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E-extremism: A conceptual framework for studying the online far right

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Abstract
Despite a recent surge in the literature on the far right, there has been a theoretical gap in studying the relationship between the dynamics of change in the far right and the changing digital landscape. Drawing on a set of interrelated concepts developed in far-right studies, social movement studies, and media and communication studies, this theoretical paper adopts a framework based on the concepts of digital network repertoires and the mediation opportunity structure to discuss the ways in which various actors on the far right – reactionary conservatives, online antagonistic communities and right-wing extremists and terrorists – exploit the affordances of mainstream and alt-tech platforms for their own purposes. Through this discussion, this article seeks to shed light on the interplay between e-extremism and the online far right.

Keywords
Digital network repertoires, e-extremism, mediation opportunity structure, memes, reactionary conservative

Introduction

Over the last decade, ideological and religious extremist actors such as Islamist and right-wing extremists have become adept at using digital technologies as the primary instrument for propaganda, radicalization, mobilization and recruitment (Ebner, 2017). A recent surge of media and scholarly interest in right-wing extremism since the Christchurch massacre has sought to match the level of attention given to Islamist terrorism in the post-9/11 era. One context for this research has been an increase in far-right

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attacks by 250% in North America, Western Europe and Oceania between 2014 and 2020 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). This surge in attacks by violent right-wing extremists has been matched by their appropriation of social media affordances and innovative use of alt-tech platforms to livestream attacks, post manifestos, spread antagonistic memes, troll opponents and connect the likeminded.

Meanwhile, the UK government and European Union (EU) policymakers have made great strides to redesign their 'Countering Violent Extremism' policies as tackling extremism in all its form, but their overwhelming focus remains on Islamist extremism (Kundnani and Hayes, 2018). Notwithstanding the hostile relationship between Islamist and right-wing extremism, they both operate within the logic of 'victimization of the "us" and the demonization of the "other"' to justify themselves, which inevitably brings about 'reciprocal radicalization' as one side feeds off the other (Ebner, 2017: 27). It is thus necessary to give equal importance to the threat posed to international peace and security by these two forms of extremism.

Compared with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) centralized organizational structure that is built on hierarchical relationships while also incorporating its weak branches and informal online affiliates (Lawson, 2019), the decentralized, distributed network of the far right is predominantly made up of loosely connected movements and online communities, albeit with right-wing populist political parties and institutionalized groups (Walther and McCoy, 2021). An example of this is the alt-right, which is 'an outgrowth of Internet troll culture' operating primarily online and mostly anonymous (Hawley, 2017: 4), with an amorphous assemblage of supporters scattered across the right of the political spectrum, ranging from far-right intellectuals and influencers to the misogynist manosphere to White supremacists and neo-Nazis (Hermansson et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, extremists tend to share similar digital communication strategies. Jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS and the far right use websites, social media platforms and public discussion forums for propaganda and recruitment while relying on closed chat rooms and private messaging apps for ingroup communication, such as event planning and virtual training (Rieger et al., 2013). In another disturbing parallel to ISIS' release of execution videos on social media, the livestreaming of terrorist attacks has caught on among right-wing extremists as a way to lure their sympathizers into radicalization through the performance and glorification of violence (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020). Despite continuous efforts to take down jihadist channels and content by Telegram, this encrypted messaging app has become a hotbed for the far right with high-profile figures like Milo Yiannopoulos, Laura Loomer and Paul Joseph Watson migrating accounts there in reaction to widespread deplatforming in the wake of the Christchurch massacre (Rogers, 2020). It is difficult for social media algorithms to identify right-wing extremist content as it is often meme-based and less likely to be explicitly violent than jihadist content.

A further difficulty is defining right-wing extremism. As Berger (2018: 23) argues, '[e]xtremism is not the province of any single race, religion, or political school'. Nor is there a universal definition of what constitutes extreme phenomena as the definition itself may be influenced by 'a (non)democratic nature of the political system, the prevailing political culture, the system of values, ideology, political goals, personal characteristics and experiences, ethnocentrism, and many others' (Sotlar, 2004: 703).

