

# The meanings of racism: Public discourses about racism in Finnish news media and online discussion forums

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## Abstract

Understandings of racism are produced and circulated in contemporary networked media forms, contributing new opportunities to both extend and challenge racializing discourses, images and frameworks. This study investigated how the concept of *racism* is used in Finnish public debate by employing a computational text analysis technique to derive topics related to racism from a large corpus of news media content and online discussion forum comments. Our findings show that discourses about racism are different in legacy media and online platform regarding both their prominence and framings. While social media produce various discourses of ‘reverse racism’, news media connects racism to historical and international contexts. We conclude that what racism is understood to be is not only an intensely political process but also one shaped by the type of media platform, specificities of Finnish language and national ideological battles.

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## Keywords

News media, racism, social media, topic model

## Introduction

The global significance of the civil rights struggles in the United States, and the influence of North American theoretical and political writing, has ensured that research on the shifting and contested meaning of racism has been predominantly Anglo-American (Murji and Solomos, 2015). There is therefore a pressing need, as Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012) have argued in relation to the Nordic countries, to examine public understandings of racism in societies dominantly imagined as ‘White’ or which have markedly different histories of racialized oppression than countries like the United States or United Kingdom. In response, this article examines public discourses about racism in Finnish legacy news media (i.e. professionally produced journalistic content) and in Finland’s largest online discussion forum, Suomi24 (‘Finland24’), using a combination of topic modelling, an automated textual analysis technique (Blei, 2012), and a qualitative reading of the sample texts.

This article demonstrates the importance of a particular political and media conjuncture, bookended by significant electoral successes for the populist-nationalist party, the Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*), in 2011 and the intense news media focus on asylum seeking in 2015, in shaping societal discourses about the concept of racism. During this period, a racializing politics focused on the presumed problems of immigration was a pronounced issue in the public sphere. This conjuncture was further marked by the integration of digital media into public debates; as a result, understandings of racism have increasingly been circulated and contested in everyday digital media practices (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Titley, 2019). This study aims to contribute to the understanding of distinctive yet inter-related discourses about racism in European contexts. We ask, In which discursive contexts does the term racism appear? What kind of socio-cultural and political-historical references are deployed in discourses about racism? How do uses of the notion of racism differ between news media and online discussion forums, and how did they evolve during the chosen historical context?

## Racism: Political contest and media dynamics

Racism is not a universal category, rather it is a relatively recent term for the hierarchical and differentialist work of race in structuring social relations in colonial modernity (Hesse, 2004). As Sivanandan (1983: 2) stated, it is constantly changing ‘. . . shape, size, contours, purpose, function – with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system, and above all, the challenges, the resistances to that system’. Thus, there can be no general theory of racism, instead the focus of analysis must be the historical specificity of racisms. Scholarship in this vein has examined racism’s contextual articulations in and through particular political ideologies, national imaginaries and forms of representation (Hall et al., 1978; Virdee, 2014).

This theoretical complexity contrasts with dominant public understandings of racism that foreground meanings associated with the past – with blatantly racist regimes– while downplaying its banal or more complex expressions (Hesse, 2004; Lentin, 2016). In Western nation-states with an official commitment to opposing discrimination and racially motivated hatred, racism is typically restricted to the political ‘extremes’ and to instances of hateful actions and words of aberrant individuals: ‘racists’ (Ahmed, 2012; Augoustinos and Every, 2010). These tensions between socio-political effects and limited public understandings fuel debates over the meaning of racism in public culture. The historical weight the term carries in public usage ensures its interpretation as an ‘accusation’ (Ahmed, 2012; Doane, 2006). Consequently, many contemporary public cultures are marked by mediated scandals over racism: ‘careless’ political remarks, racist verbal and physical attacks, and the subsequent contest over the extent to which they actually constitute racism are recurrently the subject of media coverage (Herkman and Matikainen, 2019; Titley, 2019). Such coverage shapes how the public views racism and contributes to its conceptual ambiguity by treating it as a personal moral transgression (Hesse, 2004: 10; Moore and Greenland, 2018).

These discursive investments in what constitutes racism are extended under the intensive communication conditions of digital media culture. The literature shows that social media are ambivalent; while they support the development of anti-racist publics, their political economy and platform affordances simultaneously extend the circulation of racist repertoires (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017; Sharma, 2013). While overt racist expressions are unlikely to occur in mainstream Western public debate, including legacy news media discourse, because of strong social norms and repercussions (Lentin, 2016), digital platforms have become home for the expression of ‘old racism’, that is, explicit racist expressions based on cultural and biological essentialism (e.g. Cisneros and Nakayama, 2015).

