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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87w5c5gp>

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Publication Date

2019-07-16

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies Working Paper Series

**Digital Fascism:
Challenges for the Open Society in Times of Social Media**

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July 16, 2019



Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

Digital Fascism

Challenges for the Open Society in Times of Social Media

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This paper takes up the assumption that social media offers a beneficial terrain for the far right to undermine open societies. Identifying perceptions of imperilment as the central impetus for the far right to justify illiberal politics, it analyzes how such perceptions are boosted under the digital condition. This contextualization is essential for our understanding of digital fascism: a highly fluid and ambivalent variant of fascism that lacks a clear organizational center as the digitally networked masses are the engine of their own manipulation. To substantiate this concept, we relate structures of social media to far-right agency in social media. Concretely, we show how the techniques of dramatic storytelling, gaslighting and metric manipulation correspond with the functioning of social media that catalyzes the amplification of fears, the diffusion of post-truth and the logic of numbers. Based on this, we argue that a new perspective on fascism is needed, since digital fascism draws its dynamics mainly from digital (hate) cultures and less from formal and regimented party structures. In consequence, it has to be analyzed and countered as a social phenomenon that emerges both organically and strategically in the ecosystems of social media. This presents open societies with a dilemma: The dynamics of digital fascism develop out of structures that warrant freedom of expression – and to break these dynamics, restrictions that harm its liberal principles appear necessary.

Keywords digitalization, far right, fascism, hate cultures, internet, social media

1. The Paradox of Tolerance Reloaded: An Introduction

Web 2.0 and social media have evolved as central factors of political change: for better and for worse. While the internet was envisioned as a tool for broadening the freedom of expression in the 1990s, it has since turned into a terrain for the far right to undermine open societies. Ever since the advent of the virtual sphere, far-right actors were adopters of digital technologies, yet their impact was marginal. With the proliferation of interactive social media, however, they have entered a new phase of mobilization, using the extended freedom of expression to spread their illiberal ideas. Accordingly, assumptions have arisen in political

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and academic discourse that the digital sphere has become an opportunity structure that benefits the far right in particular (Daniels 2009; Tönsberg/Walström 2017).

In the most drastic interpretation, the argument has been put forward that the internet has enabled the emergence of a "digital fascism" in which the masses are the engine of their own manipulation (Acker 2018). This interpretation implies that social media has created new orders of perception in which liberal perspectives are superseded and authoritarian perspectives receive a boost (Turner 2019). If this power asymmetry of perspectives in online spaces is (at least partially) true, what does this mean for the persistence of open societies in times of social media? To discuss this question, we approach it in two steps.

First, we put the "palingenetic ultranationalism" (Griffin 1991) that today rakes electoral success all around the globe in the context of a digitalized world. In line with prominent theories of fascism, we identify this rationale as the core feature of fascist phenomena: the perception of an endangered community that needs to be reborn through extraordinary means. From here, the question arises as to how such fears that justify authoritarian or illiberal politics unfold in the digital context. After all, if we consider them constitutive for fascism – Roger Griffin calls it the "fascist minimum" – understanding how myths of menace spread specifically under digital conditions becomes essential for the concept of digital fascism.

Second, in line with our focus on the core feature of fascism, we relate the strategies far-right actors employ for disseminating fears to elements of social media that potentially function as catalysts for such fears. In this way, we contrast aspects of agency and structure in social media, enabling a more substantiated understanding of how digital fascism works. From this tentative overview, we conclude that elements of social media not only blend into the interests of far-right actors, but stimulate perceptions of imperilment that are prone to fascism. Accordingly, digital fascism should be understood less as an organized phenomenon than as an emergent one, resulting from perceptions stimulated by the structures of social media.

Following, we discuss why such a variation of fascism entails new challenges for the open society. As an emergent phenomenon, digital fascism differs significantly from classical fascism in organizational terms, making a new understanding of who or what has to be countered necessary. Its dynamics resemble a "new tribalism" (Kaplan/Costa 2014) that is bound together by fears produced and shared in virtual networks and less guided by formal and hierarchical organizations. This "post-organizational" (Mulhall 2018) nature makes digital fascism a more fluid and ambivalent movement, which cannot be fully grasped with actor- or ideology-centered approaches. More than ever before, fascism has to be analyzed (and countered) as a social phenomenon of cultural practices.

Likewise, the open society is facing a dilemma: The dynamics of digital fascism develop out of structures that warrant freedom of expression – and to break these dynamics,

restrictions that harm its liberal principles appear necessary. This challenge – a reloaded "paradox of tolerance" (Popper 1995 [1945]: 602) – is even more vexing as digital fascism comes in as a social or emergent phenomenon. Since it is not fascist parties that are the main driving forces, but digital cultures prone to fascism that emerge from social media, there are no subjects assignable as the center of fascist dynamics. Accordingly, the paradox is not simply "not to tolerate the intolerant" (*ibid.*), but of being intolerant of (liberal) structures producing intolerance.

2. The Fascist Minimum in Social Media: Making Sense of Digital Fascism

To discuss the challenges of withstanding "digital fascism" (Acker 2018), we have to figure out what constitutes this phenomenon. We do so by relating two strands of research to each other. The first deals with the nature of fascism. Following generic definitions in fascism studies, we will identify a core feature of fascism – nominally Griffin's concept of "palingenetic ultranationalism" – and base our focus on perceptions of imperilment. The second strand is investigating the social impact of the internet. Guided by our focus, we consult literature that addresses the problem of perceptual changes through social media. Both taken together will frame our reasoning about how today's expressions of fascism are conditioned by a digitalized world.