Also, there has been some confusion around the term 'extremism', given its conflation with radicalization and terrorism. To distinguish among these three terms, Striegher (2015) defines radicalization as a *process* whereby individuals may adopt the *ideology* of violent extremism on the journey, but it does not necessarily lead to *acts* of terrorism. From this, right-wing extremists may be individuals who espouse White supremacist and racist ideologies, but their acceptance of the use of violence to achieve their ends varies, whereas far-right terrorists are committed to actual physical acts of violence.

To extend the definition of right-wing extremism into the digital realm, this article begins by defining e-extremism and reactionary conservative activism, and then developing an understanding of the interplay between e-extremism and the online far right through the subsequent discussion of the ways in which various actors leverage the affordances of mainstream and alt-tech platforms, algorithms and bots to develop digital repertoires such as memetic warfare, trolling and coordinated harassment campaigns. The primary focus of the article is theoretical, based on Chadwick's (2007) concept of 'digital network repertoires' and Cammaerts' (2012) concept of the 'mediation opportunity structure', and contextualized with examples from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Defining e-extremism

Given the wide variety of actors, ideologies and online platforms in play in the fast-changing media environment, this article aims to capture the complexities of online extremism with a particular focus on the changing dynamics of the far right. To encapsulate these complexities, it advances the concept of 'e-extremism', which seeks to develop earlier terms such as cyber racism and cyberhate to capture developments such as the use of alt-tech platforms like Gab, Telegram and BitChute; the global spread of the White genocide, QAnon, and coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) conspiracy theories; the growing overlaps between groups such as White supremacists, men's rights activists, anti-vaxxers and the anti-5G movement; and their shared sense of impending crisis demanding hostile and even violent response.

Whereas earlier terms such as cyberhate sought to describe the use of online technologies prior to the development of Web 2.0 technologies and focused on the general characteristics and functions of hate websites (Quandt and Festl, 2017), in comparison, e-extremism can change its content and structure, and more specifically the way hate is mediated and networked, as technological affordances change. More importantly, in contrast to cyberhate, which is strategically planned at the organizational level or carried out by lone actors (Quandt and Festl, 2017), the growth of e-extremism has also become a macro-level problem that has encouraged the confluence of right-wing extremist ideas and mainstream politics. This may be seen most strikingly in the case of Donald Trump, who ran for US president with the strong support of alternative online media outlets such as *Breitbart* and *InfoWars* in 2016 (Kaiser et al., 2020), and continued to use a coded version of extreme language in political statements on Twitter during his administration, which contributed to the mainstreaming of the far right's ideological and policy agendas.

E-extremism looks beyond a specific type of online ideology and activity such as cyber racism and hate speech. In the context of the online far right, its decentralized ideological network encompasses a constellation of actors who do not fit in the traditional category of right-wing extremists and are labelled as reactionary conservatives in this article. The far right has traditionally been associated with groups such as White supremacists and neo-Nazis, whose extremist ideology is race-based and racial-centric, while its online presence includes members of 'online antagonistic communities' – whose 'antagonism is directed against what they perceive as the left-liberal political and social hegemony' when they converge with the alt-right (Hermansson et al., 2020: 123) – and actors who may engage more in contemporary social issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) rights, feminism and climate change rather than race matters.

Development of reactionary conservative activism

Parker and Barreto (2013: 6) introduce the term 'reactionary conservatives' to refer to 'people who fear change of any kind – especially if it threatens to undermine their way of life' while distinguishing them from 'more conventional conservatives' who 'realize incremental, *evolutionary* change is sometimes necessary as a means of preventing *revolutionary* change'. This definition was originally developed in the context of the emergence of the Tea Party movement in the United States, which marked an important moment of the mainstreaming of far-right politics that smoothed the path for the rise of the American alt-right and the Trump presidency. Notwithstanding the wide use of the classic term right-wing extremism, it is no longer adequate for describing the full scene as the border between mainstream and far-right politics has become increasingly blurred in the post-Trump era (Brown et al., 2021).

