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EXTREME RIGHT AND MIS/ DISINFORMATION

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Key concepts and a brief note on conceptual ambiguity

Before exploring how the extreme right and information disorders have mutually shaped one another, we need a clear definition of the notions of ‘extreme right’ (or far right) and ‘information disorder’. Easier said than done. As with most social and political-scientific concepts, reducing complex and multi-faceted phenomena to a clear-cut definition is a tricky operation which depends on normative and politicised perspectives. What is ‘extreme’ (or ‘fake’, as in ‘fake news’) for one scholar may be viewed as ‘alternative’ by another and as a discursive signifier by yet another. Given such a conceptual ambiguity within the current literature, anyone intending to study such concepts faces a number of epistemological, ontological, methodological, and ideological challenges. It is therefore necessary to briefly outline the perspective from which this chapter approaches the concepts of extremism and information disorders.

Extreme right

In this chapter the definition of extremism is approached through two premises. The first one has to do with the envisioned end goal of extremists. In the *Ethica Nicomachea*, Aristotle developed the conception of ‘extremes’ in the context of his virtue theory (Aristotle, Ross and Brown 2009). He saw a virtue as a character trait – of a human being or of a community – and as the perfect common middle ground between two vices: that is, extremes (Frissen 2019). In contrast to ‘virtue’, the extremes are the margins where bad qualities prevail. While people or communities at those extremes can be diametrically opposed to one another, what defines them is a rejection of the virtue; ‘the extremes reject a common middle ground’ (Leman 2016, 4). This is the first premise through which this chapter approaches the definition of extremism: a rejection of the common ground. As a consequence, extremists are best defined as those who strive for the creation of a homogenous society based on an uncompromising, uniform, dogmatic ideology that ‘tolerates no diversity’ (Schmid 2013, 10). For the purposes of this chapter, the ‘extreme right’ is a phenomenon based on various ideologies (e.g. neo-Nazi, white supremacist, xenophobic, religious, homophobic, or gender related) that always legitimise violence against specific ethnic or cultural groups.
The second premise concerns the ways in which this end goal is achieved. While political change can be achieved through a wide variety of means, extremists favour the use of force/violence over debate and persuasion (Schmid 2013; Frissen 2019). On the basis of a historical analysis, Midlarsky (2011) argues that a willingness to kill massively for a cause or collective is what characterises all extremist groups, from fascists to communists and from separatists to nationalists. More explicitly, he states that ‘[p]olitical extremisms of all sorts share a propensity towards the mass murder of actual or potential opponents of their political programs’ (Midlarsky 2011, 8). As a result, the second premise of this chapter’s definition of extremism is that extremists turn to violence in the hope of arriving at a non-pluralistic, non-democratic, non-virtuous society. In the next section, we explore how the information ecosystem has helped in shaping such violence.

Information disorders

The production and dissemination of misleading information, myths, and propaganda are certainly nothing new. A brief peek into the twentieth century provides us with many examples, ranging from Orson Welles War of the Worlds to Joseph Goebbels’ machinery of ‘public enlightenment’. In recent years, however, these phenomena have spurred heightened scientific interest. This is a debate at whose epicentre lies the question of how to define whether information is true or false and intentional or unintentional. Scholars seem to have been mostly occupied with disentangling misinformation from disinformation. As a result, misinformation has been conceptualised as ‘publishing wrong information without meaning to be wrong or having a political purpose in communicating false information’ (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018, 24) while disinformation is ‘defined as manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve political ends’ (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018, 24). The locus of concern in these debates is on the issue of intentionality behind the production and circulation of false information (Farkas and Schou 2018). The problem is that this is often based on guesswork rather than well-grounded findings, leading to conceptual ambiguity in the literature.