To be sure, this question is not an entirely novel one. An extensive amount of recent literature is dedicated to the problem of how the internet and social media are changing democracy (Bartlett 2018; Zuboff 2019) and how they contribute to radicalization (Baldauf et al. 2018; Meleagrou-Hitchens/Kaderbai 2017; Von Behr et al. 2013). The study of the far right in particular has entered a major challenge with the proliferation of social media and virtual forms of political involvement. As various features of online communication increasingly dominate our everyday lives, it has become a widespread notion that far-right actors are profiting significantly from the digital – or even "post-digital"¹ – condition (Fielitz/Thurston 2019; Turner 2019). Certainly, the internet as a playground for the far-right is not just a recent phenomenon; it has offered the potential to renew fascist expressions for a while now (Daniels 2009). There has been groundbreaking research conducted on the

¹ The post-digital names a technical condition that followed the so-named "digital revolution", and is constituted by the naturalization of pervasive and connected computing processes and outcomes in everyday life, such that digitality is now inextricable from the way we live while its forms, functions and effects are no longer necessarily perceptible. As we will not expand on this debate and more stick to the inter-effective relationship between fascism and the digital, we refer to the digital condition that, according to Felix Stalder (2018), encroaches our lives through three characteristics: the use of existing cultural materials for one's own production, the way in which new meaning is established as a collective endeavor, and the underlying role of algorithms and automated decision-making processes that reduce and give shape to massive volumes of data.

identity-building of virtual hate communities (Simi/Futrell 2010), the worldwide virtualization of fascist thought and action termed "cyber-fascism" (Griffin 2000), and "broadband terrorism" as the new face of fascism (Feldman 2009). However, the assumption that social media gave rise to an emergent variation of fascism that draws its dynamics directly out of social structures in the digital world still has to be substantiated.

As a starting point, we take Antoine Acker's argument that the new, digitalized fascism is characterized by the circumstance that the masses are manipulating themselves through social media, and are less (mis-) guided by the propaganda techniques of hierarchical far-right organizations (Acker 2018). This argument, which he developed with reference to the mass support for Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, mirrors not simply the notion that social media is particularly beneficial for authoritarian and illiberal mass movements. It also includes the supposition that fascist developments today are less a result of far-right organizations' strategic actions, but of new structures of communication that change society's perception towards a fascist rationality. So, how can this supposition be substantiated?

2.1. The Rationale of Palingenetic Ultranationalism as the Core Feature of Fascism

At first, this task requires us to clarify the term fascism. We follow Acker's use of this term, in awareness that he himself is quite imprecise in using it – he simply subsumes the recent illiberal or far-right developments under this term – and that it is a controversial one. After all, 'fascism' is, today, mostly used in a derogatory sense to stigmatize political adversaries, drawing misleading historical parallels to recent challenges. Moreover, it has been argued that the term has become analytically useless as there is no consensus on its very meaning. Indeed, the field of fascism studies is marked by deep trenches between Marxist, ideological, cultural and praxeological approaches that make it difficult to extract a consensus around its meaning (Finchelstein 2017). Griffin tried to overcome this by offering a "consensual" definition of fascism as a revolutionary form of nationalism (Griffin 1998). Yet, to reduce fascism to ideological aspects has repeatedly been challenged, especially by scholars who research discourses (Wodak/Richardson 2013) and (political) cultures of fascism (Berezin 1997; Gentile 2004; Mosse 1975) and the constituting role of (violent) practices for fascist community-building (Paxton 2004; Reichardt 2002).

This considered, we favor a definition of fascism that is not actor-centered, but understand fascism as a social phenomenon; that is, a certain political rationality individuals and groups can express in matters of cultural practices. Moreover, we would like to distinguish between fascism as an ideal-type and family-like phenomena, thus understanding it as a concept whose ideal-type is composed of certain features, but can manifest in variations that have aberrant features. Consequently, we do not generalize the far-right as fascist per se.

Rather, it is critical for us which features – more or less elaborated – the far right and its environment are harboring or transporting that are constitutive for fascism, thus generating at least family-like phenomena.

Following those parameters, Robert Paxton's generic understanding of fascism seems to be most reliable for us, when he deduces three features out of the history of inter-war actors that are unanimously regarded as fascist. While two features of this ideal-type refer to the top-down nature of fascism and its radical pragmatism, the primary feature is a "political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity" (Paxton 2004: 218). Although not reducing fascism to ideological aspects as Griffin does, this feature – resembling a kind of political rationale – is nevertheless compatible with the semantic of Griffin's earlier concept of "palingenetic ultranationalism": the myth of a nation that is fading away and has to enforce its rebirth through extraordinary efforts (Griffin 1991).

According to Griffin, this mobilization of populist energies for renewal should be seen as the "fascist minimum", which means: fascism may also have other features, but there is no fascism without it (Griffin 2018: 80). Bypassing the complex and extensive debate on defining fascism, we follow this argument and take palingenetic ultranationalism – or at least the rationale behind it as described by Paxton – as the core feature of fascism we want to focus on. From this, two (entangled) questions arise. The first asks how strategic actors unleash this rationale in public discourse to prepare authoritarian or illiberal developments. The second, in turn, asks how this unleashing works specifically under the digital condition.

2.2. *Justifying Illiberal Politics with Perceptions of Imperilment*

Regarding the first question, it has become almost common sense in studies of the far right that one major strategy of its actors is to address and inflame fears in order to justify extraordinary political approaches (Griffin 1991). In inter-war democracies in particular, one outstanding scheme of the fascist movement was to construct a national crisis in public discourse and to precipitate a state of emergency demanding authoritarian and illiberal measures (Mosse 1975). This also has to be seen in the context of the third feature Paxton attributes to fascism: a radical pragmatism that feels unbound to "ethical or legal restraints" to enforce the actors' goals (Paxton 2004: 16). This pragmatism also includes a highly instrumental relation to truth, which can be bent if it helps to construct the preconditions for seizing influence and power (Billig 1978: 67).