This article adapts the term reactionary conservative to refer to far-right influenced actors who inhabit the political mainstream in the post-Tea Party context where political discourse is dominated by figures like Donald Trump, Steven Bannon and Tucker Carlson, and media outlets such as *Breitbart* and *Fox News*. Often these actors are self-proclaimed conservatives who have taken up an intermediary role as promoters and enablers of the far right without necessarily, openly embracing right-wing extremist ideology themselves. Besides, there are fringe sympathizers from the general public, who 'look more like general conservative interest groups' as they only occasionally support far-right causes through sporadic engagement with extremist content online (Phadke and Mitra, 2021: 111:16). To map an increasingly heterogeneous online far-right scene, reactionary conservative as a supplementary term takes into account a moderate form of right-wing extremism and its potential for transition into full extremism, violent extremism and even terrorism. It not only helps identify the reactionary agenda of traditional right-wing extremists and online antagonistic communities, but also helps describe those who fall in between the far right and the mainstream via casual engagement with extremist content online but may nonetheless be radicalized in the long run.

Given the increasing strategic importance of the Internet to reactionary conservative activism, the study of extremism needs to move beyond the traditional focus on hostile acts against an outgroup (Berger, 2018) while also bringing attention to actors' online efforts in furthering their ideological agenda rather than merely breeding outgroup

hostility and inspiring acts of violence. Although most reactionary conservative actors do not openly endorse violence, their participation in the sharing of extremist ideas and exposure to an online milieu that is filled with crisis narratives, antagonistic memes, conspiracy theories and other hateful content help create an atmosphere conducive to (self-)radicalization (Guhl et al., 2020). E-extremism provides a theoretical lens for the study of the burgeoning phenomenon of online reactionary conservative activism that is not necessarily violent, but nonetheless may be increasing opportunities for the radicalization of individuals towards violent extremist ideologies, disruptive behaviours and even acts of terror via means of electronic communications such as the Internet, mainstream social media, fringe online platforms and mobile media. Building on this, this theoretical paper seeks to provide insights into understanding the dynamics of the online far right and its relationship with e-extremism.

Digital network repertoires of the online far right

The first dimension of e-extremism bears on the concept of 'repertoires of contention', which originally refers to the 'whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals' (Tilly, 1986: 2). However, in line with Scholl's (2012: 47) argument, this definition is somewhat inadequate given its narrow focus on 'the idea of claim-making' without mention of 'visible manifestations of the contentious ideas of social movements'. The repertoire, as McAdam et al. (2001) add, can be thought of as social actors' performance given their tactical use of means of contention for strategic interactions with targets of claims, including allies, supporters, enemies and opponents. The Internet as a virtual site of contention have brought new modes of repertoires such as e-petitions, virtual sit-ins and social media campaigns.

Drawing on Tilly's (1986) original concept and Tarrow's (2011) classification of three main forms of contentious repertoires, Costanza-Chock (2003: 173) develops the notion of 'the repertoire of electronic contention' to refer to the use of conventional, disruptive or violent tactics via the Internet for achieving certain kinds of outcomes by social actors. In the context of the online far right, conventional electronic repertoires such as information distribution, subcultural production, fundraising and lobbying are routinely practised for the purpose of propaganda and mobilization. These conventional tactics not only helps the process of indoctrination and (self-)radicalization but are also useful in facilitating the transnational mobilization of far-right movements. This is evident in the 2018 #FreeTommy campaign, which rallied sympathizers around the world, from ordinary citizens to populist politicians like former UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Gerard Batten and neo-Nazi groups such as the National Socialist Movement to call for release of the founder of the notorious far-right English Defence League, Tommy Robinson.

However, disruptive forms of contention tend to be innovative and unstable, which may be conventionalized over time or, at worst, escalate into real-world violence (Tarrow, 2011). The online far right exploits disruptive repertoires to influence political events and public debates, or even to coax susceptible audiences into carrying out acts of terror through the novel use of memes, trolls and bots (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Yet, given the fluidity of boundaries between three forms of contention, it is sometimes difficult to

ascertain if an action is disruptive, conventional or violent. As seen with the radicalization of reactionary conservative actors, who, on the one hand, have played an important role in justifying, normalizing and mainstreaming right-wing extremist ideas by spreading hate speech and conspiracy theories via seemingly harmless memes across online platforms, but on the other hand, they act as facilitators for (self-)radicalization towards violent extremism and lone actor terrorism (Crawford et al., 2021).

