigns that they can then launch on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Their aim is to shape the online discourse, set the agenda for discussions and put pressure on politicians to ultimately persuade the mainstream to support their parties of choice (Ebner/Davey 2018).
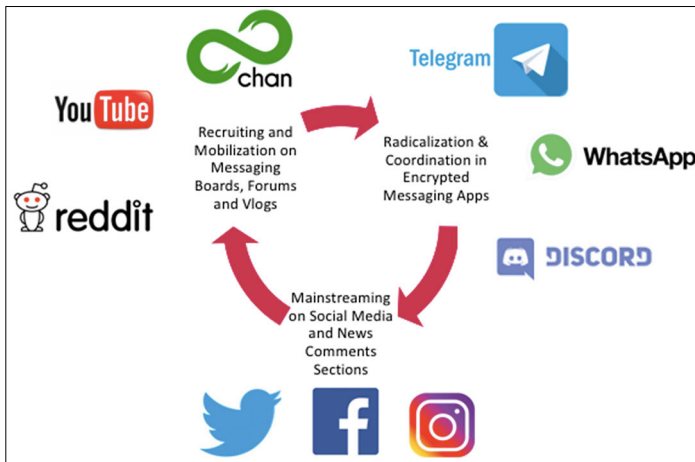
Author's visualization of far-right online influence ecosystems.

Intimidation campaigns aimed at opponents involve trolling and coordinated hate campaigns have enabled far-right actors to harass, silence and publicly discredit critical voices and political opponents including journalists, activists and politicians (Kreißel et al. 2018). Doxxing has been a particularly popular tactic among Alt-Right actors who want to take revenge on individuals who openly criticized them or simply do not share their opinions. The Crash Override Network, an organization made up of former cyber-bullying victims, defines doxxing as "a common first-stage tactic of mobs of anonymous online groups looking to intimidate you and start digging up information on your life".[5] Campaigns that involve the leaking of an individual's address and phone number, do not just fuel online hate but also increase the likelihood that these people are attacked in real life. In the US, activists, journalists and even academics have become increasingly frequent targets of doxing campaigns and cyber-harassment. At least 250 university professors reportedly became victims of right-wing online campaigns between early 2017 and mid-2018 (Kamenetz 2018). For example, Joshua Cuevas, a psychology professor at the University of North Georgia received racist and threatening private messages and was targeted in a sophisticated public doxxing campaign for his liberal leanings. "Those of us in higher education increasingly find ourselves the target of hostilities" (Cuevas 2018), he reflected in a firsthand account for the American Association of University Professors.

Ultimately, all three types of campaigns – radicalization, manipulation and intimidation – are designed to maximize the far right's online and offline influence by provoking overreactions on a political and societal level, which can set in motion profound systemic change.

The far right currently holds a number of comparative advantages in the realm of strategic communications: First of all, its campaigns have benefitted from the significant time lag in the responses given by policy makers, tech firms and civil society. Not only were the prevention and countering efforts often reactive but they also tended to be inward-looking and generic. Far-right activists are currently ahead of those trying to counter their activities on at least three levels: they have been better at

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5 | Crash Override (2018): *Preventing Doxing: "A Primer on Removing your Personal Information from the most Commonly Exploited Places"*, (http://www.cra shoverridenetwork.com/preventingdoxing.html).

exploiting new technologies, at fostering international ties and synergies, and at appealing to young audiences.

Far-right extremists, as early adopters of new technology, have been particularly apt at spotting and exploiting infrastructural loopholes and socio-psychological weaknesses that social media have unleashed within our societies. By coordinating slick campaigns in encrypted channels and then propagating these on mainstream social media platforms, far-right groups have managed to conquer entire online spaces, leveraging the traditional media's growing pressure to compete for clicks and baits with their faster online counterparts (Kreißel et al. 2018).