Therefore, this chapter follows Benkler, Faris and Roberts’s (2018) concept of information disorder(s). This concept is much more inclusive in the sense that its definition is not only based on the piece of information as such: it also encompasses the broader role of the technological drivers and architecture in the (online) information ecosystem, such as digital platforms and social media. In other words, the concept of information disorders also refers to environmental and infrastructural phenomena such as algorithmic filtering, filter bubbles, and micro-targeting (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018). Furthermore, the concept of information disorder(s) is meaningful because it is not just based on the (intention of the) sender. It instead considers the outcome as the leading defining principle. Indeed, the word disorder conveys the consequences – a ‘disturbed order’ in the information ecosystem – of intentionally or unintentionally misleading pieces of information. As will become clear in the next section, instead of just capitalising on the rise of misinformation/disinformation (such as ‘fake news’ or memes), it is this notion of disorder that a deeply mediatised extreme right has instrumentalised for their cause (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

A deeply mediatised extreme right

On 15 March 2019, around 1:40 pm local time, a right-wing extremist embarked on a ‘mission “against the invaders”’ in Christchurch, New Zealand (Macklin 2019a, 18). In a little over half an hour, he entered two mosques and killed 51 people. What was unprecedented about this attack
was the fundamental part played by digital technologies. This criminal announced his attack on the/pol/board on 8chan, an image board in the web’s social outskirts on which extreme-right information circulates freely (Davey and Ebner 2019). He posted on numerous file-sharing web sites a manifesto titled ‘The Great Replacement’, and he broadcast the atrocity on Facebook Live, using a GoPro sports camera. By orchestrating his livestream as in a first-person shooter game, the attacker showed he understood the logic of the digital information ecosystem and how to use it to make sure his message would be heard. And heard it was. The video was shared a few million times on multiple social media platforms. It was celebrated with memes on 8chan, and it fuelled anti-Muslim hatred online (Macklin 2019a). But, what the Christchurch shooting mainly caused was a ‘chain reaction’ of near-identical right-wing extremist attacks against ethnic and cultural communities perceived as invaders or occupiers, such as in Halle (DE) and in El Paso (US) (Koehler 2019; Macklin 2019b). As a result, the Christchurch shooting ushered in a new era for the extreme right: one in which actions are increasingly shaped by digital media and their logic. This chapter therefore states that the extreme right has become deeply mediatised (see Hepp 2020). Deep mediatisation has been defined as ‘an advanced stage of [mediatisation] in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures’ (Hepp 2020, 5). Indeed, the Christchurch scenario would never have been possible without digital technologies. In the next two sections, this notion is explored further by looking at two ‘triggers’ for the deep mediatisation of the extreme right: (1) the broader context of globalisation and immigration and (2) information disorders and the information ecosystem.

**Broader context of globalisation, immigration, and trust in institutions**

In order to understand how the current era of deeply mediatised right-wing extremism came into being, it is necessary to discuss the broader context first. Although it is impossible to conclusively point to specific antecedents and consequences, a series of circumstances (e.g. globalisation, the migration crisis, anti-Muslim sentiment) have been immensely influential. In our current societies, globalisation has triggered a shift from a ‘solid’ society based on control and concrete points of reference to a ‘liquid’ society whose key traits are perpetual change, insecurity, and hopelessness about the future (Bauman 1998). The change in intercommunity relations due to immigration has been associated with an increase in intergroup conflict due to discrimination against diverse minorities and the upsurge of different forms of radicalisation and (political, religious, and xenophobic) extremism across the world. Phenomena such as ideological polarisation, radicalisation, violent extremism, ethno-nationalism, and anti-Muslim sentiment are a ‘minefield’ and a threat to basic human rights, fundamental freedoms, and intergroup relations and tolerance (Sedgwick 2010). More concretely, in many countries, globalisation and immigration are exerting tremendous pressure on social cohesion (shared public values, communal and group values, guiding principles, and normative values). As a consequence, an increasingly recurring and prominent narrative – especially within extreme-right circles – is that of ‘white genocide’. The idea behind this is ‘that white populations are being replaced through immigration, integration, abortion and violence against white people’ (Davey and Ebner 2019, 6). The ‘white genocide’ ideology was a driving factor behind the Christchurch attack, for example. Because this narrative is becoming more and more visible in society, it led to a divided public opinion that tends to be more overtly hostile towards migration (European Commission 2015).