To develop a deeper understanding of the strategic use of the Internet by the far right, we draw on Chadwick's (2007) work, which conceptualizes digital network repertoires in the four principal ways. First, as the rise of the Internet has led to the hybridization of repertoires, social actors have had greater opportunities to create 'appealing and increasingly convergent forms of online citizen action' (Chadwick, 2007: 287). However, the subtle distinction between 'Internet-based' online actions and 'Internet-supported' offline activities becomes blurred when social actors deploy a sophisticated blend of repertoires (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010: 1149). This is exemplified by the #FreeTommy campaign; supporters relied on digital communication technologies for fast 'repertoire switches' from a hashtag movement on social media to international protests in the real-world.

The far right has created transnational networks by fostering 'distributed trust across horizontally linked citizen groups' online (Chadwick, 2007: 289). From the European New Right to the American alt-right, these movements have resorted to the construction of a collective identity based on a common European heritage, Whiteness, Christianity and shared social issues to mobilize support from right-wing extremists and reactionary conservative political figures, media personalities and citizens across Western democracies, notably through the deployment of culturally specific discursive repertoires. By way of illustration, the 'MAGA' hashtag and the 'Pepe-the-Frog' meme as two well-known symbols of the alt-right subculture represent a White nationalist sentiment and a White supremacist belief, which were used to mobilize support for Trump during the 2016 US presidential election by creating 'a universality' among online far-right communities (Sugiura, 2021: 75).

As the far right expands beyond party politics into a broader sphere of e-extremism, online antagonistic communities such as the manosphere and the anti-gender movement sometimes converge with the alt-right on issues such as feminism and so-called 'gender ideology' (Hermansson et al., 2020), which has brought about the fusion of far-right discourses and Internet subcultures (Chadwick, 2007). By penetrating subcultures such as the PUA (pick-up-artists) community, the 'incel' subculture, White power rock and roll, and video games, the far right aims to appeal to and unite different types of actors on the far right, from reactionary conservatives to online antagonistic communities and to right-wing extremist groups such as White supremacists and neo-Nazis while also luring susceptible young people into their networks (Ebner, 2018). In Papacharissi's (2010: 40) words, these networked assemblages are 'counter-publics' formed within 'smaller, marginal or semi-marginal spheres of civic interaction' to fight against the liberal-left and 'political correctness'.

Last, digital network repertoires create and build upon 'sedimentary online networks' that persist over time, especially for discussions on high-profile political events and controversial topics (Chadwick, 2007: 293). For example, the Twitter hashtag

#whitegenocide was found to be most popular theme in both neo-Nazi and White nationalist datasets in 2016 (Berger, 2016), which went viral amid an escalating wave of White anger and anti-immigration sentiments that hit during Trump's presidential campaign (Deem, 2019). This hashtag has not faded away after the election. On the contrary, it has continued to gain importance in the far-right discourse, which allows believers in 'white genocide' to create a sedimentary network based in the 'digital traces' of their discursive repertoires surrounding that conspiracy theory (Deem, 2019).

The concept of digital network repertoires provides a conceptual basis for analysing not only the strategic reliance of far-right actors on a wide range of online communication tools for propaganda, radicalization, mobilization and recruitment, but also their choice of rhetorical devices and discursive styles for different target audiences. According to Ennis (1987: 521), repertoires are shaped by both '*external* limits' such as political constraints and lack of recourses, and 'an *inner* logic' based on individuals' ideology. It is thus important to look at how the online far right develops repertoires to communicate right-wing extremist ideologies in specific sociopolitical settings, media environments and discursive contexts.

Opportunity structures for the online far right

A second facet of e-extremism is its emergence within the context of changing political opportunity structures and the hybrid 'mediation opportunity structure' arising from the expansion of digital networked media (Cammaerts, 2012). The concept of political opportunity structures has been widely used to investigate the political fortunes of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, yet given its emphasis on structural factors that vary cross-nationally, such as electoral systems and institutional settings (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Van Der Brug et al., 2005), it tends to overlook strategic efforts by various non-party actors and their cultural influences. Drawing from Cammaerts' (2012) mediation opportunity structure theory, this article examines how different types of far-right actors deploy and develop different forms of digital network repertoires to facilitate e-extremism through the exploitation of *hybrid media* opportunities, *networked* opportunities and *discursive* opportunities. In more detail, it also uses the concept of affordance to understand the ways in which these actors appropriates three mediation opportunities afforded by the properties of different digital communication technologies to achieve their ends (Comunello et al., 2016: 519).