Strikingly, today it is still a predominant scheme of the far right to adopt "politics by fear" (Wodak 2015; Bonikowski 2017) or to set "anxious politics" (Albertson/Gadarian 2015)

into motion. Some actors attributed to the far right even admit this. For instance, Donald Trump claimed in his presidential campaign that "real power [comes from] fear" (Woodward 2018). What this means in concrete terms can be seen in narratives the global far right is spreading in the context of migration issues. In manifold ways national actors utter the myth that the respective nation is victim of a "great replacement", as the attacker of Christchurch put it, inspired by a standard trope of European Identitarianism (Zuquete 2018). Similarly, the German far right speaks of a "population exchange" (*Umvolkung*) or even "people's death" (*Volkstod*) (Quent 2014), as well as North American supremacists tell stories of "white genocide" (Perry 2004) to justify radical action.

Such extinction narratives are not limited to militants of the far right, but find their way – at least in gradations – into the broader public. This is, for instance, reflected in German discourse where the talk of "anxious citizens" went viral in the context of anti-migration protests, normalizing the far-right myth of a menace (Marcks 2016). It is not a coincidence that in the wake of this discursive shift, which made xenophobia more mainstream, attacks on refugees in Germany exploded (Quent et al. 2019). Correspondingly, Susan Benesch has made the more general point that an (imagined) "mortal threat from a disfavored or minority group makes violence seem not just acceptable, but necessary" (Benesch 2018). From this perspective, it is "dangerous speech" that forgoes expressions of hate and should thus be considered as more essential for fascist dynamics than the often adduced "hate speech" (ibid.).

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This points to dialectics that already loomed in the accounts of Paxton and Griffin when they pointed to the compensatory aspect in the fascist rationale: out of perceptions of imperilment the justification derives for behaving in an uncompromising way. To put it bluntly, facing death, all means are allowed, if not necessary. This conversion from victimhood to perpetration is the same rationality appearing in the peculiar mixture of mournful suppression and propagating superiority that can be observed in the far right today (Fielitz et al. 2018: 24). Seemingly a contradiction, the interplay of both is actually at the heart of fascist dynamics. After all, it is the passion to fight for the endangered community that mobilizes people to join the fascist movement. And this mobilization brings people together who, in turn, reinforce each other in their perceptions of imperilment (cf. Paxton 2004: 36).

However, while the core feature of fascism is alive and well, the role of far-right organizations in unleashing it seems to have changed. According to Paxton's second feature, in classical fascism a "mass-based party of committed nationalist militants" (ibid.: 218) – usually a strong hierarchical one (Rosenberg 2012) – was crucial for guiding this process, by spreading manipulative propaganda and by organizing practices in which these passions could unfold. Of course, there are still far-right actors functioning this way – the Golden Dawn in Greece or the Slovakian L'SNS are cases in point. Yet, we see that large numbers of

far-right extremists in the U.S., for instance, have left organized groups to avoid social stigmatization and align with peers in online forums. According to Mark Potok, "[m]any of those people apparently now belong to no group, but operate instead mainly on the internet, where they can offer their opinions anonymously and easily find others who agree with them – and where they can be heard by huge numbers of people without the hassles, dues, and poor leadership associated with membership in most groups" (Potok in: Neiwert 2017: 36-37). Hence, the digital sphere offered a much-needed substitute to the failing real-life experience.

It is thus no coincidence that, according to Rob May and Matthew Feldman, fascist ideology today has been most successfully rebranded by the Alt-Right, a digitally born movement that is marked by a lack of ideological cohesion, leadership and organization (May/Feldman 2019: 25). The broader dissemination of far-right tropes in online spaces followed the promotion of a more horizontal approach to activism that conflated with online subcultures. The resulting Alt-Right and its various global relatives significantly differ from interwar fascism, not only in matters of organizational structures, but also in the way they strategically permeate society with their ideas. And this leads to the second question as to how exactly this is conditioned by digitalization.

2.3. Catalyzing Perceptions of Imperilment through Social Media

In the digital age, we need to rethink how social interactions work – mass manipulation in particular. Digital platforms have become a central marketplace for ideas, commerce and conflict, profoundly changing collective action (Bennett/Seegerberg 2013), as studies of social movements have also shown (Earl/Kimport 2011; Tufekci 2017). They have enhanced the network capabilities of actors, their cross-sector mobilization reach and their speed of transnational exchange (Margetts et al. 2016). All this comes along with new forms of political claim-making that transcend any clear distinction between online and offline politics. For instance, it has been said that actors increasingly adjust their behavior to the functioning of online platforms (Gillespie 2010), mimicking "the logic of companies such as Facebook and Amazon and integrating the data-driven logic of social networks in [their] very decision-making structure" (Gerbaudo 2018: 5).

These transitions have not simply changed the face of the very far right, but also of its environment, that is, its constituency and audience. While already in the pre-digital age, the far right has proclaimed "leaderless resistance" as a strategic advancement (Kaplan 1999), this paradigm somehow became (even more) real with far-right online cultures. Today, the movement expresses itself more strongly as a virtual community in which the boundaries

between organized activists and individual supporters are blurred.² In these networked social movements – some call them "post-organizational" (Donovan 2018) – it is hard to tell what and who is organized or not. They fundamentally question our understanding of individual and collective action, since all subjects in these networks are in direct contact with one another. On the other hand, however, far-right actors are involved in efforts of "leading the leaderless" (Tufekci 2017: 49–82), by implanting guidance and channeling the seemingly dispersed hate that floods different levels of social media. In consequence, members of those "digital hate cultures" may not even be aware that they are part of fascist dynamics (Ganesh 2018).