Yet, far-right extremist efforts and effects are by no means limited to cyberspace. Many fringe groups have built powerful online-offline hybrid strategies to maximize their real-world impact. By sharing knowledge and experience across borders, far-right movements in Europe and the US have been able to learn from each other. "We've mastered the online activism, you've mastered the in-real-life activism", said American far-right activist Brittany Pettibone in a filmed conversation with European Identitiarian figurehead Martin Sellner in 2017 (Sellner 2017).

The pan-European white nationalist group Generation Identity as well as American Alt-Right influencers frequently stage carefully planned media stunts on the street, which they then livestream to social media (Hentges et al. 2014). By combining sharable – often shocking – contents with credible messengers – often charismatic influencers with massive followerships – their slick social media campaigns are easily turned viral. The result is a wide online reach that goes beyond their own fanbase, which in turn forces traditional news outlets to report about them. This is particularly true once a tipping point is reached, where fringe groups make hashtags and their content trends in numbers significantly large enough to penetrate mainstream audiences (Philips 2018).

The creation of transnational and cross-ideological alliances, and exploitation of international synergies, are a second area where the far right seem to have gained a 'first mover' advantage. Over the past few years the phenomenon of "networked nationalism" (Donovan et al. 2018) has become a growing aspect of far-right movements. Increasingly, far-right groups and actors put aside ideological differences and historic sources of in-fighting. For instance, the Defend Europe mission in the summer of 2017, which sought to prevent NGOs from rescuing drowning refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, received social media support and donations

from across the world (Davey/Ebner 2017). Cases such as the Defend Europe campaign, the Charlottesville rally and multi-group mobilisiations in the run-up to elections, are examples of such explicit efforts to cross borders and overcome ideological differences for the sake of maximizing collective impact. To act as agents of change they opportunistically join forces, focusing on the lowest common denominator: their shared enemies and their shared goals. These are most commonly their aversion to multiculturalism, their opposition to 'establishment' politics, their hatred of the left, and their fear that cultural-ethnic identity is being eroded. All three, and others, have become a bridge that has brought together far-right groups who traditionally did not cooperate.

The targeting of young people through the creation of counter-culture movements and the use of gamification in their communication and recruiting strategies have given far-right activists a third advantage. "Politics is downstream from culture. I want to change the cultural narrative", said Andrew Breitbart, the creator of the website that has become the premier source of information and commentary for today's far right (Poniewozig 2012). Based on Breitbart's philosophy of changing politics by altering culture, far-right movements and influencers have placed their bets on developing a strategy that has the potential to bring about drastic attitudinal and behavioral changes within large sections of society. In their positioning against the political establishment and in satirical fashion their messaging has resonated well with a range of sub-cultures such as online gamers, anti-feminists and conspiracy theorists who now coalesce around common themes, grievances and online meeting points. The development of a shared set of insider jokes, references and even a common playbook for online campaigns has created a strong sense of in- and out-group thinking.

The online far-right's successes in reaching young digital natives have been particularly striking. Their use of computer game references, anti-establishment rhetoric and exciting counter-culture activities has allowed them to appeal to large proportions of Generation Z and the millennials. By hiding racial slurs behind funny memes and jokes, and by replacing traditional swastika-ridden attire with cool jeans and Ray Ban sunglasses, the far right has increasingly polished its image among younger generations.

Developing the Response

An international framework to protect those targeted by radicalization, manipulation and intimidation campaigns should be based on a collaborative, integrated approach that builds on the following pillars: Predicting the trends, understanding the audiences, building an anti-hate coalition, and testing new intervention approaches.