This fragmentation in public opinion has been increased by a series of recent political developments and a worldwide decline of trust in democratic institutions such as the news media.
Indeed, in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, the Brexit vote, and the European migration crisis, political and societal polarisation (i.e. a vast and growing gap between political ideologies and public opinion) have increased rapidly (Newton 2019). And each side of the polarised spectrum holds the same idea as truth: ‘we are right, they are wrong, no matter what’ (Pattyn 2014, 231). Together with the sudden rise of populist leaders and discourses across Europe, this has resulted in today’s ‘disaffected democracies’ being trapped in an epistemic crisis in which citizens are increasingly unable to tell truths from falsehoods (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018). For instance, populist leaders all over the world – most notably President Trump – now routinely use the term ‘fake news’ to describe news that is critical of them or embarrassing. It is no surprise that such dominant discourses have gradually affected people’s relation to news media in a negative way. In the last decade, scientific studies and polls have consistently pointed to a decline of citizens’ trust in the conventional news media (Newman et al. 2019).

Audiences increasingly tend to rely on self-selection of online and social media sources (‘my media’) that they choose to trust for news, background, and information. This has raised concerns as people may get isolated intellectually if they are no longer seeking additional sources that convey diverse news (Newton 2019). In this regard, both mediated and interpersonal types of communication have been blamed for facilitating political and societal polarisation, which paved the way for right-wing extremism (Yadlin-Segal and Ramasubramanian 2017). Social media platforms also include contentious content such as extreme-right-inspired hate speech, offensive comments, misinformation and disinformation, blurred lines between fact and fiction, and propaganda – all of which result in a polarised society and in division between communities, some of which become ostracised. This brings us to the second issue related to this deeply mediatised extreme right, one which pertains to information disorders and the information ecosystem.

‘It’s the information ecosystem, stupid’

This part of the chapter discusses the umbilical role that information disorders and the information ecosystem at large have played in the deep mediatisation of the extreme right (Maly 2019). Rather than attempting to be complete or exhaustive, this section looks at the three most pervasive information disorders used by the extreme right: (1) ‘fake news’ and propaganda, (2) memes and memetic warfare, and (3) digital platforms.

On fake news and propaganda

The first information disorder that has boosted the mediatisation of the extreme right is ‘fake news’. Apart from its deceptiveness, the most prominent feature of fake news is probably its virality: the capacity to pollute the mediated public debate by spreading and transforming falsehoods and myths (see Venturini 2019). According to Mourão and Robertson (2019, 2077), fake news relies on ‘genre blending combining elements of traditional news with features that are exogenous to normative professional journalism: misinformation, sensationalism, clickbait and bias’. However, the assumption that fake news demonstrably and significantly undermines democracy is not a matter of agreement (Marda and Milan 2018). Nevertheless, while the total volume of fake news in comparison with real news is rather limited, at least in some cases, and very dependent on the topic or the event, it definitely needs studying – its existence, its design, and the machinery behind it (see Bayer et al. 2019). Not least because right-wing-inspired fake news stories have been found to outperform real news in terms of user engagement and popularity (Silverman 2016).
In line with their anti-establishment stance, (violent) extreme-right activists demand absolute free speech, no matter how offensive this may be to specific individuals or groups of people. In this respect the following elements in Bayer et al.’s definition (2019) of disinformation and propaganda is important: this is content designed to be false, manipulated, or misleading (disinformation) disseminated using unethical persuasion techniques (propaganda) on a topic of public interest, with the intention of generating insecurity, inciting hostility, or disrupting democratic processes and often making use of automated dissemination techniques for amplifying purposes. In a context of growing international tensions, a critical challenge is to try to identify the sources of manipulation techniques such as lies, omission, exaggeration, and misdirection, used strategically to influence domestic and foreign population groups, governments, and news professionals.

