

Article

Shifting Formations, Formative Infrastructures: Nationalisms and Racisms in Media Circulation

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue departs from elaborating on the issues explored in a project examining right-wing politics and “debates” about racism in Finland. It situates the research gathered in the collection in terms of a shared focus on the disparate networks of organised and opportunistic cultural producers that invest time and labour in the production of racialising and othering discourse and aesthetics, and on the modes and forms of cultural and media production that have, in a relatively short space of time, come to be distributed and adapted across divergent socio-political contexts, and integrated to the situated forms of racism and nationalism given exclusionary force across and within them. It underlines the need to understand the motivated circulation of racializing discourse in the wider context of forms of “postracialism,” and the need for research to move past the paradigm of “hate speech” to get to grips with the significance and impacts of intensively circulated racist “noise.”

Keywords

racism, nationalism, social media, hate speech, postracialism, digital media

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In *The Twittering Machine*, Richard Seymour (2019) invites analysts of digital media and society to recognise that they are writing “early in the evolution of a radically new techno-

political system.” In part, this invitation is designed to transcend, with some finality, the well-trodden story of how the cyber-idealism and techno-utopianism of Internet-driven democratisation became a “cyber-cynicism” revulsed by the seemingly rapid transition to an ecosystem marked by the unstoppable production of disinformation and the proliferating artefacts and sensibilities of a “post-truth” era. To break with such narratives of degeneration, and position ourselves at the boundaries of emergent dynamics and contingent formations, Seymour suggests, involves centering the abruptly—and unevenly—distributed “scripturience” of everyday life; that is, the incessant drive to communicate in and through the social industry’s platforms, “the machine they have created for us to write to” (2019, loc 121). The Twittering Machine, in this understanding, is not only “the infrastructure of fibre-optic cables, database servers, storage systems, software and code,” it is also the “machinery of writers, and writing, and the feedback loop they inhabit.” To take these emerging dynamics seriously, therefore, is to look squarely at the “hyper-productivity of the machine,” the drives it harnesses and the attachments it formats, including the desires shepherded by relentless invitations to discourse and reaction.

In such a purview, it is not surprising that the current digital-political moment has witnessed an explosion of nationalist, supremacist and racist *writing*: ideological exegesis, archival hypertextuality, memetic commentary, fantasy assemblage, news simulation, and the purging promise of death to the enemies of the race or nation are all written to the machine and spun out through its incessant imperatives of production, distribution and circulation. Perhaps, nonetheless, it is something of a surprise that this “postmodern” mesh of transnational circuitries, and the chaotic communicative abundance it produces, proves particularly giving for nationalism, that quintessentially modern, territorialising constellation of forces. Yet, nationalism, as Sivamohan Valluvan notes, “. . . has no inevitable political complexion other than that of its own exclusionary ethno-racial desires,” and thus the “. . . nationalist sway at any given historical moment requires a particular kind of racial Othering that is able to assemble an ideologically disparate collage” (2019) (p. 14). In this aggressively nativist conjuncture, the digital media ecology serves as a transnational laboratory of nationalist assemblage and racial Othering.

This is not, it must immediately be clarified, a *mediacentric* claim. The mediated clamour of ideological exchange, imaginative suturing and affective circulation does not, clearly, determine the globally distributed formation of contemporary racialised nativism. The slow puncture of capitalist implosion, neoliberalism’s determined diminution of the social (Brown 2019) and the horizon of ecological catastrophe have profoundly animated exclusionary desires. And yet, for all the apparent, transnational similarities in authoritarian political expression, there are

significant divergences across contexts that resist summary and synthesis. This tension has led Enzo Traverso, for example, to posit the idea of “postfascism,” that is, a phenomenon in transition that belongs to a “. . . particular regime of historicity—the beginning of the twenty-first century—which explains its erratic, unstable and often contradictory ideological content” (2019) (p. 7).

Nonetheless, to underline the force and intensity of contemporary nationalist and racist expression is to suggest that we cannot understand these formations without the productive force of mediation. The exclusionary energies of the moment, “written to the machine,” do not merely find arenas of expression and representation in the mediascape. They are, in important ways, shaped by and generated within its structures, rhythms, affordances, dynamics and forms. This political, cultural and affective generativity is the focus of this special issue. It pays attention to both “writers”—the disparate networks of organised and opportunistic actors and cultural producers that invest time and labour in the production of racialising and othering discourse and aesthetics—and “writing,” the modes and forms of cultural and media production that have, in a relatively short space of time, come to be distributed and adapted across divergent socio-political contexts, and integrated to the situated forms of racism and nationalism given exclusionary force across and within them.