The puzzle lies thus in understanding how far these dynamics today are driven by strategic actors on social media or are the result of emergent processes. While it became obvious that the far right is roaming and burgeoning on social media (Ebner/Davey 2017), it is far from clear how exactly it benefits from the digital opportunities. At the same time, however, there are indications that perceptions of imperilment are catalyzed through digitalization (cf. Homer-Dixon 2004): precisely the emotions the "fascist minimum" is building on. The explanations for this may differ; but they center definitely around the problem that the allocation and selection of information have changed drastically in times of social media. Furthermore, it has been said that social media caused an erosion in the intersubjective understanding of truth, thus extending the space for "post-truth". And this circumstance seems to fit, again, the radical pragmatism of fascism that deals with truth in a highly instrumental fashion (Finchelstein 2016).

This is where our analysis sets off. It tries to test Acker's argument that digital fascism has to be seen more as an emergent phenomenon resulting from perceptual changes through social media – and less as a result of strategic action by fascist parties. The argument is provocative, but not implausible. As we have theorized, myths of menace are the fuel for fascist dynamics; and in classical fascism it was the function of the party to unleash such perceptions of imperilment among the masses. In times of social media, however, the digital structures of the masses may produce new orders of perception prone to fascism, this way making fascist parties as driving forces (partially) obsolete. To identify what are strategic and what are emergent factors, we will now take a closer look at how far-right agency unfolds in the structures of social media. This is critical for the question as to whether it actually makes sense to speak of digital fascism.

² To be sure, 'virtual' does not necessarily mean 'digital'. Already in the pre-digital age, virtual alliances formed, for instance, when lone wolves joined a movement unilaterally and without formal bounds by perpetrating acts on its behalf and being recognized as functional part of it by movement entrepreneurs and/or the public (see Marcks 2019).

3. Far-Right Strategies and Digital Cultures: How Digital Fascism Works

Far-right actors have been at the forefront in using digital means to convey their political message and to socialize a new generation of disciples. The internet's forums, communities and websites provide an ideal breeding ground for a new tech-savvy generation which soon hived off the standard tropes of nationalism and racism, making them applicable to a much broader audience. Yet, we cannot solely understand this rebranding as a top-down process. As an ever more globalizing movement, the far right builds on very specific language and cultural settings that cannot be simply channeled and directed by parties or organized groups. Rather, dispersed digital (sub-)cultures create new counter-publics that go far beyond the familiar logic of far-right organizations (Wendling 2018). They strongly correspond with the fear-mongering that is being reproduced by a patchwork of beliefs in which contradictory influences converge into myths of an endangered community that is forced to take radical action (Törnberg/Wallström 2017: 24).

The narratives of victimhood and imperilment are key to understanding the enhanced mobilization of such emotions. These myths of menace are easily compatible with the cultural pessimism that permeates mainstream and radical right-wing ideologies. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze how they diffuse in the digital infrastructures that connect the more organized forms of the far right with the dispersed potential of fascist dynamics. In doing so, we distinguish between three general readings guiding the analysis. First, it has to be asked whether social media represents a general opportunity structure that far-right actors are now utilizing very effectively. Second, it makes sense to consider whether social media even offers a special opportunity structure that corresponds advantageously with far-right agency. Third, we look at whether social media itself produces new orders of perception that are prone to the fascist rationale. These aspects mark the extent to which fascist dynamics in the digital context are a consequence of strategic actions or of emergent processes.

3.1. *Dramatic Storytelling and the Amplification of Fears*

Nationally and transnationally, it has been a prominent pattern of far-right actors to feature local events and topical issues in order to spin dramatic narratives that serve a far-right agenda. In fact, the far right has built up an alternative news system that is specialized in storytelling techniques (Lewis 2018). These techniques encourage the consumer to identify with the victims of crimes that are being associated with, for instance, migrants and Muslims. Selectively emphasizing facts and rumors that support justifying certain politics has been termed 'frame amplification': "the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that

bears on a particular issue, problem, or set of events" (Snow et al. 1986: 469). It is obvious that far-right actors amplify messages and news that trigger fear and notions of threat.

On the German far right, for instance, the figure of the 'molesting foreigner' is of central importance and has been associated with incoming migrants and Muslims living in Germany (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2017). In this context, specific local events are given transregional and even transnational meaning. For instance, the tragic incident of a young girl being stabbed by an unaccompanied minor refugee in Kandel has made the small town a symbol of resistance against migration and 'Islamization' (Berg 2019). As the slogan "Kandel is everywhere" indicates, far-right actors try to generalize such events, suggesting a kind of ongoing femicide of German women by migrants. Similarly, local incidents of (lethal) violence involving migrants are featured regularly in the far right's national news system, crystallized even in websites mapping incidents they relate to a "migration of knives".

These campaigns come along with a personalization and moralization of critique that is seemingly sketched to blur the difference between abstract structures and concrete events (Salzborn 2017: 123). For instance, German chancellor Angela Merkel is repeatedly blamed for crimes that are allegedly committed by migrants. Tapered in the uniting parole "Merkel must go", an aggressive affectivity is cultivated that is constantly associated with events and developments that promote a far-right agenda. It is another facet of these discourses that far-right parties, movements and online subcultures present themselves as victims of political correctness and larger conspiracies that prevent them from effectively protecting their endangered community. Establishing alternative influence networks has, thus, a stronger countercultural appeal (Lewis 2018).

Undoubtedly, far-right actors know how to use social media strategically for their agenda. By creating trans-local identification with victims of local incidents they spread the notion of a nation permanently under attack. Their messaging is particularly constructed to encourage people to identify with the characters in their stories. 'It could happen to you' is a central message when they, for instance, call on women to weaponize to defend themselves. Suggesting that nothing is safe anymore, actors call for vigilantism and exclusion while their online disciples produce deeply racist messages and memes, unleashing perceptions of imperilment and laying the ground for justification of extraordinary politics to save and strengthen their own communities. Storytelling has thus evolved to become the order of the day. Wrapping political messages in seemingly casual comments, video clips and memes have become central weapons of an 'information war' that aims at subverting liberal values (Marwick/Lewis 2018). Employing largely plain-sight activists, they incite hordes of (supposed) trolls in the infamous forums to amplify their messages.