On memes and memetic warfare

While memes may be viewed as trivial and mundane artefacts, they reflect deep social and cultural structures, and when used for subtle (or not-so-subtle) political purposes, they can be ‘deadly serious’. The extreme-right has no use for complex arguments and nuanced language: to persuade mass audiences, it knows it needs a sledgehammer rather than a feather. In other words, it favours simple, emotional, and dramatic language, including humour, ironic memes, and jokes. ‘Memes’ are (often a set of) images, photographs, and text fragments, or a combination of these, which are posted online, shared, imitated, and transformed by users (Shifman 2013). Often shared and commented upon in online public spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, they are also very popular on more exclusive online forums such as cloaked Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, and channels on Discord, Reddit, 4chan and 8chan. Memes often take the form of so-called remixes, in which visual and textual elements are combined to send out a multimodal message and are usually a combination of content and design (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017; Heikkilä 2017; Shifman 2013), which makes them an appropriate mode of communication for political-ideological purposes (e.g. Börzsei 2013; Shifman 2014).

One common characteristic of extreme-right memes is the ‘anomalous juxtaposition’, putting incongruous images together to make the message absurd or provocative. This is used for ‘maximising the susceptibility of the idea being passed from mind to mind’ (Knobel and Lankshear 2007, 215). The use of elements from visual and popular culture and the injection of humour helps the extreme-right internet memes appear innocent at first sight while they send a powerful message around the world through this ‘racial humour’ (Yoon 2016). According to Bogerts and Fielitz (2019), far-right actors are aware of this duality and use this ‘wolf in sheepskin’ strategy to make their message attractive to the wider public rather than just the already convinced: this boils down to ‘mainstreaming’ an extreme message (Davey and Ebner 2017).

Bogerts and Fielitz (2019) investigated memes used by the German far right. They found that memes are often based on elements of popular culture, such as cartoons and video games, but also historical images (see also Boudana et al. 2017). Such memes mostly pertain to immigration, foreign politics, and the media but are also about the so-called naive leftists. Although memes are shared and commented upon at the micro level, they are capable of influencing society at the macro level (Gal, Shifman and Kampf 2016; Shifman 2013). A good example of this is the Christchurch mosque attack described earlier. Both the livestream video and the manifesto were drenched in references to a broader extreme-right internet culture. As noted by Davey and Ebner (2019, 24), the amount of intertextuality with the web’s extreme-right subculture gave the attack almost the character of one big ‘inside joke’. For instance, the background music that the attacker played in the car while driving to the first mosque was the song called ‘Remove
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Kebab’, which was recorded by Bosnian Serb soldiers in the context of the Yugoslav wars and genocide against Bosnian Muslims and then became popular within the extreme right at large.

When the creation and dissemination of memes via social media are conducted on a large scale with the strategic intention of propagating a specific message or ideology, this is called memetic warfare (see e.g. Wall and Mitew 2018). This happened on a large scale during and after the 2016 US presidential election: a pro-Trump campaign was organised via memes that were crafted and pushed into the mainstream discourse from various online fringe communities such as Twitter, Reddit and 4chan (see e.g. Zanettou et al. 2018). More recent examples of the implementation of memes in (mainstream) political communication are the meme campaigns by presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Michael Bloomberg in the first months of 2020, with the latter also using Instagram influencers to disseminate the memes (see e.g. Lorenz 2020).

One of the better-known internet memes used by the extreme right (and mainstreamed regularly) is that of ‘Pepe the Frog’ (see e.g. Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz 2018). It is a 2005 creation by comic artist Matt Furie and was featured as a character in the popular comic series Boy’s Club. Because of Pepe’s popularity as an online meme, he was hijacked by extreme-right movements in order to disseminate hate speech by depicting Pepe with a Hitler moustache or a long nose and a Jewish star. This practice was offensive enough for the Anti-Defamation League to include Pepe the Frog on its 2017 list of hate symbols. Authors and remixers of these memes injected humour through the funny-looking figure (Pepe is a green frog with bright red lips) in combination with familiar or historical settings and a tantalising quote. There is also the ‘clown world meme’, a derivative of Pepe which the extreme right uses to indicate that we live in an absurd, ‘left-wing’ ‘clown world’. The jocular use of a clown results in the meme being enthusiastically shared by both alt-right supporters and people who just like to provoke, gradually making more people familiar with far-right ideology.