Across these contexts, research on the proliferation of ultra-nationalist and racializing discourse and activity in and through digital networks has intensified during the last 5 or so years. The general increase in attention may be due, in no small part, to the elevated activity and emboldened presence of extreme right movements in the United States during the period of the Trump Presidency. However, research on the digital enhancement of existing movements, and the ersatz formation of new far-right presences, has flourished beyond the long shadow cast by a president given to periodic, widely-reported flirtations with organised, transatlantic racism (Cohen 2019; see also Udupa et al. 2020).

Concomitantly, the study of the online life of movements has shifted from a predominantly functionalist examination of extremist uses of the Internet (for an overview, see Hale 2012) to an emphasis on the contingent imbrication of situated politics with the techno-sociality of digital networks. In their study of what they term “the digital Golden Dawn,” for example, Siapera and Veikou demonstrate how the eponymous Greek neo-nazi party, in a context of shifting communicative possibilities, antiracist counter-strategies and platform-specific dynamics, could not be approached as a “pre-constituted actor” representing itself online, but must be examined as a “. . . dynamic assemblage of disparate parts. This shifts the focus towards the generative element of the assembling together” (2016) (p. 15).

This special issue does not attempt to gather together studies that can give anything approximating an overview of this fast-moving and politically critical field of research. Rather, it emerges from a specific context, and a particular engagement with the issues thrown up by the acceleration of far-right, mediated interventions in public culture. In Finland, the European borders crisis of 2015-16 precipitated an intensification of a “migration debate” which had been simmering for some years. The unprecedented electoral successes of the radical nationalist Perussuomalaiset (The Finns Party) party in 2011 and 2015 had established the public viability of a calculated racializing politics of immigration. The relative success of this politics was two-fold; agitating to represent non-European “immigrants” as a problem population that could be tied to shifting forms of economic risk and socio-cultural anxiety, but also naturalising the prevalent assumption that racism is a—unacceptable but sometimes understandable—response to human movement and the social change it precipitates, rather than a product of the ethno-national closures historically enacted and continually renewed by modern nation-states. (Keskinen 2011; Mäkinen 2016).

For all this conventional political success, it is important to understand the influence of the Finns party in the context of wider networks of ideological and cultural exchange. The party, in this period, intersected with extreme right groups and a host of shape-shifting “immigration critical” formations online, through key blog sites and social media entanglements. (Hatakka 2017; Horsti and Nikunen 2013) The so-called “refugee crisis” post 2015 precipitated a significant increase in organised and ambient far-right media activity that succeeded in augmenting the focus on refugee reception as a wedge issue. More broadly, it propagated a rolling and roiling “racism debate,” where the expression of hostility to people forced to migrate—often through discourse euphemised as “immigration skepticism”—triggered a recursive consideration of whether and when such discourse could *legitimately* be described as racist. In part this was driven by concerted political contestation by solidarity and anti-racist groups, but was also more diffusely enabled by the form of “postracial” confusion which reduces racist articulation to narrow questions of intentionality and overt prejudice, eliding the wider discursive structures through which people who migrate are racialised as a homogenous, problem population harbouring, as was suggested in this period, socially extrinsic problems of extremism, patriarchy and sexual deviancy.

It was in this context that the research project “Racism and public communication in the hybrid media environment” (Hybra) was established to examine contestation around racism and anti-racism in a context of insurgent far-right activity and intensively mediated public debate. The three editors of this special issue were centrally involved in this project, as reflects our

scholarly and political commitments. At the same time, our central involvement in a funded project on racism, as three white scholars, also reflects racialised disparities in professional research and academia. Central to any meaningful reflection on positionality, in this context, must be a determination not to reproduce those modes of normative argument and theory-building that have been so instrumental in writing the continuing salience of race and racialisation out of the field of Media and Communication Studies (see Chakravartty et al. 2018). Consequently, some of the research gathered in this special issue stems from the project, but most of it emerges from the international project seminars which departed from an emphasis on centering the importance of critical race studies to the historicised understanding of racisms, and cultural and historical context to examinations of digital racism. The research assembled consequently sought out points of international comparison along several thematic lines of comparison.