Song’s (2014) examination of what she termed a ‘culture of racial equivalence’ in the United Kingdom explored the process by which the concept of racism is gradually becoming less valid. While Song is concerned with specific British controversies, her wider argument is of salience here. She notes that public understandings of racism, shaped by the formats and accelerated pace of communication in social media, are ‘. . . often highly imprecise, broad, and used to describe a wide range of racialized phenomena’. Consequently, there is a ‘. . . growing tendency in Britain to regard almost any form of racial statement, made by anyone (of any hue), as automatically, and indiscriminately, “racist”’ (Song, 2014: 109). Furthermore, this equivalence is secured through a proliferation of mediated assertions of ‘reverse racism’ – that is, of a discursive tactic designed to extract the consideration of racism from a system of power and reduce it to a prejudice that anyone can have. For Song (2014: 107), the consequences of this conceptual ambiguity are serious, as the idea of racism is stripped of its ‘historical basis, severity and power’, and in the production of equivalence, racialized experiences are silenced.

## Racism and immigration in Finland

In the Finnish language, ‘racism’ is a relatively recent loanword from English, adopted in the late 1960s (Maamies, 1996). Consequently, the Finnish term, *rasismi*, does not

directly connect to the term *race* in the minds of Finnish speakers (in contrast to the term *rotusorto*, or race oppression, which was used in public discourse in the 1960s and 1970s). The term racism was popularized in Finland in the 1980s and 1990s, when, following the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans, it was used to name and contest the discrimination faced by racialized new migrants in Finland (Puuronen, 2011). In a historical perspective, immigration and asylum seeking in Finland have been a limited and relatively recent phenomenon in comparison to other European and Nordic countries. Between 1990 and 2017, the share of people with foreign background in Finland's population has risen from 0.8% to 6.5%. In 2015, a record number of 32,477 people sought asylum in Finland. Before 2015, the number of asylum seekers was relatively stable (3000–4000 asylum seekers yearly).

Yet, the popular narrative of a White, homogeneous nation-state dismisses the historical presence of different minorities in Finland, as well as its undeniable history of and struggle against racism (Seikkula, 2019). Similar to other European countries, racism in Finnish society has typically been discussed in the context of immigration. As Rastas (2009) notes, this situates racism as a consequence of human movement and resultant 'multiculturalism', rather than as a production of the ethno-political form of the nation-state and European colonialism (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; Keskinen et al., 2009). Thus, not unlike in other European contexts (e.g. Boulila, 2019; Hoving and Essed, 2014), there is a gap between official discourses of equality, non-discrimination and anti-racism, promoted through the welfare state, and research that has documented racism as an integral element of the everyday lives of racialized minorities in Finland (e.g. Rastas, 2005).

This study was particularly concerned with the parliamentary success of the nationalist Finns Party in the 2011 and 2015 elections, together with the increased popularity of social media, which have ensured that racism and hate speech have remained in the spotlight in public debates (Nikunen, 2016). For example, several elected party members have been found guilty of 'agitation against an ethnic group' – a crime under the Finnish criminal code – for using racist language in their social media comments. More broadly, the confluence of the global economic crisis and the dramatic increase in asylum seekers in 2015 have encouraged the rhetorical positioning of 'migrants' as a security risk, economic burden and obstacle to socio-cultural cohesion (Keskinen, 2016). However, the intensity of public reaction should not be underplayed; anti-immigration arguments have provoked demands to publicly condemn racism, and emergent anti-racist groups have contested the ways in which racism is constructed in political and media discourse.

## Methods

Data science methods offer a 'bird's eye view' on the discursive patterns and contexts surrounding the concept of racism in a specific political and media conjuncture. We opted to apply topic modelling with latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) (Blei, 2012), which is increasingly being used in social sciences and humanities to study textual data (e.g. Jacobi et al., 2016). Unsupervised topic modelling like this can reveal thematic structures in large text corpora without any a priori classification of the studied phenomenon.

**Table 1.** The five largest sources of data from the news media and Suomi24.

News outlet	Count	Suomi24 subforums/subgroups	Count
<i>Aamulehti</i> , the second-largest daily circulation newspaper	781	Society/Daily News (day-to-day news both in Finland and internationally)	25,322
YLE, public broadcaster	751	Society/Racism (causes and problems of racism)	18,502
<i>Keskisuomalainen</i> , the largest newspaper in central Finland	624	Society/Politics > Political parties > The Finns Party	7804
<i>Iltalehti</i> , the third-largest newspaper in Finland (tabloid)	521	Society/Politics > Political parties > Swedish People's Party of Finland	7310
YLE news in Swedish	508	Localities/North Karelia > Lieska (Local discussion group for Lieska, a small town in Eastern Finland)	5722
Total news media data	5262	Total Suomi24 data	113,410

### Data collection

The data were selected from all news media content (news, columns, etc.) produced by Finnish institutional news media organizations and Suomi24 posts between 2011 and 2015 which contained the word 'racism' (in its stemmed Finnish forms, *rasism-*, *rasist-*). The news media data set<sup>1</sup> was selected from various national and regional newspapers based on their circulation. It includes articles from the leading national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, major regional and local newspapers (e.g. *Aamulehti*, *Turun Sanomat*, *Keskisuomalainen*, *Kaleva*, *Lapin Kansa*, *Savon Sanomat*), the popular tabloid *Iltalehti*, as well as the online news of the public broadcaster YLE. The total number of items in the news dataset was 5262, accounting for about 0.25% of the total number of items. Table 1 summarizes our largest data sources from the news media and the Suomi24 discussion forum.

