Right-Wing Populism and Mediated Activism: Creative Responses and Counter-Narratives

Peer Review:

Copyright:

Open Access:

Digital Preservation:

RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND MEDIATED ACTIVISM: CREATIVE RESPONSES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Right-Wing Populism and Mediated Activism: Creative Responses and Counter-Narratives Special Collection

Elizabeth Poole and Eva Giraud
University of Keele, UK
Corresponding author: Elizabeth Poole (e.a.poole@keele.ac.uk)

This is an introduction to the *Open Library of Humanities* Special Collection 'Right-Wing Populism and Mediated Activism: Creative Responses and Counter-Narratives'. It provides an overview of key issues and debates in discussions of social media activism, specifically in relation to populism, and the corresponding rise in hate speech. It provides a summary of the contributing articles which demonstrate the digital practices of the far right and the strategies of actors in challenging hate speech. The introduction also elaborates on the structure of the Special Collection.

We began our research into counter-narratives against hate speech in 2016, applying for a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant to explore how negative discourses about Islam were being constructed – and crucially, contested – on the social media platform Twitter. By the time we had received the funding and began work on the project in earnest, however, a wave of high-profile events had occurred: the UK referendum to leave the European Union; the election of Donald Trump as US president; the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazilian President; and the rise of other European populist groups, in Austria and Italy for example.

Our research into the dynamics of an online counter-narrative against Islamophobic discourse (Poole, Giraud and de Quincey, 2019; this edition) is imbricated in this contemporary political environment. We had always recognized the impossibility of disentangling counter-narratives from the discourses they were responding to. Over the course of our research, however, we realized that these entanglements did not only stem from the fact that a counter-narrative – by its nature – is always reacting *against* something. In addition to this relationship, in our particular study we found that, though originating in Europe, the dynamics of the counter-narrative (particularly its visibility, persistence, and longevity) were heavily shaped by the presence of self-defined right-wing, (often) Trump-supporting Twitter users in the US. While the anti-racist counter-narratives we were concerned with were often able to gain visibility, particularly within the mainstream media, this was short-lived in the face of tightly-knit clusters of right-wing social media users. In addition to those identifying explicitly with the far right, moreover, there was a pervasive sense of 'ambient racism' of the variety described by Siapera (2019; this issue), which worked to both normalize hate speech and undermine possibilities for sustainable counter-narratives.

The relationship between our findings and these broader political developments motivated us to develop this Special Collection for *Open Library of Humanities*. In drawing together research that has worked to understand the affordances of mediated populism, we have sought to gain a clearer sense of how discourses associated with contemporary political events have contributed to the normalization of (racialized) xenophobia. Our aim, in adopting this focus, has been to better

understand the difficulties of contesting these narratives in order to grasp the possibilities for critique and intervention.

In academic contexts there has been a particular focus on the role of the media in legitimizing populist sentiment, in ways that have laid the groundwork for recent political developments. As Phoebe Moore and Kirsten Forkert presciently argued in 2014, there has been, following the financial crash of 2008:

> An emerging populist media consensus which has become an apparently indisputable truth, despite the lack of evidence: that working-class people are not only anti-immigration, but also that immigration is fundamentally bad for working-class people (2014: 500).

Though Moore and Forkert are referring to a UK political context prior to the events outlined above, recent comparative studies of mainstream European media depictions of events such as the refugee crisis (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2016) and anti-immigration narratives surrounding the US presidential election (Kellner, 2016) demonstrate the broader resonance of this line of argument.

Careful attendance to these evolving mainstream media discourses, therefore, is proving an increasingly urgent task (a point brought into sharp relief by Holohan, 2019; this issue). The mass media, however, have increasingly been seen as only one dimension of the complex media ecology that is entangled with contemporary political events (Treré, 2019). The role of digital media has also been seen as a critical area of investigation, especially in light of the increased awareness of the influence of extreme-right media platforms, which has been precipitated by the rise of so-called 'alt-right' digital media outlets as a palatable face of white supremacism (Feshami, 2018; this issue). There have been particular concerns about the role of social media in contributing to the increased visibility and circulation of these views. The affordances of platforms such as Twitter – where different voices are brought together by features such as hashtags – have been accused of spreading fake news (Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen, 2018) and have provided outlets for more established populist figures, such as Trump or Geert Wilders (Muis et al., 2018; this issue).