With the rapid development of digital communication technologies over the last two decades, political communication has undergone massive transformations as the media system is no longer entirely governed by traditional media logics. Chadwick's (2017: 285) concept of 'the hybrid media system' provides some valuable insights into 'how the interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are understood as bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms – shape the power relations among political actors, media, and the publics'. However, media hybridization sometimes can be conducive to e-extremism. This is seen in the rise of media manipulation by the far right, which tends to drive disinformation, political polarization and radicalization, with the use of incivility as a

rhetorical strategy to fuel antagonisms and disrupt societal orders (Hameleers et al., 2021; Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

The hybrid media theory in Chadwick's work has so far focused more on mainstream political actors and progressive movements than on far-right activism (Russell, 2020). To address this gap, it is noteworthy that the far right thrives on what Chadwick (2017: 271) calls 'dysfunctional hybridity', that is, as both traditional media organizations and online news aggregators have to rely on algorithmically generated ads, partisan political coverage, infotainment and low-quality clickbait content to generate revenue under the pressure of a 24/7 news cycle, there has been a crisis of trust in mainstream media. This changing media environment provides opportunities for reactionary conservative figures and alt-tech platforms to wield influence online by representing themselves as the authentic voice of 'the people'.

Apart from *hybrid media* opportunities, the intrinsic infrastructure of the Internet and affordances of mainstream and alt-tech platforms and mobile media enhance *networked* opportunities for the far right 'to organize and mobilize (transnationally), to recruit, to coordinate actions and to disseminate counter-frames independent from the mainstream media' (Cammaerts, 2012: 119). Moreover, relying on these technological affordances, far-right actors can maximize their *discursive* opportunities, which are 'public visibility, resonance and legitimacy' (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004: 199). An understanding of the interdependence of these mediation opportunities would help analyse the tactical choices of digital network repertoires by far-right actors based on their knowledge of the affordances and constraints of different online platforms (Comunello et al., 2016).

Alternative online ecosystem

From the early use of the online bulletin board Stormfront in the 1990s (Daniels, 2009), to present reliance on a broad array of mainstream and alt-tech platforms, the far right has been emboldened by digital networked media to advance e-extremism. In particular, the proliferation of alt-tech platforms has presented the opportunity of 'self-mediation' for influential reactionary conservative figures, right-wing extremist leaders and lone-wolf terrorists while also offering other fringe actors the opportunity of 'co-production' in the creation and dissemination of extremist content (Cammaerts, 2012: 118). The participatory network structure of online discussion boards such as 4chan and 8kun, fringe social media platforms such as Gab, MeWe and Parler, and encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal makes them a gathering place for far-right actors of all sorts for ingroup communication, with a lax approach to content moderation. Especially with the popularization of chan culture, anonymous 4chan and 8kun's 'politically incorrect' (/pol/) boards have become a major source of inspiration for (self-)radicalization towards violent extremism and terrorism by hosting a sheer volume of hate speech while coordinating extremist activities on other platforms (Papasavva et al., 2020).

The expanding alternative online ecosystem has become indispensable to today's far right, given its instrumental role in mobilization, recruitment and fundraising. As Munn (2021) has found, Parler was used as 'preparatory media' for storming the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 by various kinds of far-right actors, from pro-Trump reactionary conservative protestors to QAnon adherents and to violent right-wing extremist groups such

as the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo movement. Despite ongoing deplatforming by mainstream tech companies, the emergence of those so-called 'free speech' online platforms has facilitated the rise of e-extremism by providing a landing spot for deplatformed actors and their fan bases. However, 'portability, availability, locationality and multimediality' of mobile media allow users to share multimodal content and Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates with one another anytime, anywhere, with Internet access (Schrock, 2015: 1230). Relying on the affordances of alt-tech platforms and mobile devices, the far right can enhance its networked opportunities to mobilize supporters.