The structures of social media are especially beneficial for such an agenda, if not one of its motors. It has been found that bad news posts and links are more likely to spread virally

through the digital spheres (Soroka et al. 2015). This is partly conditioned through the functioning of social media itself: Via social media platforms, people feel connected with events that happen in very different contexts. Since the information density is so high, news that people can associate with gets more attention. Moreover, this corresponds with insights that dramatic events are usually more salient in human perception (cf. Trussler/Soroka 2014). With the "glocalization" of information in the digital age that allows bad news previously constrained to local audiences to spread globally, perceptions of imperilment are also amplified by social media itself, this way producing a stronger discrepancy between actual and perceived dangers (cf. Dietrich/Haußecker 2017).

3.2. Gaslighting and the Diffusion of Post-Truth

Gaslighting is a technique that is key to understanding the rationale of digital fascism in its propensity towards affective politics. It describes a manipulating practice that causes disorientation and uncertainty about one's sense of reality. As we have seen, frame amplification is a key technique employed by the far right to influence public opinion by emphasizing specific news stories and interpretations and by constructing the identity of a collective victimhood. The gaslighting approach goes one step further. It stokes the idea that there is no truth, but only 'postfactual' emotions "to anchor in a dense fog of rumors nationalistic, racist and anti-Semitic worldviews and thereby to instrumentalize the democratic media" (Salzborn 2017: 16).

The most obvious means of gaslighting is to spread manipulated news that causes confusion. 'Fake news' or 'alternative facts' are well-known expressions of such efforts to misinform the public. Besides such blatant lies, which are often uncovered by other media actors, but nevertheless get caught up in public discourse and individual perceptions, it is the framing of topics, language and interpretations that set the tone. The rhetoric on migration-related issues, for instance, gives us a central glimpse of this problem: Combined with flawed numbers and charts, the migration of people has been associated with natural disasters that topple the state of normality; floods, waves and hurricanes are central tropes that convey a message of invading forces and trigger feelings of being abandoned by the state. As a consequence of this confusion, the far right brings such emotions to boil by predicting an inevitable conflict (or even civil war) between 'civilizations'.

Such processes are possible because, with digitalization and social media, the traditional gatekeepers of public discourse have lost control over the allocation of information. Initially, Web 2.0. enabled people who would otherwise have been contained to tiny audiences due to their incapacity to find publishers or enter media stages, to present themselves to the world

with minimal web skills and resources. Social media, in turn, goes further. It offers every individual a dirt-cheap service structure to spread content effectively, ready-made and not demanding any skill. Even the access to an audience is included in this service, even for individuals who provide nothing more than a dull commentary that would formerly have failed to qualify as a reader's letter. All this not only accounts for political actors, but also for clueless individuals. As "prosumers" they not only consume (manipulative) information, but (re-)produce it by sharing it uncritically if they lack the expertise to classify the information at hand properly.

The far right is a major profiteer of this opening up of plural information. Classical fascism was already gaslighting successfully by using new media for spreading manipulative information. As a response, the open societies developed protection mechanisms against this, such as journalistic or ethical standards for knowledge production, disarming the far right, whose agenda stands and falls with society's susceptibility to making truth random. Social media levers these mechanisms out, thus giving the far right its most important weapon back to unleash alternative perceptions. Bypassing established routines and institutions of knowledge production, it can easily spread its manipulative content. As Jessie Daniels writes, "the rise of the Alt-Right would not be possible without the infrastructure built by the tech industry, and yet, the industry likes to imagine itself as creating a "race-less internet" (Daniels 2018: 62).

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That structures of social media are also immanently beneficial for the far right is due to its instrumental relation to truth. While other political actors are bound to ethical constraints in dealing with information, in the fascist rationale there are basically no limits that would sacrifice political ambition for the sake of the factuality of events. Leaders of the Identitarian Movement, for instance, admit openly, that "[w]e need a moral justification of our position much more urgently than proof of its factual correctness!" (Sellner 2017: 218). And this need is also satisfied by social media itself, as it contributes to an erosion in the intersubjective understanding of truth and thus to an "epistemic crisis" (Benkler et al. 2018: 3). As mentioned above, dramatic events are more salient in human perception, and, at the same time, offensive material attracts more attention. Fear-mongering content is hence only more likely to migrate from one platform to the next. Promising more clickbait (and revenues), it also gets prioritized in the algorithm-based curation of users. In this way, social media keeps pushing the diffusion of "post-truth" forward, which the fascist rationale then builds on.

3.3. Metric Manipulation and the Logic of Numbers

Taking the techniques described above a step further, we can observe a symbiosis of far-right manipulation strategies with a business-like competitiveness over followers and attention.

Range and ratings are today a central engine to produce visibility and ultimately political efficacy, since voices from social media outlets are increasingly seen as a truthful mirror of public opinion. Furthermore, even mainstream media takes snippets to reflect public opinion and to feature trends in social media. For instance, trending hashtags on Twitter may gain the attention of the broader public and allow the message transfer between different platforms. It should thus not be surprising that far-right actors, with their radical pragmatism, are engaged in metric manipulation: they try to create better ranges or ratings and to outnumber political opponents and undesirable content.

The potential of this technique has been seized by an alliance of far-right actors and trolling cultures that are keen to disrupt a democratic discourse (Tuters 2019). In an attempt to make truth random and to marginalize opposing ideas, far-right actors make use of numbers of fake accounts, automated bots and flawed algorithms, while being generally in favor of intense online activism. In this way, only a small minority of social media users produces vast amounts of content, giving the impression of an emboldened community (Kreißel et al. 2018). Such efforts at metric manipulation not only serve to gain broader media attention, but also to persuade individuals that their community is endangered. By making a viewpoint appear to be supported by a majority, far-right actors can credibly contend that politicians and mainstream media are concealing the imperilment, suggesting a conspiracy against the will and the interests of the people.