These platforms have also enabled views formerly restricted to extreme blogs and websites to come into contact with new audiences (Daniels, 2018).

In light of the rapidly expanding body of research about right-wing populism and the political role of media (both mainstream and social), it perhaps seems surprising that a comparatively short time ago scholars were arguing that research into activist media ecologies was characterized by the 'disproportionate interest it has shown in the progressive politics of the left compared to the relative scarcity of sources tapping into the workings of far-right groups' (Mercea, Ianelli and Loader, 2016: 285). The Special Collection contributes to ongoing attempts to redress this problem, building on allied work that has sought to deepen understanding of the dynamics of mediated populism (Ouellette and Banet-Weiser, 2018).

This *Open Library of Humanities* Special Collection brings together a range of examples including: uses of Twitter by members of the political establishment; white nationalist media ecologies; circulations of hate speech on social media; and the racialized anti-immigration media discourses that play a co-constitutive role in this broader media environment. At one level, the articles seem to engage with different modes of racist and xenophobic discourse, from 'organised' disinformation to more 'everyday' racist sentiment; as Siapera (2019) argues, however, such distinctions do not meaningfully hold as these discourses all contribute to an environment where vehemently anti-immigration views can be reframed as legitimate public opinion. It is this environment, in other words, to echo Moore and Forkert, which results in broader political discourse shifting the right.

In focusing on the complex, contradictory ways in which narratives are constructed and contested in the context of specific communication ecologies, the papers here resist reductive accounts about the affordances of the media they examine. In particular, they avoid polarized narratives that either celebrate digital media or dismiss it as irrelevant to 'real', 'offline' politics. This Special Collection instead paints a picture of a media environment in which the co-constitutive relations between different media– including digital, print, and even oral communication – are, in turn, entangled with the dynamics of the narratives that emerge from this environment. Through deepening understanding of these relations, these papers offer a sense

of the ways in which particular discourses have become normalized. In doing so, however, and perhaps most importantly, these papers help to offer a clearer sense of how possibilities for critique and resistance can emerge.

Outline of Content

We have structured this Special Collection so the content comes full circle. It begins with an outline of the activities and strategies of white nationalist groups online (Feshami) before offering an empirical example of how these strategies play out in one specific context, here the Netherlands (Muis et al.). This examination of high-profile political figures' use of Twitter is followed by a focus on the contestations of right-wing discourse within increasingly complex media contexts (Poole, Giraud and de Quincey). The final articles provide a more in-depth exploration of the difficulties of countering populist discourse, as illustrated by Siapera's analysis of tweets about a suspected terrorist attack in Ireland. This article demonstrates how, in mobilising 'common sense' discourses, the far-right have extended their voices beyond their own digital enclaves. Furthermore, in the last article, Holohan shows how challenges to right-wing populism (or as we frame it here, counter-narratives) are often muted by the systems in which they are produced and thus the dominant more conservative voices prevail.

Feshami details some of the political difficulties surrounding the rise of right-wing populism, in his analysis of the media engagement of white supremacists in the US. Through an examination of a variety of white nationalist media, both physical and digital, he demonstrates their aim is to shift the terms of public debate so that far right ideas are adopted as mainstream. This he calls 'metapolitics'. Online media provide an arena for metapolitics to take place due to the accessibility they offer to wider society. Yet white nationalists also reject the pluralism present online in a bid to ensure their voices are dominant, hence the problem of incorporating white nationalist voices into liberal democracies. Feshami turns to democratic theory to illustrate this incompatibility. He complicates Mouffe's (2000) argument that conflictual voices are a necessity to the workings of democracy, stating that this also requires the equal recognition of different voices, something white nationalists do not accept.