Many of the response systems in place have been too slow to be effective as a result of a failure to predict new trends in the use of new technology and communication strategies by far-right activists. Research is needed to understand the emerging new media ecosystems, their internal dynamics as well as their influence on mainstream platforms. Over the last couple of years, far-right campaigners have increasingly moved their operations to so-called 'Alt-Tech platforms' (see Donovan et al. in this book), reacting to the introduction of stricter anti-hate speech measures across major Silicon Valley companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google. Alt-Tech safe havens for far-right extremists include, for instance, Alt-Right social media like Gab and Minds, the far-right's Youtube equivalent Pewtube, and the white supremacist crowdsourcing website Hatreon. These virtual migration streams demonstrate that a static, linear perspective will fail to reflect the changes in the fast-paced online universe of far-right extremists. It is therefore necessary to look at how different platforms interact with each other and are used as part of an information and communication ecosystem that runs in parallel to that of the political mainstream.

Some of the measures undertaken to prevent or disrupt far-right mobilization proved ineffective or even counter-productive due to an insufficient understanding of the far-right's support base, its key target audiences and the characteristics of their various sub-cultures. Furthermore, neglecting the high degree of interconnectedness among far-right networks can restrict the desired effect of counterspeech campaigns or even backfire.

A case in point is the #MoreThanARefugee video, which told the stories of individuals who had to flee their countries and was featured on Youtube Spotlight in June 2017 as part of the Creators for Change initiative. The campaign focused on maximizing its visibility and reach among a general audience but experienced a significant backlash from far-right communities on 4chan and Reddit, who launched a so-called 'dislike raid' on a massive scale. Their reframing and mockery of the original message allowed them to spread their campaign on Twitter, where they were able

to encourage even moderate users to participate. A month after #More-ThanARefugee was published, the video counted over 450,000 dislikes, compared to just 144,000 likes. The vast majority of its 80,000 comments were negative or contained hateful speech and threatening language. For example, ISD's analysis of a sample of 239 of the 80,000 comments revealed that just 4 percent held positive sentiment.

Raids like these expose the need to significantly step up our efforts to comprehend how far-right subcultures take shape in online spaces, as well as their grievances, language, insider jokes and reference points. Only a handful of institutes are currently focused on the far-right's use of new media. For example, MIT's Center for Civic Media, the Oxford Internet Institute and Data & Society Foundation have released seminal studies that can lay the foundation for further research. The University of Amsterdam's Alt-Right Open Intelligence Initiative has released the first comprehensive taxonomy of trolls and far-right online communities. Using Google's BigQuery Tool, the researchers conducted a linguistic analysis of 3 billion Reddit comments.[6] Likewise, scholars at University College London have developed a way to measure how memes spread across the web and have identified the most influential groups in the creation and dissemination of memetic contents. Their study shows how far-right actors have weaponized neutral memes such as Pepe the Frog to spread politically loaded, racist and antisemitic messages.[7]

However, online sub-cultures and different parts of the online far-right networks remain underexplored. Their audiences are often misunderstood by outsider commentators. Only by studying their narratives and language can we get to the core of their motivations, ideologies and identity perceptions. These insights could then serve as a basis to develop adequate intervention approaches to debunk, discredit and counter their messages.

The creation of a global multi-agent coalition against far-right campaigns in the digital space could be the starting point for coordinating

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6 | Alt-Right Open Intelligence Initiative (2017): "Mapping the Alt-Right: US Alternative Right across the Atlantic", 18 July 2017 (https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/AltRightOpenIntelligenceInitiative).

7 | MIT Technology Review (2018): "This is where Internet Memes Come from", 11 June 2018 (https://www.technologyreview.com/s/611332/this-is-where-internet-memes-come-from/).

such intervention efforts, as well as a massive step towards reducing the comparative advantages held by the far right. The goal should be to foster closer cooperation between researchers, policymakers, the private sector and civil society. Concerted efforts led by stakeholders on all levels could help to develop and scale novel approaches to prevent, disrupt and counter far-right campaigns.