The first of these is a focus on nationalist and racist social media mobilisation. A key political manifestation in this period was the proliferation of internet-enabled street movements that corresponded with wider European trends. As Castelli Gattinara and Pirro have demonstrated, the 2015–2016 period heralded the emergence of new forms of anti-immigration movements, “. . .engaged in extra-parliamentary activities and hybrid forms of activism” (2018) (p. 272). These hybrid forms of activism were characterised by intensive mediatization, from newly formed anti-immigration groups seeking to “astro-turf” themselves as nothing more than organic responses by ordinary people to a socio-cultural crisis, to political entrepreneurs aiming to carve out the forms of quasi-journalistic “micro-celebrity” that had proven productive, and even lucrative, in other contexts (see Laaksonen et al. 2020).

As Kaarina Nikunen *et al* demonstrate in their Special Issue article, “Affective practice of soldiering: How sharing images is used to spread extremist and racist ethos on Soldiers of Odin Facebook site,” while the logistical value of social media mobilisation to far-right movements is far from secured, it cannot be neglected. The logistical is inseparable from the affective, and the creation of channels or home-bases of exclusionary solidarity and xenophobia on YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp, in particular, nest spaces for community building and shared affective practices. As Nikunen *et al* argue, the emotions and moral values shared in the group are collectively produced and furthered by and within the social media platform infrastructures—a constitutive, processual aspect that contradicts the ways in which expressions of exclusionary nationalism are often naturalised as mere expressions of anxiety and alienation (for discussion see Valluvan 2019).

The importance of sustaining such channels of affective community-building has been

examined across the “radical to extreme” political spectrum, from studies of early supremacist community-building on the world wide web (Ahmed 2004, Back 2002, Bowman-Grieve 2009) to the more recent success and radicalization of various European right wing populist groups such as The Finns in Finland, PiS in Poland, Jobbik in Hungary and ECRE in Estonia (Horsti and Nikunen 2013; Kasekamp et al. 2019; Pytlas 2016; Szabó and Bene 2015). In other words, it did not come as a surprise to see how digital infrastructures were used to round-up and mobilize the human resources needed in the labour of hate. At the same time, the community-building promise of digital media “homebases” must be accompanied by a consideration of how the algorithmically suggestive infrastructure of “frictionless sharing” (van Dijck 2013) keeps the circulation of news, images and messages on the move.

While the imaginary of racialised resentment that drives far-right politics would seem to derive more from digital media’s dynamics of circulation and fragmentation than the collective orientations so central to emancipatory movements, the relation between affective consolidation and ideological sharing is not uncomplicated. Studies of the ephemeral global translocation of the “Soldiers of Odin” brand from Finland, for example, document tensions stemming from the public searchability of Facebook communities, where the public image of the groups as “not racist” street patrols was constantly undermined by the overtly racist material visible, or ferreted out from, their Facebook pages (Ekman 2018; Veilleux-Lepage and Archambault 2017). Nevertheless, in a relentlessly productive digital environment, practices of sharing prefer visibility, brevity and velocity, and these elements are seen to be particularly beneficial to simplifications, ideological binaries, fake news, and fostering affective politics of irony.

As Tina Askanius notes in her Special Issue article “On frogs, monkeys and execution memes: Exploring the humour-hate nexus at the intersection of neo-Nazi and Alt-right movements in Sweden,” the prime artefact of this politics is the meme. If the extreme right and different anti-immigrant groups have been able to “mainstream” nationalist and racist discourse, this success is derived less from the strategic use of logistical possibilities than working with and through the cultural aspects of the digital media ecosystem. On the cultural end, these practices draw on internet cultures of satire and irony, mash-ups and trolling. Older racist imaginaries are freshened up by digital remixes, ambivalence, playfulness and anti-establishment sentiments. Remix culture, with its ethics of ironic distance and humorous disavowal, has been adopted as a space for racist actors to target audiences beyond their mobilised cadres by seeking to widen the space of “acceptable” discourse. In the hybridity of digital media, racist ideas are co-produced by different actors in new informal constellations that we are only beginning to recognise and map.

It was for this reason that the *Hybra* project sought to examine the production of racializing discourse by the far-right not only in a wider media system purview, but also in terms of a broader political-discursive contest around the question of racism in putatively “postracial” societies. In David Theo Goldberg’s understanding, postracialism, while formatted in importantly different ways across the postcolonial and settler societies of the “West,” is more than a prevalent fiction of overcoming, it is a generative political force involving “the restructuring of the conditions of racist expression, and their terms of articulation” (2015) (p. 113). The tension between the continuous political reproduction of racialised exclusions, and the official commitment to anti-racism in western nation-states, produces a dynamic which “. . . increasingly erases or erodes the possibility of identifying racisms and their underpinnings, their structures and implications.” (2015) (p. 88).