In addition to alt-tech platforms, the creation of alternative online media outlets is a cultural strategy inspired by the Gramscian notion of 'war of position', which seeks to reconquer cultural hegemony from the liberal-left by providing sources for alternative news and information (Bar-On, 2014). Beyond US-based far-right news websites such as *Breitbart, Infowars* and *Epoch Times*, other alternative online media outlets include Australia-based *XYZ* and *The Unshackled*, Canada-based *Rebel News* and UK-based *Politicalite.com* and *PoliticalUK.co.uk*, just to name a few, which operate as far-right metapolitical channels and counter-publics that strive to influence mainstream culture and discourse (Holt, 2019).

Multimodal online communication and memetic warfare

Through the tactical choices of modality resources afforded by digital communication technologies (Ravelli and Van Leeuwen, 2018), online far-right actors could create and share their counter-narratives and counter-frames in the forms of hashtags, posters, memes and videos to induce a favourable discursive opportunity structure for better public visibility (Cammaerts, 2012). For example, they used the hashtag #covid-19 to link their posts to this trending topic on Parler while also generating other hashtags like #nocovidvaccine, #masksdontwork, #plandemic, #scamdemic and #scaredemic to fuel anti-vaccination and anti-masking sentiments amid the spread COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracy theories (Baines et al., 2021). By developing 'attention hacking' tactics such as trend hijacking, hate speech, media attacks and conspiracy narratives, far-right figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and Andrew Auernheimer have attracted mainstream coverage with their expanded sphere of influence in the hybrid media environment (Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

The multimodal communicative affordance of online media has enhanced the digital performativity of the far right, especially with the novel use of memetic communication strategies. Shifman (2013: 364–365) defines memes as 'cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon', which not only present ideas in written texts such as phrases, satires and misspellings, but also convey information and emotions via 'images, animations, hyperlinks, hashtags and videos' (Pavlović, 2016: 99). Using memetic communication strategies, complex messages may be easily converted into replicable, spreadable and contagious memes that have the potential to evolve into viral online campaigns (Chadwick, 2007). This is exemplified by the best-known 'Pepe-the-Frog' meme, which not only helped Trump mobilize electoral

support from local White supremacists in 2016, but also help draw international reactionary conservatives into a memetic warfare against their perceived enemies (Maly, 2018).

The online far right tries to boost the appeal of e-extremism by resorting to humorous and ironic memes as a mechanism of (self-)radicalization. According to a former insider of Australia's fascist organization the New Guard, recruiters would invite those who are really engaging with more edgy memes in public groups and online forums for a meet-up (Mann and Nguyen, 2021). Potential targets include young White men who feel marginalized and alienated from contemporary Western societies, so long-term exposure to far-right memes is likely to drive these angry youths into antagonistic mindsets, leaving them vulnerable to radicalization (Dafaure, 2020). The memification of right-wing extremist ideas has given momentum to e-extremism, with a low barrier for reactionary conservative citizens to participate in the production, reproduction and dissemination of racist jokes under the guise of humour and satire, which contributes to the (self-)radicalization process by normalizing extremist ideology (Crawford et al., 2021).

Memetic antagonism is a widely used online communication strategy by the far right to mock and ridicule Cultural Marxism and 'politically correctness' within the liberal-left while attacking other perceived 'outgroups' by creating 'an organic and classless "us" bound together by existential antagonisms against a nebulous "them"' (Tuters and Hagen, 2020: 2223). In the mind of the far right, Cultural Marxism has involved a Frankfurt School conspiracy to undermine Western civilization orchestrated by 'Jewish Marxist intellectuals – Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromm' (Mirrlees, 2018: 54). Also, 'political correctness' is deemed to be a form of Cultural Marxism, which drove the counterculture movement of the 1960s in the United States by radicalizing minority groups, including Blacks, Hispanics, feminists and homosexuals (Lind, 2004), who are now targets of far-right antagonistic memes under derogatory labels such as 'Social Justice Warriors', 'snowflakes' and 'virtue signallers'. Portmanteau words like 'cuckservative' were also used to mock political conservatives for leaning selectively to the left through a portmanteau of 'cuckold' and 'conservative'. Another popular example is the conspiratorial term 'globohomo'; as a portmanteau of 'globalist' and 'homogenous' or 'homosexual', it alleges a globalist plot to destroy the West by promoting a global monoculture and gender-inclusive education.