We chose the discussion forum Suomi24 as our online data source, as it is one of the largest non-English discussion forums in Europe. However, we do not claim that the Suomi24 database is representative of Finnish social media discussions more generally. Suomi24 is a large open-access corpus on which over two billion posts have been released, comprising all discussions over its entire history (Lagus et al., 2016). The form allows participants to write messages anonymously. Due to its size, the forum can be considered a significant platform in the Finnish social mediascape, although its user base is now slowly declining and moving to other platforms. The keyword search identified 113,410 posts during the study period, which accounts for approximately 0.5% of the total post volume. Suomi24 is divided into 23 main subforums, under headings such as 'Society', which includes a large number of subgroups (for instance, 'Immigration') hosting a wide variety of discussions. Discussions relating to controversial topics such as immigration have a reputation for leaning towards incivility. Most popular topics, however, deal with a profoundly 'human' issues, such as grief, death, love, religion and loneliness (Lagus et al., 2016). A survey showed that middle-aged males comprise the

largest user group on Suomi24 (Harju, 2018). Importantly, users see Suomi24 as representing ‘the people’, providing an alternative forum for citizens’ voices that go unheard in the legacy media (Harju, 2018).

### *Data analysis*

Topic models produce themes (‘topics’) from the data without making assumptions about what the topics are. Rather, the models look for co-occurrences of words in the corpus, assigning words to a particular topic and documents to topics in an iterative fashion. Furthermore, the models also reveal the proportion of each topic in the documents; a document belongs to all topics, but a topic-per-document probability reveals its proportion: these posterior values range from 0 to 1 so that, in total, per document, they sum to 1.

In topic modelling, pre-processing unstructured text data are crucial to increasing reliability and making a valid interpretation of the topic (Maier et al., 2018). We proceeded by lemmatizing the content, removing stop-words and, finally, applying relative pruning to remove both rare and very frequent words (Denny and Spirling, 2018). Next, we created a common corpus consisting of both the news content and discussion forum content. While the style of language in Suomi24 is highly informal, the key components in computational text analysis – words – are similar in the lemmatized form of these two data sources. The combined corpus approach allowed us to compare and contrast the differences between the media sources.

Choosing the right number of topics is a key challenge in topic models (see Maier et al., 2018). To choose the statistically best fit to the data, we utilized harmonic log-likelihood measurements. Changing the number of topics from 2 to 300 to explore the best fit resulted in 86 topics. It has been well established that topics require researchers’ identification and interpretation to make them meaningful for the study and to relate them to existing research (e.g. Jacobi et al., 2016). To exclude incoherent topics, two researchers reviewed all the topic sheets and independently evaluated which topics should be included for the final labelling step. We examined topics through the 20 top-words shown to produce the most accurate labels (Towne et al., 2016) and removed non-meaningful topics, such as those containing profane Finnish words or foreign language words. To further validate and label the topics, we examined a random sample of 20 of the 200 highest posterior value documents from the news media and Suomi24 data to determine whether their topics were semantically coherent (1600 items in total). In this phase of qualitative reading, topics that were not connected to the discussion of racism or did not have coherent meaning were also discarded. Based on these steps, 51 topics were selected for further analysis.

We then organized the remaining manually validated and labelled topics into higher-order categories to show the overall discursive contexts in which the term racism was used in Finnish media. In the next phase, we examined the differences in proportion of use of each topic in the datasets: We computed the posterior values for each topic (i.e. the proportion document belongs to each topic), removing all relationships with a low posterior value of 0.1. Subsequently, we sought to determine whether differences existed in the proportions of topics utilizing a standard  $\chi^2$  test. Analysing proportions allowed us to explore differences in salience between news media and Suomi24 datasets, despite the

**Table 2.** Topic categories and individual topics.

Main category	Topics
Populist politics	Political ideologies; political parties and racism; populism; the Finns Party
Immigration	Fake news; patriotism; critique of multiculturalism; critique of legacy media Journalism; accusations of racism; reception centres; asylum seekers; The economic impact of migration; abuse of social benefits
Minorities in Finland	Mandatory Swedish in Finnish schools; Swedish-speaking minority; Roma; Sami
Crime	Migrants' crime; racism as a crime; increase of crime; court sentences
Discrimination	Social security; job market; education; personal relationships
Religion	Religion
Online discussion	Online discussion
Anti-racism	Anti-racism actors; anti-racism action; immigration research
Cultural reviews	Cultural reviews
International context	Anti-semitism; racism in foreign countries
Race and racism	Race and skin colour; definitions of racism; evolution and race; prejudice
Sports	Sports
Extremist movements	Extremist movements

differences in the size of the datasets.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, by summing the posterior value of thematic categories for each document, we computed the average posterior value of each category over time to understand its salience. The visuals were created using smoothed values of these averages to focus on overall trends.