In the German-speaking context, the technique has been further elaborated by a far-right network called Reconquista Germanica (Bogerts/Fielitz 2019). Several thousand far-right activists and self-considered trolls gathered on an encrypted discussion board to coordinate manipulation efforts that worked in favor of the AfD party. On central command, hordes of far-right activists targeted the mainstream discussion boards in social media in the disguise of anonymity. Besides these methods of outnumbering, they were also involved in hijacking hashtags and the harassment of politicians, including the doxing of personal information that had already led to the withdrawal of representatives from politics. Organizations like the Identitarians and the AfD have welcomed the flood of comments, memes and bots to marginalize opponents and to manipulate discourses. They also encourage online activists to bring discord into discussions and challenge opponents with disruptive tactics and transgressive appearances. Trolling as a tactic in particular reflects the ambivalence of the internet (Philips 2018). Double meanings, in-joke humor, irony and invective build the cornerstones of a subtle practice, where activists hide behind fake profiles to sidetrack, frustrate or (in the best case) neutralize critics, contributing to a discursive metric that makes far-right tropes look common.

Influencing the discursive metric is also a matter of speed since rapidly-shared content catches above-average attention and promises exponential dispersal. The coordinated actions of online activists pushing content are thus important for metric manipulation. Moreover, the far right accelerated its influence by relying heavily on image-based communication. In contrast to textual forms, visual forms of political messages enjoy greater trust as they affect emotions and forge a relationship between the spectator, the image and the sender. Memes are a central weapon in this "war of information". The sheer mass of these image-text combinations – produced in the depths of the vernacular web and combined with the propensity towards trolling – is aimed at giving public discourse a certain spin. As Luke Munn writes: "If automated speed was key to social media, memetic speed is critical here. There is no time for discourse in the sense of a considered exchange of ideas. The picture and slogan that gets pasted more, that floods the board, that soaks up more scroll time, wins" (Munn 2019).

Social media gave thus the far right a special opportunity. With activists and bots, it can influence the discursive metric as never before. The anonymity of the internet allows subjects to multiply themselves with numerous fake accounts; at once, content can be easily reproduced by copy-and-paste or even automatic procedures. Here, as with gaslighting, the far right, with its radical pragmatism, has an immanent leg-up on other political actors whose ethics are at odds with manipulation and thus with taking part in a kind of online arms race. Moreover, the logic of numbers, which already applied to pre-digital movements, gets a new spin with social media: echo chambers constitute discursive spaces that are homogenous, this way reinforcing impressions that a certain popular content is uncontested; while quick resonances to content give them priority in terms of visibility, marginalizing other content quickly in the contest for numbers. It stands to reason that, under these conditions, emotional and simplified content outweighs arguments and reasoning, making perceptions of reality that are prone to the fascist rationale more likely.

4. Grasping the Intangible: The Fluidity and Ambivalence of Digital Fascism

Relating far-right agency *in* social media to structures *of* social media, the above section has shown that Acker's argument has a plausible core. Social media does not simply offer opportunities for far-right actors to spread their worldviews, but offers opportunity structures that are particularly beneficial for far-right agency. Moreover, social media itself (re-)produces orders of perception that are prone to the fascist rationale. This is plausible if we understand palingenetic ultranationalism as the core feature of fascism and corresponding myths of menace as constitutive for fascist dynamics. After all, social media enables an allocation and selection of information that unleashes perceptions of imperilment in

particular, thus doing the emotional work that, in classical fascism, had to be done by a regimented party structure.

Digital fascism can thus be considered a family-like variation of fascism in which the fascist core feature draws dynamics directly out of social structures in the digital world. This means that the propaganda strategies of single far-right parties and movements that once worked as motors for unleashing it may today have a pushing rather than a driving role. Seeing such a digital fascism rising, it is now up for debate what such a variation of fascism means for the persistence of open societies. As a more emergent phenomenon, digital fascism differs significantly from classical fascism in organizational terms, thus making adjustments in the dealing with fascist dynamics necessary. This is a particular challenge because digital fascism is highly fluid and ambivalent, lacking a clear organizational center that can serve as a focal point for counter-efforts. The political opponent is, thus, an intangible one, leaving civil society actors confused about how to approach the phenomenon and how to pinpoint who or what exactly has to be countered.

4.1. Fluid Transitions between Activists and Audience

The most obvious aspect of the new face of fascism is the contrast to the highly centralist way of organizing in classical fascism (Rosenberg 2012), exhibiting a historically uncommon extent of decentralization. Most prominently, this is expressed by the swarm-like penetration of online discussion boards that undermines the openness of debate, equal access to it and finally the accessibility of public opinion. This kind of leaderless swarm activity spreads messages and contributes to dynamics that are neither centrally controlled nor in any way controllable or governable (Ganesh 2018). In particular, the growing subcultural collectives that act out in discussion boards and chat forums follow their own trolling logic of *schadenfreude* that may cause repercussions differing from the strategic logic of formal far-right parties and groups (Coleman 2014; Philips 2015).

It would fall too short to see this just as a loss of control for authority in the movement, giving grassroots activism more space in the far right. The problem is much deeper because it goes along with new mechanisms of mobilizing and recruiting, making it difficult to distinguish between activists, constituency and even audiences. In short: the movement constitutes itself very differently, integrating individuals effectively into virtual networks that feel solicited by the appeal to a leaderless, dispersed digital resistance that is tailored to the needs of online activism. Leadership certainly still plays an important role in the digital spheres of far-right activism. In virtual networks, there is still space for authority that can work as a "virtual leadership" (cf. Holtmann 2011). For instance, we see the rising impact of

far-right influencers that transport quite different messages and correspond to individualizing tendencies in the digital sphere. However, the operative influence is less formalized and thus often hidden. "Leading the leaderless" (Tufekci 2017) is a much more indirect process, since the membership is not so much following orders, but rather emotions are triggering people to act. The job of a digital far-right leader is thus to push the right buttons on social media to make this emotional machine work for them.