On algorithms and (the Achilles heel of) platforms

Besides the contents and forms of the communicative artefacts such as fake news and memes, the concept of information disorders also refers to the broader role of the ecosystem. In particular, social media platforms have been highly useful channels for the dissemination of populist messages. These platforms make it possible to have direct contact with an audience, bypassing professional news media and providing infinite possibilities to personalise a message and target specific users or groups (Ernst et al. 2017). We have already noted that mainstreaming involves the demarginalisation of extreme points of view by bringing them from the extreme poles of public discourse to the centre, thus making them negotiable (see earlier). And while one can argue that there is a kind of ‘media populism’ (Krämer 2014) happening in traditional media (which mostly present the political debate in emotional terms and often frame political items as in-group versus out-group issues), the gatekeeping on social media is much more open than on more traditional media platforms, where the focus is still mainly on elite and mainstream sources (see, among others, Grabe et al. 1999; Schoemaker and Vos 2009). Even traditional news media covering news on social media platforms use a new form of gatekeeping induced by social media logic (see, e.g. Bruns and Highfield 2015; Tandoc and Vos 2016). It should therefore come as no surprise that extreme-right movements and actors have started to see social media as a rewarding and easy way to send their messages to both followers (as a form of ‘activism’) and non-followers (as a form of ‘mainstreaming’). Studies in this domain have been focusing on extreme-right discourses and hate speech on social media platforms such as Facebook (e.g. Awan 2016; Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Farkas, Schou and Neumayer 2018); Twitter (e.g. O’Callaghan et al. 2012; Nguyen 2016); YouTube (Ekman 2014; O’Callaghan...
et al. 2015); and, to a lesser extent, Reddit (e.g. Topinka 2018) and Instagram (Ichau et al. 2019) or a combination of different platforms (e.g. Matamoros-Fernández 2017; Ernst et al. 2017). Most platforms’ terms of agreement and so-called community standards forbid hate speech, but in practice hate speech flourishes on such platforms because of the often-thin line between hate speech and free speech or humour. The platforms must achieve a difficult balancing act between wanting to be an open platform (and attract users through sensationalistic content) on the one hand and being called on to delete offensive content on the other hand (see e.g. Gillespie 2018).

As described by Macklin (2019a), events such as the Christchurch shooting highlight the Achilles heel of many of these platforms when confronted with extreme violent content. In determining whether content should be removed or not, platforms tend to rely heavily on artificial intelligence and algorithms. As a result, when interrogated in terms of their responsibilities in disseminating extreme-right materials, platforms often hide behind a narrative of solutionism, or ‘we have an algorithm for that’ (Morozov 2013). However, these algorithms have been found to be problematic in their own right. Not every message posted on social media (the input) is equally likely to be shown to the general public (the output) since both editorial (by content moderators) and algorithmic filtering take place between input and output (Diakopoulos 2015; Napoli 2014; Wallace 2018). Poell and Van Dijck (2014) indicate how this selection is anything but neutral. They argue that platforms have a strong preference for breaking news and news in line with the users’ prior search and click behaviour. As far as breaking news is concerned, they claim that items or hashtags that generate a sudden, steep peak in the volume of tweets are more likely to be selected as trending topics than items that may generate a larger total volume but for which there is no clear peak. And this focus on a peak may favour spectacular, sensational, and bizarre news over complex, nuanced, but socially relevant news. This is in line with previous research indicating that the algorithms give toxic messages extra attention (Massanari 2017). These insights can teach us how sensationalistic news but also fake news and extreme partisan messages can reach millions almost instantaneously – as epitomised by the success of #pizzagate, the hashtag that accompanied messages about an alleged paedophilia network headed by Hillary Clinton that was initially launched by a troll account that mainly tweeted pro-Nazi content (Metaxas and Finn 2019).