## Findings

The focus in the subsequent analysis was to examine the discursive contexts in which the term racism was used in Finnish news media and online discussion forums. First, we describe the topic categories, including illustrations from the data. Next, we compare the salience of topic categories in the news media and discussion forum, and then analyse how the categories evolved over the selected 5-year period.

Our analysis yielded 13 different categories (see Table 2). It is important to note that the categories often overlapped. For instance, the category *Crime* overlapped with the *Immigration* category due to the strong focus on crimes purportedly committed by asylum seekers or those with an immigrant background. Some categories were more prominent than others: The categories that received the most attention on Suomi24 – *Populist politics*, *Immigration*, *Minorities in Finland*, *Crime* and *Discrimination* – were also the largest categories in the whole dataset due to the large amount of Suomi24 data. Importantly, except for *Populist politics*, the largest categories were different in the news data (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Distribution of categories in news media and Suomi24 (%).

	News media	Suomi24
Populist politics	17.74	14.76
Immigration	5.13	13.91
Minorities in Finland	3.59	13.25
Crime	4.19	10.52
Discrimination	4.84	9.99
Online discussion	0.42	9.28
Religion	0.83	8.81
Anti-racism	6.02	6.79
Cultural reviews	24.93	0.65
International context	12.73	3.62
Race and racism	1.37	5.63
Sports	15.53	0.97
Extremist movements	2.68	1.81
Sum	100	99.99

### Topic categories

The most prevalent category in the datasets was *Populist politics*, named as such because of its overall focus on the Finns Party. Some topics within this category were shared by the news media and Suomi24. However, they were discussed from different angles. For instance, in the news media, the topic ‘political ideologies’ centres on the history and rise of populist movements and the far-right in Europe, and racism is discussed as a driving force behind the rise of extremist movements. On Suomi24, the rise of populist movements is connected to representing the voice of the people:

Soini [ex-leader of the Finns Party] thinks that linking right-wing populism to racism and xenophobia is a too simple explanation. According to him, the success of Jörg Haider’s party in Austria and Carl Hagen’s Progress Party in Norway is not due to their xenophobia or right extremism but because of their ability to speak the language of the people.

The topic ‘political parties and racism’, also found in both news media and Suomi24 data, concerns the relationship between political parties and racism in Finland. In news articles, other Finnish political parties and politicians are frequently contrasted with the Finns Party:

In his speech, Arhinmäki [left-wing politician] chastised the Finns Party members, even if not mentioning the target directly. Arhinmäki declared his party to be a workers’ party without racism. Soini had defined the Finns Party as a workers’ party without socialism. – I visit often suburbs and shopping malls. There you see how wrong information and racist propaganda are fed, Arhinmäki said. The climate has changed according to Arhinmäki. – I’m very worried when even at the parliamentary level statements demeaning to minorities are uttered under the pretext of joke. (*Aamulehti*, 21 November 2011)



The other topics in this category explicitly focus on the relationship between the Finns Party and racism. The discussions on both Suomi24 and the news media mainly concern racist remarks made by party members, and other politicians' reactions to them, particularly then-party leader Timo Soini's evasive stance towards public accusations of racism. The key message was that if the Finns Party did not follow the government's anti-racism programme, other parties could not collaborate with it, as an example from Suomi24 illustrates: 'Several members of the parliament have demanded Soini to keep his word and make now a final break with the party's extreme nationalist and racist wing'.

The category of *Immigration* contains several topics that regularly feature in global anti-immigration discourse, such as immigration as an economic or security threat, or 'bogus' asylum seekers abusing 'our' welfare system. In this category, the freedom of speech discourse was used to deny or transform what is considered racism. According to this view, mainstream discourse, constrained by political correctness, constructs the label 'racist' or charges of 'racism' as rhetorical weapons to prevent 'immigration-critical' views. The concept of 'immigration-critical' (as an alternative to 'anti-immigration') was launched in the late 2000s in Finland by the rising right-wing, anti-immigration movement to argue that anti-immigration views were not racist but instead based on realistic economic and social assessments (Nikunen, 2016). The strategy of reversing the victim-oppressor position and racism, typical to populist right-wing rhetoric (Van Dijk, 1993), is highly prominent in this category. Accordingly, this category's topics are often organized around enemies of patriotic, 'immigration-critical' people. Among these 'insider enemies' are 'liberals' who do not tolerate different opinions and journalists who are defined as 'racists' on Suomi24 because their reporting is seen as sympathetic towards immigrants at the expense of the Finnish people.