Internet trolls, disinformation and coordinated online harassment

Besides the use of memetic communication strategies, the far right has spread fake news, conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns via Internet trolls and social media bots. Although 'trolling' has been popularized by the media as a catch-all term for diverse disruptive digital repertoires, the three most common types of Internet trolls are shitposters, swarms and troll armies. A shitposter is an online account that intends to '[derail] active discussion, and [send] threads off-topic through low-quality posting, often using inflammatory, (ironically) falsifiable, provocative, or vulgar content' (McEwan, 2017: 20). This can be seen in the 2016 presidential campaign where Trump supporters created and disseminated shitposts to sway public opinion against Hillary Clinton, most notably in the form of memes on 4chan's (/pol/) board, the r/The_Donald subreddit and across social media (Phillips, 2018).

While some trolls are genuine accounts, many others are either inauthentic accounts created by people using fake profiles or programmed social bots that run automate scripts to 'spread false and misleading stories rapidly through online social networks' (Iyengar and Massey, 2019: 7657), which were deployed as agents of disinformation to disseminate anti-Clinton and pro-Trump tweets (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). The online far right has attempted to influence the political process and infiltrate into the public discourse by generating bot traffic, which may not only help legitimize fake news when politicians and journalists retweet them (Salgado, 2018), but may also exacerbate polarization and radicalization with the large-scale circulation of disinformation and hate speech that nurture e-extremism (Hameleers et al., 2021).

Online harassment campaigns by swarms of trolls clustering around specific events also play an important role in promoting e-extremism (Jakubowicz, 2017). For instance, Jakubowicz et al. (2017: 128) found that Facebook pages of 'Bendigo Mosque – reasons to oppose it' and 'Stop the Mosque in Bendigo' posted sensationalist anti-Islam content to rally 'a digital hate swarm' against the 'Islamization' of Australia from 2014 to 2016, which was escalated into an offline protest by right-wing extremist group United Patriots Front. More recently, the Twitter debate around the Premier of the Australian state of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, and his lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic attracted swarms of trolls using the #DictatorDan hashtag, largely driven by reactionary conservative commentator Avi Yemini and his followers (Graham et al., 2021). In a more extreme case of a coordinated harassment campaign like Gamergate in 2014, misogynist trolls intimidated women in gaming through rape and death threats (Sparby, 2017). Despite the decentralized structure of clusters of swarms, provocateurs could turn various far-right actors in the networks into troll armies for more coordinated online harassment campaigns or offline protests (Gagliardone, 2019). Such disruptive digital repertoires may even escalate into real-world terrorist attacks, as exemplified in the trollish manifesto of the Christchurch shooter, Brenton Tarrant.

Moralized discourses in the attention economy

As Wahlström and Törnberg (2019: 8) contends, 'Koopmans and Olzak's visibility mechanism becomes absorbed by the resonance mechanism' in social media's attention economy wherein both consonance and dissonance help increase messages' public visibility, thus broadening discursive opportunities for far-right attention seekers to cut through the noise by posting content that evokes strong emotional reaction and moral outrage (Brady et al., 2020). Following the logic of the competitive attention economy, antagonistic memes, trolls and disinformation thrive online because uncivility helps to attract views, clicks, shares and comments, which are commodified by platforms.

Moralized narratives by far-right actors on issues such as gun control, LGBTQI+ rights and climate change are emotionally arousing and, thus, particularly prone to capture attention and provoke intergroup conflict (Brady et al., 2020). Similar to the logic of feminist framing, they use counter-hegemonic frames to attract the likeminded by appealing to 'the interests they express and support' and reinforcing a sense of victimhood (Ferree, 2003: 305). Also, using extremists' digital communication strategies based on 'propaganda offensive, attention-seeking terrorism or the marketing of fear'

(Rieger et al., 2013: 16), the far right can achieve greater public visibility in the online space. Therefore, by taking advantage of discursive opportunities and network opportunities embedded in social media's attention economy, the far right uses victimhood discourses, emotive crisis narratives, antagonistic memes and transgressive humour to provoke outgroup counter-reactions so as to get issues trending while also triggering ingroup moral outrage to amplify and justify their messages through networked harassment (Marwick, 2021).