In her Special Issue article “When is ‘Racist’ truly applicable? News media’s contribution to the debatability of racism,” Danielle K. Kilgo builds on Titley’s (2019) discussion of the “debatability of racism” to call for attention to how discordant understandings of racism, and the ways in which these understandings circulate in public debate frames focused on adjudicating “what is and what is not racism,” open up space for racist articulation under the sign of racism’s indeterminacy. Kilgo traces this particular mode of productivity through intensive social media interactions generated by the “meta-debate” on the meaning of racism staged in mainstream reporting of particularly egregious comments by Donald Trump. This “debatability” is far more than simply confusion as to a correct, or shared definition of racism. It is a product of, on the one hand, presumed closure as to the “true” sense of racism, defined by its pasts, and the radical openness of digital media circuits, which stage and re-stage controversies and talking points over and over again, signalling as Kilgo argues, that there is still a debate to be had not just on racism’s meaning, but on its existence.

Paying comparable attention to the ways in which the dynamics of circulation have particular effects on how racializing discourses are shaped, Francesca Sobande, in her Special Issue article “Spectacularized online (re)presentations of black people and blackness,” argues that anti-Black racism online is “not the by-product of digital technologies and practices but instead is expressed and enabled in ways inextricably linked to their make-up.” Images of and ideas about Black people are routinely spectacularized online. By drawing connections to anti-black racism, the development of racialized CGI influencers, the sensationalising of Black pain as well as decontextualized and commodified use of images and footage of Black people, Sobande shows that at the core of different forms of anti-Black digital racism is a lingering dismissiveness of the humanity of Black people. And, at the same time, individuals and

institutions not subject to the “weight of race” are, within the same economy of circulation, capitalizing on digital representations of Black people and (mis)using signifiers associated with Blackness. “Blackfishing,” for example, “. . . may be regarded as a type of digital Blackface (and) exemplifies how some non-Black social media users attempt to tap into the profitable online influencer industrial complex by toying with people’s perception of their racial identity, emulating a Black aesthetic, and, potentially, profiting from the commodification and mimicry of Blackness.”

Paying attention to these forms of wider, racializing generativity is critical to understanding the circulation of ideologically motivated modes of racism which we associate with the political far-right. However, as Siapera and Viejo note in their Special Issue article, “Governing hate: Facebook and digital racism,” the narrowing of the permissible meaning of racism in “postracial” contexts is enhanced by the technocratic reduction of racism to the category of hate speech, a move which elides the importance of the structures and power relations at the heart of the digital media environment. In this further flattening out, the responsibility and accountability of social media companies is limited to questions of content management. Facebook’s evasive and reductive stance, in particular, has not just reduced racism to hate speech, but hate speech from a question of ethics, politics and justice to a technical and logistical problem, bad writing in an otherwise functioning machine. Siapera and Viejo argue that Facebook’s individualised post-racial approach works to socialise users to what they call “flexible racism,” that is, racism that is not defined and addressed directly and, therefore, evades moderation.

That this reductive, over-determining approach would characterise the operations of social media corporations is hardly surprising, for as Ariadna Matamoros and Johan Farkas’ Special Issue article “Hate speech and social media: A systematic review and critique” demonstrates, there is still much work to do to integrate multi-faceted understandings of racism to the burgeoning academic literature on digital hate speech, particularly from what they term “critical race perspectives” that “. . . interrogate how race and power are shaped and shape socioeconomic and legal systems and institutions.”

Matamoros and Farkas situate their review in the context outlined at the start of this short introduction, approaching contemporary forms of racism as being not just re-articulated but re-shaped by “proprietary platforms” and thus requiring the field to go “beyond text-based analyses of overt and blatant racist speech, Twitter and the United States and into the realm of wider geographical contexts, platforms, and thorough examinations of how racism on social media is ordinary, everyday, and often mediated visually.” The papers included in this Special

Issue seek to make a modest contribution to that “going beyond,” presenting critical perspectives on shifting formations and intensities of contemporary nationalist and racist expression in the context of the incessant productivity of digital media.

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