The category *Minorities in Finland* focused, unexpectedly, on the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (comprising 5.3% of the population), while also containing topics concerning the Sami and Roma minorities. On Suomi24, the Swedish-speaking minority is typically referred to as a 'racist' power that oppresses Finnish-speaking Finns. We should mention here that Finland was part of Sweden from 1320 to 1809. This period of Swedish rule has heavily impacted contemporary Finnish culture; for instance, the Swedish language is a compulsory subject at comprehensive schools and universities. This constitutional bilingualism has been a topic of ideological confrontations historically, and here the idea of racism was used to reinforce arguments against compulsory Swedish language teaching. In this category, it is particularly interesting how terms related to historical oppression systems (e.g. slavery, apartheid) are translated to the Finnish context as moral intensifiers in the debate.

While in the category of *Immigration*, Finns are positioned as victims of migrants and their liberal defenders, in the *Minorities* category, a different ideological struggle is apparent, in which Finnish-speaking Finns are positioned as racialized others. Individual topics within this category represent different perspectives on this victimized collective identity. The first topic concerns what is commonly called 'language racism' (*kielirasismi*) on Suomi24 and involves Swedish as a mandatory and official language in Finland. The second topic concerns the Swedish People's Party's (RKP – an 'ethnoregionalist language party' representing the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority) perceived 'racist

history'. The discussion frequently refers to the leading ideologue of the Swedish-language nationalist movement in Finland in the end of the 1800s and the 'founding father' of the party, Axel Olof Freudenthal (1836–1911). Drawing on the racialized hierarchies of the time, Freudenthal argued that the Finnish-speaking part of the population – considered as non-White and non-European – was inferior to their Swedish-speaking counterparts, a view commonly shared in Nordic race science. It was reasoned on Suomi24 that because of this historical connection, RKP is both racist and complicit in treating the Finnish-speaking population as an inferior 'slave race' incapable of constructing their own culture. Thus, the Finnish-speaking population is claimed to be subject to what is called 'race racism' (*roturasismi*) by the Swedish-speaking political elite, with the notion 'race racism' highlighting the awkward relationship between 'racism' and 'race' in the Finnish language. The third topic has a wider focus on the hegemony of the Swedish-speaking minority and the 'apartheid politics' practices of the RKP.

The category of *Discrimination* illustrates the extension and dilution of the term racism in Finnish public discourse. This category comprises discussions on various forms of discrimination: 'age racism' (*ikärasismi*), 'obesity racism' (*lihavuusrasismi*), 'ugliness racism' (*rumuusrasismi*) and 'health racism' (*terveysrasismi*), among others. In contrast, the *Anti-racism* category constructs a more precise understanding of racism based on processes of racialization and racial discrimination. In news media, this category comprises discussions not only about various anti-racist campaigns, events, awards and statements but also about personal experiences of racism motivating the anti-racism programme. A great deal of attention is given to the Finnish Red Cross (FRC), because anti-racism work in Finland is essentially organized by non-governmental organizations. Discussions focus on social action coordinated by the FRC, such as the yearly award of the title of 'Unprejudiced Pioneer' to people and organizations who promote equality in Finnish society.

15-year old Rebecka Holm was awarded for her bold anti-racism writing. According to Holm, racism is visible in public transportation, among other places. The letter to the editor Holm wrote in January has generated wide discussions about the racism immigrants encounter. – The Unprejudiced Pioneer title came as a happy surprise to Holm. As it is, she has succeeded in turning the racism she has personally experienced to victory. – I encounter racism perhaps a few times a month. It is enough to make me sad and angry but I turn those feelings into positive energy. (YLE, 21 March 2012)

On Suomi24, the *Anti-racism* category focuses on criticism of the 'immigration business' and 'immigration lobby' (including racism researchers), in particular on the money spent on various immigration and anti-racism-related projects and organizations. While Suomi24 typically offers a negative view on immigration or anti-racism, the *Anti-racism* category also includes comments which defend the FRC 'against Finnish racists'.