The new relationship of far-right leaders to the movement makes it hard to grasp the cradle of fascist dynamics, since the fluidity of these virtual networks does not allow a clear classification of how individuals and groups relate to each other. This problem can be explained by the concept of cooperation. Traditionally, when individuals join an organization, they access a cooperative relationship in the sense that a bilateral agreement takes place, enabling coordinated action. In contrast, where individuals act unilaterally in the interest or even on behalf of someone, but in an uncoordinated way, this is a case of "harmony" (Keohane 1984). Recent far-right networks, however, transcend this classification. While it is true that individuals affiliate with virtual networks unilaterally, it is not correct to say that there is no coordination. On the one hand, there is virtual leadership (although the individuals may not be aware of it); and on the other hand, they are coordinated by social media itself.

After all, social media puts people into a direct relationship with each other, offering a structural environment for mutual references and a hidden guidance through the algorithm-based curation of interaction. Social media has thus become a form of hyper-organization – a network for networks – where quasi-cooperative processes are simulated in varying spaces (Lovink/Rossiter 2018). The access to these spaces are identities and emotions that designate the mutual references and interactions. The patterns of such (seemingly) leaderless activism can be seen as a result of discursive dynamics in political conflicts, in which "imagined communities" function as indentation for interrelating individuals with specific virtual networks (cf. Joosse 2015). Accordingly, it is ideational and symbolic channels that activate and guide individuals, often motivated by the aspiration "to become part of a cohesive and supportive milieu" (ibid.: 3). This reflects the desire to belong to a group system outside the real surrounding social structures that has been termed "new tribalism" (see Kaplan/Costa 2013). It is clear that the existence of social media has facilitated the opportunities to satisfy this desire, which may also be stronger today since the fragmentation of modern society leads to unstable identities. In this sense, members of the virtual networks of the far right are often idiosyncratic. Not at home in political debates and not having been active in political groups, they combine their own ideas with the ideological pieces they find fitting. Consequently, it is hard to tell what are authentic expressions of the far-right actors and what are manifestations of free-riding.

4.2. *Ambivalent Expressions in Digital Cultures*

Due to its dynamic nature and low barriers for participation, virtual networks on social media create specific synergy effects and group processes in the form of digital hate cultures behaving like swarms (Ganesh 2018). Members of such swarms are often not aware that they are part of a broader dynamic or agenda. On the one hand, the boundaries between everyday expressions of opinions and political propaganda are blurred. On the other hand, the members are not simply consuming information, but also take part in the production of information, by liking, sharing or commenting on content, thereby potentially functioning as multipliers of fascist dynamics. Both aspects can be perfectly exemplified by memes: Born in humoristic and ironic image-boards, they are charged with far-right messages that are difficult to decipher, or are so ambivalent that it is futile to try to distinguish between provocation and agitation (Philips 2018; Bogerts/Fielitz 2019). Clueless subjects can thus rapidly reproduce far-right messages in the accelerated speed of meme dissemination.

Digital fascism is hardly tangible due its "post-organizational" characteristics that make the phenomenon highly fluid and ambivalent. This is reflected in the way the internet has revolutionized organizational processes. Organizing without the need for organizations, as Clay Shirky described the collective action paradox in the digital age, had deep repercussions on political mobilization (Shirky 2008). Furthermore, it is not so much ideological consistency that keeps this assemblage of idiosyncratic elements together, but rather the cultural practices in the digital community itself that work in a community-building way. Engaging in those digital cultures through offensive rhetoric and transgressive behaviors is thus the meaningful means for a collective identity. This fits well with Sven Reichardt's comment that, for fascism, means are more important than the ends; in this sense, political style and practice are (also) constitutive for the movement (Reichardt 2002). Today, this praxeological moment, which is also recognized by Robert Paxton (2004), is still as alive as the fascist core feature, however, like palingenetic ultranationalism, the necessary practices are less dependent on a party that mobilizes for action in the streets. The virtual networks are already a permanent mobilization that center around emotions which are easy to trigger on social media.

Far-right actors are well aware of the join-in character that digital cultures offer and assume that their ambivalence will work for their cause. In an interview, Martin Sellner, the Austrian leader of the Identitarians, for instance, praised their dynamics as contributing to the agenda of the far right: "I just see in [the internet] a hurricane, a chaos potential of irony, partly also hate and anger. At the same time, however, there are pubertal feelings that have become immune to any moral dogma. In my opinion, this hurricane, this tornado, will

massively damage and blow up political correctness."³ It is this emotional dynamic that far-right actors try to use as a carrier to gradually conflate digital cultures with far-right undertones, realizing the metapolitics the New Right imagined: a subtle form of politics that subverts the cultural foundations of political discourse (Griffin 2000). This conflation is precisely what makes digital fascism so challenging, since its core feature unfolds in the wake of pubertal feelings whose effervescence make it seem naive, at best brattish and thus politically negligible.

4.3. Immanent Challenges for Open Societies

With digital fascism, so one could say, fascism comes closer to its core. No longer exclusively dependent on a hierarchical party as the driver of fear-mongering and mobilizing practices, fascism draws new dynamics directly out of emotions and cultural practices that are spawned by and in the structures of social media. Such a phenomenon cannot be grasped with actor- or ideology-centered approaches. More than ever before, fascism has to be analyzed as an emergent phenomenon through the actions of its disciples. In the same vein, it has to be countered as such. And this means: In the absence of a tangible center of political actors, it is primarily the structures that constitute its dynamics that have to be targeted.