Feshami acknowledges the diversity of those who may be defined within the white nationalist label but argues they have a common goal – to stop what they perceive as the 'extermination' of the white race, which means they cannot accept the pluralism integral to contemporary democracy. Through strategies which link white supremacist ideas to mainstream discourse – strategies that are often realized through the use of digital media – moreover, white nationalists actively constitute a threat to democracy. The dispersion of these actors across networks extends their visibility and makes it difficult to close down their voices, because such an act could be seen as anti-democratic. Feshami contends that it is necessary, therefore, to examine the social spaces these groups inhabit (including online) to learn more about the motivations and factors which inform these social disruptors, rather than simply trying to accommodate their voices within normative democratic frameworks.

At the same time as white nationalist voices are acquiring broader visibility, other right-wing actors are actively gaining political legitimacy. One of the more high-profile voices, which appears to have been legitimized by contemporary political events, is that of Dutch politician Wilders, infamous for his Islamophobic position. Muis, van Schie, Wieringa and de Winkel analyze the Twitter feed of Wilders during the 2017 elections to demonstrate how he both uses 'facts' (in the form of statistics) to legitimize his views on race and ethnicity, whilst simultaneously undermining the facts of opponents (as fake news). They argue that, in a pattern comparable to other 'populists', Wilders avoids mainstream media and uses social media as a channel to communicate. Similar to other public figures, this use of Twitter is based on a traditional broadcasting model, with virtually no interaction with his audiences. The analysis offered by Muis et al. shows how Wilders uses both discontent and discursive strategies, such as appeals to 'rationality', to gain prominence without being accountable through mainstream channels. In this new media landscape, they suggest, the traditional media lose control of their message as 'information bricoleurs' reframe content to service their own agendas. Through this strategy, Wilders can maintain control over his message and circumvent the mainstream media, a pattern also shared by other political actors (notably Trump). In this way, Wilders and others can transgress conventional practices of political communication and force opponents to act on their terms.

The divergent digital strategies of populists are evident in the third paper, on the trending of #StopIslam, which also emerged and was circulated on Twitter (Poole, Giraud and de Quincey). Various actors have used this hashtag to share Islamophobic discourse following terrorist attacks; this paper focusses specifically on its use in the wake of the bombing in Brussels in March 2016. Echoing claims made in other papers in the Special Collection, the widespread circulation of the hashtag seems to resonate with arguments which suggest that xenophobic media content has become more mainstream. Yet a closer examination of data related to the #StopIslam hashtag revealed that the majority of the tweets or posts using the hashtag did so in order to contest its original meaning and intent. Not only this, these counter-narratives gained some visibility in the wider public sphere as the novelty of the challenge to hate speech meant that this counter-discourse was shared by mainstream media outlets (both on Twitter and in print). The wider visibility of the counter-narrative suggests that voices seeking to spread hate speech mostly appeared to be talking to themselves. However, through a more qualitative approach, that situated these messages within their broader ecology, it became evident that those using the hashtag were ultimately successful in extending their hate speech outwards.

Original users of the hashtag adopted a conflictual approach (generating huge amounts of flak in response to the counter-narratives) and used tactics such as the extensive circulation of 'evidential' memes, URLs, and more. While the visibility of the counter-narrative against #StopIslam seemed to demonstrate the potential of social media campaigns to appropriate and change the direction of xenophobic discourse, therefore, tactics engaged in by those propagating Islamophobia ensured that attempts to contest these narratives ultimately lacked longevity and soon fell away. In contrast, the tightly organized structures and networks of the right enabled their messages to continue beyond this discursive event. Siapera builds on these arguments in her article, which further demonstrates the traction afforded to right-wing voices through their adoption of 'common-sense' discourses on race which has allowed them to circumvent prohibition.