Other categories consisted of a single or a few topics. For example, the category *Sports* concerned various expressions of racism in sports, focusing on newsworthy 'racism scandals' in football and ice hockey leagues, condemning racism in all its manifestations, such as 'stadium racism' (*katsomorasismi*). The category of *International context* addressed the historical backgrounds and current expressions of racism in foreign contexts: for

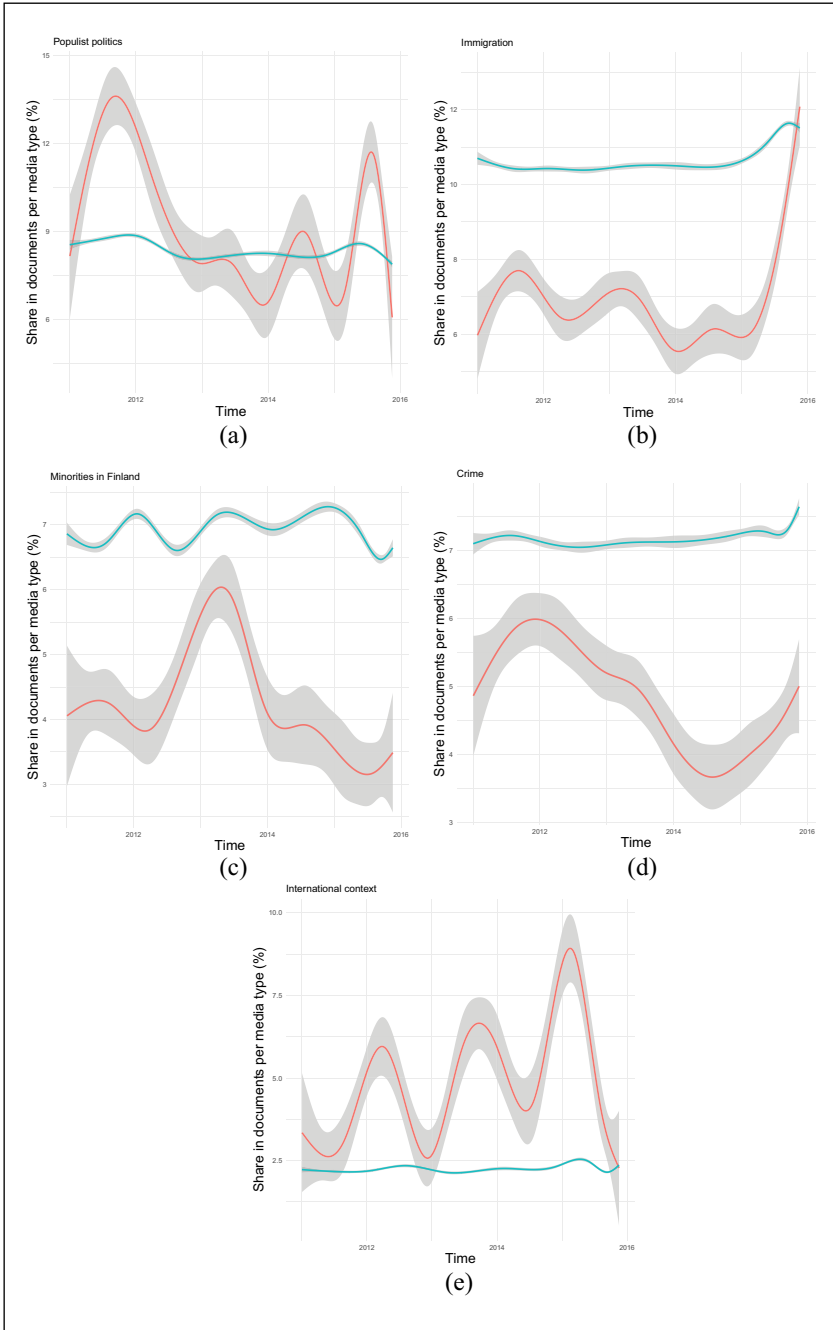
example, the rise of racism in Greece with the popularity of the right-wing party Golden Dawn and the rise of right-wing racist violence and racism within US law enforcement. In the Finnish context, the rise of far-right movements was discussed under the minor category of *Extremist movements*. Among the smallest categories, *Race and racism* included a ‘meta-discussion’ about definitions of racism (the relationship between prejudice and racism), reflections on what constitutes racism – is it, for instance, racist to use terms such as ‘negro’ or ‘dark skinned’ – and a discussion about evolution and the relationship between race and intelligence. In addition to these categories, we included two others which did not directly deal with racism but nevertheless formed a coherent discursive context in which the term was mentioned. The *Cultural reviews* category consisted of reviews of movies, novels and other cultural products which mentioned the word ‘racism’. Similarly, the category of *Online discussion* did not directly discuss racism but referred to it in the rules of the discussion board, which banned racist comments.

### *Differences between the news media and Suomi24*

Our findings show that public discourse about racism varied considerably across media platforms (see Table 3). The distribution of categories was not similar between Suomi24 and news media at a statistically significant level ( $\chi^2=2019.9$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Moreover, some categories (*Cultural reviews*, *Sports* and *International context*) were prominent only in news data, partly because they represented specific news genres. Similarly, categories almost exclusively featured on Suomi24 either related to online-specific issues, such as the rules and moderation of online discussion, or were concerned with more controversial issues (such as the topic of Swedish language in the category of *Minorities*). While the news media addressed racism from a historical and international perspective, online discussion was limited to national/local and present contexts.

