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Communicating Nastiness: Narratives and Networks of the Far Right

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The far right's ability to harness algorithms and build online and offline media has enabled it to shape political discourse in ways the Left has struggled to match. As the big-tech-dominated information environment favours polarising messaging and nasty communication, progressives need to invest in alternative platforms and bolster quality journalism, moving beyond the outdated ideal of objectivity.

In October 2024, at an event in Saint Petersburg, a journalist for the German public service broadcaster ZDF asked Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó why he likes to provoke the European Union with his frequent visits to Russia. The minister then accused the journalist himself of provocation. "Try to behave in a polite and respectful way towards Hungary. […] We are not a 'jawohl' nation, okay?" said Szijjártó, a member of the far-right Fidesz party, using a German word that is used as an affirmative answer to a military order. "So you cannot dictate to us – no one [can], not the German government, [nor] the Greens in Germany."

The response demonstrates some typical components of today's far-right communications strategies. Instead of answering the question put to him, Szijjártó shot back with his own accusations of wrongful behaviour and framed the journalist as an agent of a powerful interest group. The use of "jawohl" is an example of trolling: it mocks the German language (or the country's mentality) while evoking Germany's Nazi past, given the term's common use in a military context.

Finally, it is no coincidence that Szijjártó referenced the Greens – the party that is seen as the motor of progressivism, and as such, the driver of trends the far right hopes to reverse: gender equality, multiculturalism, and social justice. The short exchange was published on social media by Szijjártó's communications team.

Hungary is an example of a far-right regime that has successfully turned most of the country's media into a mouthpiece while ignoring what is left of the independent press. Fidesz has now been in power for 14 years; it has reached a point where it no longer feels accountable to the public, whether at home or abroad. Like other far-right parties, it no longer requires traditional communications channels – mainstream television or radio, for example – and therefore does not need to sit down with journalists and play by their rules. And while *Fox News*, *The Epoch Times*, *Breitbart News* and others act as international propaganda outlets for the far right, there are homegrown versions in every country, not to mention social media.

It now matters little which medium a political actor uses to convey a message. If it's well crafted, it will be picked up by major media outlets. This is best exemplified by Donald Trump's tweets, which inspire countless newspaper articles and broadcast news segments. It shows how the far right's messages become news without mainstream media getting the chance to ask uncomfortable questions.

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have a big impact on the successes of its parties.

Undercutting mainstream media

In their book *News After Trump*, media scholars Matt Carlson, Sue Robinson, and Seth C. Lewis try to explore why Trump's disregard for the truth, as well as his continuous attacks on the establishment and on mainstream journalism, turned out to be so politically effective, enabling the former political outsider to become US president in 2016. Legacy media are partly to blame, the authors argue: Trump took advantage of journalists' adherence to longstanding rules, such as the need to report on events objectively in order to ensure sufficient coverage, and in turn he deliberately undercut the mainstream media.

As far as prominent politicians of modern democracies go, there hasn't been anyone in recent years with quite the same lack of respect for "proper" political conduct, including telling the truth, as Trump. Journalists have needed to report what the candidate – and later president – was saying, but the fact that so much of what he says is untrue creates a raft of problems that they have not yet found a solution for.

Additionally, the segment of society that is frequently outraged by the minor scandals or provocative words of modern far-right politicians might be shrinking. This is thanks in part to the normalisation of the far right's messages. Meanwhile, critical journalistic reporting on the far right no longer seems to have much of an impact on the successes of its parties. In January 2024, the German investigative outlet Correctiv published a report about a far-right meeting in which participants – including high-ranking politicians of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – discussed plans to deport foreigners and "non-assimilated" German citizens from the country. It sparked mass demonstrations, yet the AfD's electoral appeal kept growing. In today's polarised and fragmented media landscapes, the party was able to use non-mainstream channels to develop and spread an alternative narrative around its plans that held appeal among a widening audience.

Being nasty

In this landscape, divisive and disrespectful speech is replacing compromise. Political psychologist Thomas Zeitzoff calls it the "nasty style of politics", whereby everything from insults and name-calling to veiled threats and incitement are common forms of rhetoric, eventually leading to actual violence. The prime example again is Trump, who, following years of lies and insults, incited a group of followers to storm the Capitol.