Algorithms as a facilitator in the radicalization process

To get a fuller picture of the phenomenon of e-extremism, analysis should take into account the ways in which social media algorithms enhance networked opportunities for radicalization in the context of platform policies on hate speech (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). With the connectivity of digital networked media, online far-right actors could engage in 'connective actions' not only through established political parties, groups and organizations, but also via loosely linked networks of unaffiliated individuals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Algorithms play a pivotal role in enabling connective actions by linking the likeminded and pushing content suggestions to susceptible reactionary conservatives, which also act as an accelerant in the process of radicalization. As Daniels (2018) argues, algorithmic hijacking by the alt-right amplifies and accelerates the spread of their White supremacist messages and ideologies in the form of memes and fake news, thereby enhancing their radicalization efforts.

This is particularly the case on YouTube, which has gained popularity among the far right given 'the pipeline effect' of its recommendation system on the radicalization process (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Owing to its commercial nature as a profit-driven online space that monetizes users' influence, YouTube has tolerated a substantial amount of 'racist, misogynist, and harassing' videos on the platform regardless of the extreme ideology of content creators, as long as they do not openly deliver hate speech (Lewis, 2018: 43). Even if YouTube modifies or removes its recommendation algorithms, its networking affordance provides a pathway for radicalization through the 'Alternative Influence Network', where far-right influences of various kinds – from self-proclaimed conservatives to open White nationalists – are united by a 'reactionary' position against what they see as 'left-liberal' enemies (Lewis, 2018: 1).

Constraints of corporate online platforms

Despite online surveillance and counter-extremism programmes by state agents and social media policies prohibiting hate speech, the dynamic mediation opportunity structure is co-shaped by platforms' designers and users (Cammaerts, 2015). The online far right has been constantly reinventing and renewing digital network repertoires to deal with constraints embedded in social media infrastructure. With the adoption of the 'wolf-in-sheep's-clothes strategy', far-right actors can camouflage their extremist ideas by using cultural expressions, in-jokes and coded language in multimodal media texts (Rieger et al., 2013: 16). For example, 'white genocide' believers use the term 'Fourteen Words' or 14 as an allusion to David Lane's 14-word slogan, 'We must secure the

existence of our people and a future for white children' to bypass content moderation. In addition, with the link sharing affordance of social media, they can redirect audiences to far-right websites without being instantly detected by other users, filtering algorithms and human moderators (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). It is thus for tech companies to develop a more sophisticated moderation system that identifies and removes extremist content in a more effective way.

Conclusion

This article develops the concept of e-extremism that covers a broad spectrum of digital network repertoires of the online far right, from the use of conventional tactics such as information sharing and fundraising, to disruptive behaviours such as memetic warfare and trolling, and to the livestreaming of terrorist attacks. It also notes the alarming trend of reactionary conservative activism, which may lead to further radicalization to violent right-wing extremism, on the one hand, while pushing the mainstreaming of far-right politics on the other. The new generation of the far right is at the forefront of e-extremism, with actors becoming more adept at exploiting media opportunities, networked opportunities and discursive opportunities afforded by technological affordances for digital network repertoires, along with a shift in the focus of their efforts from the national to the transnational level. This theoretical paper has implications in extending the concepts of digital network repertoires and the mediation opportunity structure to study the relationships between e-extremism and the online far right. Further research could empirically examine and compare the roles of different far-right actors – influential reactionary conservative figures, online antagonistic communities and right-wing extremist groups – in the furtherance of e-extremism, by analysing the strategic choices of online platforms, rhetorical devices and visual semiotic resources in their digital network repertoires.

Addressing the issue of e-extremism is more complex and more difficult than simply deplatforming extremist actors and content. Although deplatforming has proved useful in sapping the 'fan base, following, and revenue stream' of influential far-right figures and groups, it might drive them and their followers and members further underground (Rogers, 2020: 226). Therefore, tackling the issue of e-extremism requires international coordination of counter-extremism efforts to curb the spread of far-right discourses in the public domain and mitigate the transnational influence of reactionary conservative activism.

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