Our qualitative interpretation shows that even when a topic was found in both platforms, the perspectives were different. For example, the topic of ‘anti-semitism’ within the *International context* category related to the Israel–Palestine conflict both on Suomi24 and in the news media; but while in the news the conflict was discussed in terms of the Israeli government’s apartheid policy and racism against Palestinians, discussions on Suomi24 focused on the racism and anti-semitism inherent in Islam. On Suomi24, the *Immigration* and *Crime* categories were dominated by a discourse of risk and fear, reflecting what international scholarship has shown to be pronounced in public discourse about asylum seekers in this period. On Suomi24, discussions were mainly concerned with the increase in crime – rape in particular – committed by asylum seekers and immigrants. In the news media, in contrast, asylum seekers were considered at risk of violence in the receiving country.

In addition to differences in distribution, the temporal salience of categories differed between the news media and the online forum.<sup>3</sup> We found, first, that the salience of a category strongly fluctuated in the news media, expectably driven by newsworthy events, such as mediated racism scandals, but a similar trend was not visible in the discussion forum. For instance, the category of *Populist politics* (Figure 1a) peaked in 2011 when the populist Finns Party won, for the first time, a landslide victory in the parliamentary election, and again in 2015 following the party’s victory in the parliamentary election.



**Figures 1.** Salience of categories over time (blue, Suomi24; red, news media): (a) populist politics, (b) immigration, (c) minorities in Finland, (d) crime and (e) international context.

Racism as a discussion topic was more visible during election campaigning, as traditional political parties reacted to the Finns Party's anti-immigration discourses by differentiating themselves from the latter's anti-liberal, anti-democratic ideas; this development was keenly covered by the news media.

Second, some categories starkly increased in 2015. Not surprisingly, the *Immigration* category peaked in the news data in 2015 because of dramatically increased attention to the refugee situation, including increased coverage of growing racism and xenophobia towards refugees in Europe (Figure 1b). In contrast, on Suomi24, *Immigration* was by far the most prominent category during the whole period studied (together with the *Minorities* and *Crime* categories, see Figure 1c and 1d), although there was also a noticeable increase in volume, mainly due to the establishment of reception centres in different localities and the subsequent increase in references to racism in local discussion subgroups. Similarly, in the category of International context, discussions about racism became more prominent in the news media during the first half of 2015 because of the coverage of right-wing movements and violence around the world (Figure 1e).

The temporal analysis shows a lack of transfer of salience between the news media and Suomi24 discussions: This finding further illustrates core differences in public discourses about racism in legacy media and popular discussion forum. An exception to this pattern were surging discussions caused by an external society-level 'shock', namely, the 'refugee crisis', which peaked in 2015 (Figure 1b) in both mainstream media and the discussion platform. However, no clear relationship beyond this peak was observed. Thus, we conclude that discourses about racism are highly specific to the media platforms on which different publics engage in defining racism. The sheer volume of and the stable attention to discussions about racism on Suomi24, and its persistent linking to immigration, illustrates the discursive and affective investment in debate on what constitutes racism, a situation also influenced by the various nationalist movements' strategic use of Internet-based platforms to contest, deny and reverse racism.

## Conclusion and discussion

Departing from previous, predominantly qualitative research on the reproduction of racist discourses in media, we mapped macro-level discursive contexts in which racism is discussed in Finnish news media and popular online discussion forum by using topic modelling. Topic modelling does not substitute for a close reading of texts, but it does allow for the exploration of large amounts of text data and thus offers a broad view of discourses about racism in the public sphere. However, as our social media data were limited to one discussion board characterized by anti-liberal and anti-elitist voices, the diversity of online political debate was under-represented. As the literature has established, there is a constant discursive struggle over the meaning of racism and how it is applied to social relations (Doane, 2006; Titley, 2019). In this article, we aimed to emphasize the socio-political and communicative context in which this struggle occurs. Discourses about racism are not necessarily similar between European societies with different histories of racism and colonialism; therefore, studying these differences is crucial to understanding and challenging local expressions of racism (Salem and Thompson, 2016).

It is not surprising that *Populists politics*, *Immigration* and *Minorities* emerged as the largest categories in the online forum, since this reflects the contemporary socio-historical climate characterized by the rise of the nationalist, anti-immigration Finns Party and the concomitant heightened debate over immigration. However, the combination of computational analysis and qualitative reading showed that different topic categories have not only different prominences and distributions over time but are also framed differently on online forums and legacy news media. While the stable prominence of the *Immigration* category on Suomi24 testifies to the topic's continuous inclusion in public disputes about racism, in the news media, the category only surged in 2015 as journalists sought to understand growing racist rhetoric in Europe and Finland. On the contrary, the peaks in the category of *Populist politics* in the news media correspond to parliamentary elections, in which racism was discussed within the realm of populist or far-right rhetoric and was dissociated from other political parties and Finnish society. That discourses about racism in the news media are also driven by the newsworthiness of personal moral transgressions, what Moore and Greenland (2018) called 'racism scandals', is most visible in the prominent topic of *Sports*.