Zeitzoff argues that although a majority of voters do not support confrontational or aggressive politics most of the time, the tactic is nevertheless utilised as a winning strategy by certain politicians. It is especially effective during crises, when the population appreciates a leader who cannot be intimidated, as well as in cases of politicians who have nothing to lose: outsiders who would not be able to enter mainstream politics otherwise, or incumbents whose support is eroding. These aggressive strategies allow them to signal that they are a force to be reckoned with, not to mention that their insults and attacks can deter many contenders from participating in the dirty game of politics.[1]

In some European countries, US Republican consultant Arthur Finkelstein has become almost a household name. His merciless campaign strategies in the US in the 1970s and 1980s caught the attention of far-right parties in Israel and Central Europe, to whom he served as an adviser in his later

years. Finkelstein studied opinion polls to identify what topics people cared about the most; based on these, he crafted polarising messages that could be used to attack and denigrate the opponent. He is remembered as the person who created negative emotional associations with the word “liberal”, turning it into one of the most damaging adjectives one could use to describe a politician. He built whole campaigns around invented enemies, such as the infamous Hungarian posters accusing the billionaire George Soros of being the puppet master of the opposition. Finkelstein died in 2017 but his legacy lives on in a new generation of campaigners. Now, they focus on Greens, who they claim are attempting to reorganise societies in a way that only serves cosmopolitan elites.

A political party’s appeal depends on the extent to which it can reinforce its guiding metaphors

Metaphors can also play a crucial role in winning voters. Their use in politics was described in detail by the cognitive linguist George Lakoff, who argued in the 1990s[2] that voters are influenced by linguistic constructions that are subsumed under two major mental models of politics: first, the conservative model of the “strict father”, which promotes the ideal of a man who is hard-handed when it comes to disciplining his children but who avoids intervention when the child grows into a successful adult (for example, by running a company); second, the progressive model (in his case, American Liberals) of the “nurturant parent”, which builds on the metaphor of cooperative parenting with the aim of helping children fulfil their potential and sheltering them from threats.

Lakoff believes that most human thinking is driven by nonliteral comparisons, and a political party’s appeal depends on the extent to which it can reinforce its guiding metaphors. Currently, conservatives – and especially representatives of the far right – have managed to build strong frames that they can reinforce with their communications. Politicians promising to protect Europe from intruders, fearmongering far-right pundits, and rightwing tech visionaries who argue for a state that responds as fast as a startup demonstrate not only clear similarities to Lakoff’s “strict father” in their verbal constructions but are also very coherent in their messaging (a tendency related to their oversimplified worldview and the confabulatory approach to both identifying problems and proposing solutions).

Progressives also keep making the same mistakes: for decades they have repeated far-right claims (even if with the intent of debunking them), used metaphors from the “strict father” toolkit to convey liberal or leftwing messages, or even borrowed proposals from the far right (for example, in the case of immigration and border control).

The parallel infrastructure

Behind politicians and their vociferous supporters, there is a growing network of far-right knowledge-building, made up of blogs, newspapers, journals, think tanks, and book publishers. Alternative media outlets on which the Right can share its own interpretation of recent developments are mushrooming. In Germany, *Cato*, *Compact* and *Junge Freiheit* are some of the prominent far-right titles available at newsstands. *Compact* was briefly banned this year by the Federal Ministry of Interior for inciting hatred and spreading conspiracy theories, but an administrative court overturned the decision on the grounds of press freedom. The far-right activist Götz Kubitschek ran the think tank Institut für Staatspolitik (Institute for State Policy) – classified as extremist by the federal domestic intelligence agency, which caused it to lose its non-profit status – and operates the Antaios publishing house as well as a blog and a journal titled *Sezession*. Kubitschek is not a member of the AfD – he was found too radical to be admitted – but

has close ties to the extremist wing of the party.

Like British publishing house Arktos and the French Nouvelle Droite, Kubitschek subscribes to the strategy of metapolitics: to use cultural institutions to make one's ideology omnipresent. Inspired by the Left's perceived march through the institutions, certain elements of the Right work hard on extending their knowledge network and fostering an international exchange of ideas. Arktos, for example, published books by Russian fascist thinker Aleksandr Dugin and French white nationalist Renaud Camus.

Meanwhile, Hungary's government exemplifies how state resources are used to create a network that is truly omnipresent and international. After years of media capture and extensive investments in outlets at home and abroad, the state-funded "talent promotion institution" Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) was used as a tool for the cultural expansion of Fidesz ideology: MCC bought most of the book publishing market in Hungary and established a network of think tanks at home and abroad. It brought in a number of highly educated intellectuals and (former) teaching staff of mainstream universities to create the impression of a serious organisation.

The MCC's Brussels office, for example, is headed by Frank Furedi, an emeritus professor at the University of Kent, who actively organises policy discussions in the European capital in order to present its positions on issues such as gender, family, and climate change, as well as the limits of freedom of expression and the interpretation of the farmers' protests. Its employees offer expert commentary and are given a chance to explain their positions in both far-right niche media and certain mainstream outlets. The MCC was also a sponsor of the controversial National Conservatism Conference in Brussels, which featured prominent politicians of the far right, alongside some members of mainstream conservative parties.