Through an analysis of online responses to reports of a stabbing by a man of unknown nationality in Ireland in 2018 (which was circulated via the hashtags

#Dundalkand #Dundalkattacks) Siapera seeks to examine the distinction between 'ambient' (or everyday) racism and 'organized' racism (usually associated with the far-right) on Twitter. Siapera's analysis shows the similarity between these forms of racism but argues that the regulatory policies of social media platforms, which deem organized racism 'unacceptable', allows for the circulation of 'acceptable' racism under the guise of free speech and due to the platforms' stated goals to contribute to public debate. Again, the article highlights the strategies used by the far-right to extend their discourse, in particular the blending of supremacist and banal discourses of racism. Unfortunately, these strategies, alongside the current policies and practices of social media companies towards hate speech, allow for its continuation. Siapera's findings throw into question the futility of both these policies and even engaging or challenging hate speech online given that interaction appears to support the communication strategies of the far-right. Structurally, these media platforms thus appear to perpetuate racism rather than provide opportunities to contest it.

Moreover, Holohan, through an analysis of NGOs' responses to mainstream media discourse about refugees, demonstrates the limitations of counter-narratives within current systems of representation. Following Arendt's analysis of the dehumanization of Jewish populations in the Second World War, Holohan argues that mainstream media has a key role in the Othering of refugees which contributes to an environment whereby their unjust treatment is framed as justified. Holohan suggests that counter-narratives from NGOs contest this discourse only in a limited way because they operate within the same 'western' system of representation (Hall, 1992) that maintains the authority of the Global North. A (neo-colonial) counter-discourse of civility and humanity keeps migrants in a permanent state of abjection by reframing them as refugees – sympathetic victims of circumstance in need of saving – but their subordinate position is maintained. Digital environments consolidate this position of abjection as they allow a collective conscience to be operationalized from a safe distance, without fully challenging existing relations. As a result, argues Holohan, the subordinate continues to be subject to an Othering discourse: a pattern also demonstrated by the large number of would-be allies speaking in defense of Muslims through the hashtag #StopIslam, as opposed to the counter-narrative being used for

self-representation (Poole, Giraud and de Quincey, 2019; this issue). Well-meaning discourses are still therefore trapped within a hierarchical system of representation. It is this system that makes it easier for right-wing groups to normalize extremist, racialized narratives about immigration under the guise of common sense.

Overall, therefore, the research we have drawn together in this Special Collection shows that the dynamics of online activism are neither straightforward nor always predictable. To suggest that digital media technologies offer either hope or a decline into the worst of human tendencies is to set up a false dichotomy: of course they do both. But to find a solution to the problem of online hate speech requires us to come back to Feshami's proposition in the first article, the question of context. Political and economic contexts drive both the development of technologies and their usages. Whilst the governance of social media is increasingly being brought into question, unless there is significant structural change – in the way these media companies are financed for example – there will be little appetite for change. Despite all of the ambivalence and complexity of the media environments engaged with here, moreover, what we have illustrated is the centrality of social media to political communication in a digital age. We now need further, multi-method, longitudinal studies across particular media ecologies to understand more fully how specific platforms are being used strategically to meet diverse and conflicting agendas in the politics of xenophobia.

Competing Interests

References

Berry, M, Garcia-Blanco, I and **Moore, K** 2016 Press coverage of the refugee and migrant crisis in the EU: A content analysis of five European countries. Geneva: United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Daniels, J 2018 The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-Right". *Contexts*, 17(1): 60–65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218766547

Hall, S 1992 The West and the Rest: Discourse and power. In: Hall, S and Gieben, S (Eds.), *Formations of Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity.

Kellner, D 2016 *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, media spectacle, and authoritarian populism.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-788-7

Mercea, D, Ianelli, L and **Loader, B D** 2016 Protest communication ecologies. *Information, Communication & Society,* 19(3): 279–289. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109701

Moore, P and **Forkert, K** 2014 Class and panic in British immigration. *Capital & Class,* 38(3): 497–505. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816814549297

Mouffe, C 2000 *The Democratic Paradox.* London: Verso.

Ouellette, L and **Banet-Weiser, S** 2018 Media and the extreme right. *Communication, Culture & Critique,* 11(1): 1–6. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx021

Treré, E 2019 *Hybrid Media: Ecologies, imaginaries, algorithms.* New York & London: Routledge.

Vargo, C J, Guo, L and **Amazeen, M A** 2018 The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. *New Media & Society,* 20(5): 2028–2049. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817712086