Different topics, and different viewpoints on the same topic, reflect the force by which social media platforms can challenge the agenda setting and framing of the legacy media (e.g. Guggenheim et al., 2015). Clearly, they also reflect the ideological polarization between professional journalists who aim to speak for the public and Suomi24 users who feel they represent the 'ordinary' voice. Research on European racism has claimed that dominant discourses miss the connection between present racism and the history of colonization, slavery and anti-semitism (Hoving and Essed, 2014; Song, 2014). In the Finnish news media, racism is addressed in relation to its historical basis and is discussed as a serious social problem, although predominantly in international contexts. What is not present are explicit discussions of racism as a system of structural inequality in Finland, embedded, for instance, in hardening immigration policies in the 2010s. Local expressions of racism, including individual stories about experiences of racism by people of colour in Finland, are addressed in the context of anti-racist campaigns, reflecting journalistic ideals of pursuing social justice and countering racist discourses (Pantti and Ojala, 2018). In contrast, on the discussion forum, the notion of racism is both de-historicized and re-historicized by broadening its meaning through claims of reverse racism and through the production of neologisms. The different ways in which racism is discussed and framed in news media and popular discussion forums demonstrate that despite the current 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013), these realms maintain and provide their own specific discursive arenas and mobilize different political actors.

Our study highlights also the importance of the specificity of the Finnish language and national political ideologies in shaping meanings of racism. The former is seen in the dilution of its meaning on the discussion forum, where the term is used to refer to a wide variety of biases, negative attitudes or discriminatory behaviours. On Suomi24, the active production of neologisms functions to broaden the notion of racism by dismissing its relation to racialization. However, some noun compounds – 'age racism' in particular – also appear in the news media data. This dynamic dilution of the concept of racism on Suomi24 may happen partly because of ignorance or indifference to its original meaning, but it must also be seen as a specific political strategy to question and deny the racism experienced by racialized minorities.

Conceptualizing racism is an intensely political process, and our study shows the ease with which ‘reverse racism’ logics noted by Song (2014) can be integrated into discourses about Finnish history and society. On Suomi24, racism is discussed in terms of familiar, transnational repertoires of ‘white victimhood’, translated into Finnish social relations. The notion of racism, and related concepts referring to the historical oppression of people of colour (slavery, apartheid), are hijacked by nationalist, anti-immigration voices to produce class-based counter-narratives and to energize old social conflicts in Finland. ‘Ordinary’ Finnish people are constructed as the victims of the ‘racism’ of the Swedish-speaking minority, of the undeserving immigrant recipients of ‘our’ resources, and of the various defenders of multiculturalism (cf. Pöyhönen and Saarinen, 2015).

The category of *Immigration* is an obvious location for discourses about reverse racism on Suomi24, illustrating what other studies have shown to be particularly pronounced in contemporary public discourse: the idea of racism as a rhetorical weapon designed to silence common sense social criticism and limit freedom of speech (e.g. Moore and Greenland, 2018). The emergence of reverse racism is enabled through the platform affordances that follow similar peer-policing practices as many social media platforms (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017) and gather together a particular user-community who voice support for anti-immigrant movement and identify themselves as victims. Platform affordances facilitate the formation of a particular interpretative community connected with and supported by the political climate and wider cultural (mis)understandings of racism. In exploring the conceptual expansion of racism, Song (2014) assigned a particular form of causal agency to social media, arguing that it leads to imprecise understandings of racism. We did not evaluate online discourse under the assumption that stable public understandings could emerge. Instead, we examined the unstable nature of these understandings as a formative dimension of public discourses about racism. What racism is understood to be and to what ideological or political ends the notion is used are strongly shaped by media platforms on which different actors engage in defining racism, as well as the concept’s construction through linguistic choices and integration into national ideological struggles.


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### Notes

1. The data were collected from article databases or websites of major publishing companies. The dataset is a representative but incomplete sample of the Finnish news media content.
2. We did not use a per-topic examination of proportional differences, because this approach would have led to several significance tests, which may have in turn increased the likelihood

of a false positive. While Bernoulli corrections could have been used to address this, the challenge with large data samples is that even small, non-effective differences can become significant and distort the findings.

3. Since both the news media and discussion forum datasets are computed separately, the average share over time, as illustrated in the line graphs, is not influenced by the difference in the sample sizes.

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