What is clear is that progressives cannot go on with business as usual.

The digital environment and its opportunities

As changes to the public sphere prompt increasing numbers of people to get their news from social media rather than established news outlets, it becomes easier to expose large audiences to bigotry and harmful content. While propaganda and disinformation are generally considered the domain of Russia, most incitement, conspiracy theories, and fabricated content come from domestic actors who use social media to build audiences far more effectively than pre-internet generations of extremists and conspiracists were able to do.

There are indications that social media algorithms don't just enable divisive and harmful communication, but incentivise it. They understand that confrontational content sparks more engagement and consequently direct more of that content to users in an effort to keep them on the platform for longer. Given that users can opt to monetise their content and get a cut of the advertising revenues their posts generate, there is even a financial incentive to do so. After the 2016 US elections, a group of North Macedonian teenagers made a small fortune by targeting American audiences with made-up stories and copy-pasted content in favour of Trump on social media.

Social media is an enabling environment not just for fringe political activists and opportunist small entrepreneurs, but also for established far-right parties and Kremlin-funded propagandists. These actors

utilise very similar strategies and spread similar harmful narratives on issues like immigration, Covid-19, EU integration, and the election process. This creates something that resembles a united front, one that is often complemented by tech billionaires, many of whom seem to sympathise with the far right's ideology and see benefits in its (de-)regulatory approaches.

What should be done?

Whether the far right is more skilled in communication than moderate and progressive parts of society is hard to say. It could simply be that technologies such as algorithms are more beneficial to them. What is clear, however, is that progressives cannot go on with business as usual.

Politicians and activists need to be more conscious when designing their messages and stay true to their values. Instead of borrowing watered-down far-right talking points, they should clearly and coherently explain how their proposals can address the real challenges of our times and create more equitable societies. If that means finding a new guiding metaphor, they should start looking for one that best describes their goals and values.

Greens could play a driving role. The destructive effects of climate change are becoming more and more obvious, and inequalities are deepening. Greens have been warning of the problem for decades; it is time that they communicate their proposals loud and clear and without compromises.

Making one's voice heard is a better strategy than attempting to stop people from spreading lies. Far-right communication, even if harmful, is in most cases allowed under laws protecting freedom of expression, and attempts to curtail it could backfire on progressives. Additionally, the deplatforming of individuals or websites has limited effect; actors can easily find alternative channels to distribute their content.

Instead, policy work needs to focus on the tech companies whose technologies, practices, and business models are facilitating the far-right surge. Antitrust and the imposition of meaningful interoperability could help make the market more competitive and allow smaller players to emerge. Big tech will still likely provide the most interesting solutions for those who wish to have a good time on social media, but alternative responsible social media platforms, such as Mastodon, could provide a better forum to discuss issues of public interest. Progressives should increase their presence on these alternative platforms rather than focusing solely on improving their TikTok literacy. At a policy level, encouraging the creation of new platforms with a clear public service mission could help break the monopoly of big tech and leave sufficient space for publicly funded, non-profit, and smaller for-profit alternatives.

Quality journalism would also need a boost, for the importance of professional content creators who guarantee the quality and truthfulness of public interest information cannot be overstated. To make that work, the profession needs to reinvent itself. The journalism industry has already started its search for new business models, many of which can be used to create quality content, but sustainability and scalability are still problematic.

Trust is just as important as quality. Currently, the outlets that can afford to publish well-researched articles are considered too elitist and fail to include the perspectives of underrepresented groups. The authors of *News After Trump* recommend introducing a moral voice into mainstream journalism instead of assuming that the facts will speak for themselves. Such an approach would build on what they call "active objectivity", which takes into account the fact that the reporter or author is actively contributing to the knowledge generated, as facts might be interpreted in different ways by different observers.

Rethinking how journalism is done could both diversify the profession and immunise it against those who wish to undermine it. As a second step, audiences need to support high-quality journalism. Without this, it is close to impossible to maintain a democratic public sphere that can withstand trolling and provocation.

Finally, measures are needed to increase resilience in society. Progressives need to interact with all segments of the population, clearly and comprehensibly. Members of society need to have the skillset to clearly identify what is in their interest and what information they can trust. It will take time to reach this point – and the media is only one vehicle for taking us there. Myriad economic and social factors are driving polarisation in society; only if they are addressed simultaneously is long-term success possible.

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