This logic of algorithmic filtering and entanglement with political actors could lead to the notorious filter bubble (see e.g. Pariser 2011) and ‘information cocoons’ or echo chambers (see, e.g. Sunstein 2007; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In short, a filter bubble is the result of not being able to see deviating sources and content (due to the algorithms’ filtering), and an echo chamber describes a virtual ‘self-protective enclave’ in which extreme right-wing users, for example, only consume sources and content that repeat their own thoughts over and over again and confirm their already-internalised convictions (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). There are a number of studies indicating the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers (see, e.g. Barberá 2015; Colleoni et al. 2014; Walter et al. 2018; Sunstein 2004), but more and more studies indicate that the existence of this kind of insulate, virtual spaces in which users only come into contact with like-minded people and content must be nuanced (Flaxman et al. 2016; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2016). Bruns (2019) even argued that we should abandon the dogma that platforms by definition lead to filter bubbles and echo chambers, which is probably triggered by a form of ‘moral panic’, and that it is more valuable to study what people do with the news and information once they are confronted with it. Consequently, more research is required.

**Directions for future research**

Both the earlier discussion and the Christchurch shooting show that the interplay between extremism and information disorders seems to be cyclic. Against a backdrop of globalisation
and immigration, societal and political polarisation is on the increase. In turn, this climate of societal polarisation feeds into an increasing state of intergroup tensions, conflicts, and intolerance. Consecutively, these increased levels of intergroup conflict are a breeding ground for violent extremist attacks such as in Christchurch. These attacks set in motion a chain reaction of similar attacks everywhere around the world, leading in turn to increased societal polarisation. And the cycle starts over again. At the epicentre of this global cyclic movement is the information ecosystem and, specifically, the increasing spread of information disorders.

In that sense, this cyclic pattern is similar to the ‘flywheel hypothesis’ of extremism (see Frissen 2019, 89–93). This hypothesis states that such a cyclic chain of events is much like a mechanical flywheel, in as much as information disorders provide the initial energy supply to get the cycle in motion. At the same time, they provide additional kinetic energy to keep it going. The stronger the driving force, the more kinetic energy is built up in the cyclic process and the more inertia the flywheel possesses. This metaphor also implies that even if the driving force is briefly taken away, the flywheel will remain in motion for a while. As a result, it is through the driving forces of information disorders that the flywheel builds up kinetic energy and keeps turning.

A consequence of this hypothesis is that if we wish to study phenomena such as extremism – including the extreme right – we need to approach it from a ‘bird’s eye’ perspective. Current research lacks a holistic approach enabling a deeper understanding of the creation, dissemination, and impact of information disorders, as well as the combined roles of interpersonal and mediated types of communication. Most research about the extreme right has taken either a theoretical approach (e.g. ‘What is it like?’) or a quantitative perspective mainly aimed at the sources (e.g. ‘Who follows it, and how is it spread?’). However, we know very little about the way the target audiences – that is, the users of this contentious and socially unacceptable content – actually define and make sense of this kind of content. Since it has often been argued that fake news and disinformation are ‘in the eye of the beholder’, there is a crucial need for additional research on people’s own understanding of contentious content. We need to better understand the social-psychological characteristics of vulnerable individuals (both as target audience and as subject of the contentious content) and set up initiatives able to make people more resistant to extreme-right disinformation. At the same time, increased scientific attention is needed vis-à-vis the role of digital platforms and the increasing dominance of algorithms in the information ecosystem. For this kind of research, scholars may want to include predictive modelling, forecasting, and computational methods (such as agent-based models).

Note

1 The actual scientific and analytical meaning of the term ‘fake news’ evaporated almost overnight after its introduction by Craig Silverman (2016) and its appropriation by US president Donald Trump, who rightly saw it as a powerful weapon against critical journalists and media. A thorough discursive analysis of what fake news exactly is goes beyond the scope of this chapter. For such an analysis, see Farkas and Schou (2018).

References