Ideally, an integrated intervention model would combine proactive counterspeech and rapid reaction systems that make use of international, cross-sector synergies and explore innovative methods for audience analysis, segmentation and micro-targeting. The development of counterspeech or disruption campaigns should be based on in-depth research of the new trends and the target audiences. The first step in the development of effective response mechanisms is audience segmentation. Once the different sub-audiences as well as their preferred communication medium have been identified, messages that use credible messengers should be tailored to the different specifics of the different sub-cultures then tested across different platforms (Tuck/Silverman 2016).[8]

Most counterspeech and intervention approaches do come with a certain degree of risk. For example, harmful side effects may include causing unintended exposure to extremist propaganda, provoking negative belief reinforcement, setting off cumulative extremism dynamics, or triggering a backlash from fringe communities as in the case of the #MoreThanARefugee dislike raid. ISD has developed a risk framework that can serve as a guide to categorize and minimize many of these problems. Building resilience, raising awareness and offering hate aid can reduce the risks associated with anti-hate-speech campaigns. The Online Civil Courage Initiative, which ISD founded in cooperation with Facebook, or networks such as the German organization das NETTZ, can help to connect and empower young activists and NGOs and offer advice and safety nets to those that are at risk of receiving abuse as a result of their anti-hate campaigns.

Although risk mitigation is important, it should not prevent intervention providers from taking entirely novel approaches. The self-imposed limits of counter-speech should be reconsidered, and new prevention and

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8 | RAN (2017): "RAN Guidelines for Effective Alternative and Counter-Narrative Campaigns", (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/docs/pages/201702_ran_how_to_measure_impact_of_online_campaign_en.pdf).

disruption approaches tested as a process of constant improvement. Initiatives such as #ichbinhier, an anti-hate community that counters coordinated trolling and hateful commentary on Facebook, and the No Hatespeech Movement, a campaign that mobilizes young people to speak up against hate speech, are excellent examples for new models that have effectively disrupted and reduced online far-right activities. Counterspeech needs to become more dynamic, more innovative and bolder to reach some of the obscure and self-absorbed internet cultures as well as those in the grey-zones. Our future efforts need to be:

- Dynamic: Involving both proactive communication and rapid response systems to react to spontaneous far-right campaigns. Pro-active efforts need a significantly more nuanced method of choosing their messages, messengers and medium based on the target audience that the campaign seeks to reach. On the other hand, rapid ad-hoc interventions require the pooling of resources and linking of networks, so that these can quickly be leveraged and adapted to different contexts. Whenever an incident or news event triggers a far-right reaction, this kind of collective synchronicity would allow for immediate civic responses.
- Innovative: Developing creative messages could be done in cooperation with artists, scientists or even trolling communities. Furthermore, it may be worth testing experimental approaches, using for example video games and app games (Ament 2017; Bogost 2006), interactive videos and music. Out-of-the-box thinking will be essential to penetrate new audiences and offer appealing alternatives to those provided by extremists.
- Bold: Sexy counterspeech needs to develop bolder and funnier contents. It needs to dare to break taboos, transcend the limits of conventional debates and present issues from entirely new perspectives. While the use of sarcasm and humor can be an immensely powerful tool to establish sympathy, our research at ISD showed that it can also render counter-narrative campaigns counter-productive if it devalues or mocks the target audience. However, for example, self-ironizing can act as a formidable icebreaker.

To conclude, more research into the different online sub-cultures targeted by far-right campaigns will be needed to engage with them in a constructive way. Without a more thorough understanding of their grievances, lan-

guage, insider jokes and reference points that are galvanizing, far-right communities, counterspeech efforts are likely to miss their objective. Moreover, a strong coalition of researchers, policy makers, the tech sector, artists and voluntary activists will be necessary to pilot new, innovative bottom-up approaches to countering far-right campaigns. A counter-culture to extremist counter-cultures can only be led by civil society itself. The Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) is one of many initiatives that provide an infrastructure and support network for civil society activists fighting at the frontlines to counter online radicalization and hate speech. No doubt the challenges are growing in scope and sophistication, but so are the response mechanisms.

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