Recently, the dominant counter-efforts against fascist dynamics are, however, located at the agency level. Civil society responds, for instance, with its own agendas of online politics and activism. This is reflected in numerous programs and trainings to intervene in far-right storytelling, particularly with methods of counter-narratives intended to compete with the far right for the audience and/or to persuade its constituency of other perspectives. An evaluation of this 'digital street work' is still outstanding, but one can plausibly assume that it requires a profound knowledge of the emotional, strategic and structural dimensions of the problem to design them effectively. After all, fascist dynamics rest on a fluidity and ambivalence that make contradicting effects of ill-considered interventions likely. Moreover, this knowledge has to be applied consistently by a broad alliance, if – in a minefield of trolls – no backfire effects are to outweigh the positive effects.

However, even in the most organized way, the friends of the open society, as Karl Popper describes them, are at a disadvantage compared to their enemies. The functioning of social media has created a power asymmetry of perspectives in online spaces since it stimulates orders of perception that are prone to the fascist rationale. It is an immanent problem that liberal and progressive actors cannot compensate for this asymmetry without adjusting to the fascist rationale. To participate in an online arms race would mean to take over manipulative

³ Martin Sellner: Hass für den Infokrieg im Netz | Doku Lösch-Dich Bonus. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsWXwS5qjRk>, quote at 11:55.

techniques and thus to betray the ideas of enlightenment. It thus demands external solutions to change the ecosystem that this competition takes place in. This does not necessitate a shutdown of the internet – which would be an authoritarian approach itself – but apposite modifications in the macro- and micro-structures of social media. To do this, it has to be understood how single techniques of the far right interact with each other and with the structural environment, to design modifications that lever out the synergy effects of far-right agency in social media.

5. Being Intolerant (of Structures) of Intolerance? Conclusive Considerations

"Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises", wrote Umberto Eco in his manuscript on *Ur-Fascism* (Eco 1995). And in fact, today it lurks in the hidden spaces that we have limited access to and it finds, in pervasive steps, its way to the surface in the guise of practices in digital cultures (cf. Fekete 2018). It is undeniable that the internet is one of the most sweeping spaces that gave fascism a new impetus: from the Alt-Right to the Identitarians, from 'shitposting' to manipulation tactics. It is a hybrid form of fascism that transgresses traditional models of politics and is wrapped up by digital subcultures that increasingly influence mainstream platforms where millions of users spend time socializing, informing and exchanging.

With the pervasion of digital fascism, the open society is facing a dilemma. This dilemma is basically the same liberal and progressive actors are always confronted with when it comes to facing fascism. Popper once called it the "paradox of tolerance", referring to the duty "to not tolerate the intolerant", that is, to deny certain liberal privileges to the enemies of the open society (Popper 1995 [1945]: 602). This duty is paradoxical because it forces liberal actors to act (at least partially) against their own liberal principles. Today, this paradox becomes even more tricky, since digital fascism comes in as a more social or emergent phenomenon. If it is less a matter of fascist parties that are unleashing perceptions of imperilment to justify authoritarian politics, but more a matter of digital (hate) cultures emerging from social media, then fascist dynamics cannot simply be countered by focusing on intolerant actors. Instead, liberal intolerance has to be directed against the structures producing orders of perception prone to the fascist rationale.

As we have outlined in this paper, the mutual production and amplification of fear is the central transmission belt between the structural conditions of social media and the inherent logic of fascism. The new face of fascism in the digital age is thus ephemeral and builds virtual alliances and mutual entanglements between broader online subcultures and organized forms of activism. In this way, the digital conditions have strongly affected both far-right

authoritarianism and the resistance to it, recasting the role of formal organizations and grounding a new form of decentralized activism that switches interchangeably between online and offline. With the virtual structures of social media, it is almost impossible to assign certain consequences to specific subjects' actions. Due to the absence of a tangible center of political actors driving the fascist dynamics, it is not clear who should be made responsible and targeted.

Accordingly, there is a tendency in public debates to depoliticize the problems of fascist dynamics by taking the digital conditions as a new, second nature of modern society. The algorithm-based curation of users as well as the freedom of anonymity are taken for granted by many people. In contrast, however, there are also efforts to assign responsibility to those who create the fundamental algorithms and provide the structures beneficial for fascist dynamics. This tendency to center responsibility again is expressed in critiques from civil society of the role of social media companies and political demands to regulate or even disrupt them. In this matter, first measures have already been taken. In Germany, for instance, the Network Enforcement Act (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*) was passed in 2017, placing providers of social media under an obligation to proceed against hate crime and other indictable content. This is followed by a series of international commitments by tech companies to take action against extremist content as a reaction to political demands, particularly following the terrorist act of Christchurch.

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However, it is questionable if such measures of content filtering are sufficient to break down fascist dynamics, given the multiple mechanisms of social media that are beneficial for far-right agency. On the other hand, what can be done effectively against these mechanisms is moot, since politics cannot simply turn back time. The geography of information, for instance, has changed irreversibly. While the invention of print media brought a first wave of informational glocalization, and TV and radio a second, this glocalization now has been completed with the internet. And as in the late middle-ages and later in the 20th century, where those waves were beneficial for perceptions of imperilment or even hysteria, society has to adjust to this new intensity of information as a matter of fact – and to deal with the far right's new capability of dramatic storytelling to amplify fears.

Nevertheless, this capability can be limited by restricting the opportunities for gaslighting and metric manipulation. After all, the far right has been particularly successful recently because the techniques described interlock perfectly in the given environment: Metric manipulation helps gaslighting, and gaslighting helps amplification. Looking for specific interventions into the structures that allow those synergy effects should be considered of central importance to break down fascist dynamics. Here, it is possible to imagine measures that would be undoubtedly effective, such as making providers of digital platforms responsible for the content shared via their infrastructure or user registration systems that

enable fake accounts. However, such strong measures are at odds with the prevailing norms of freedom on the internet and may undermine liberal principles itself. Open societies have thus to consider carefully whether digital fascism necessitates risking their own restriction, or whether they should settle for a softer approach that accepts the risks of digital fascism.

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