



The normalization of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism: discursive practices in media, journalism and the wider public sphere/s

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Abstract

This article postulates broadening as well as deepening the agenda for critical research on the role of discursive practices in media, journalism and the wider public sphere/s in normalization of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism. Our argument is that, on the rise since the early 2000s and especially from the 2010s onwards, authoritarian and nativist populism has posed some very significant challenges to contemporary media and journalism. This has made necessary the calls for in-depth, critical discussions about the norms and practices of journalism as well as for the systematic analyses of the sometimes obviously active role that news and opinion discourse have played in normalizing the nativist as well as radically-nationalist and authoritarian status quo. Through a set of empirically-based studies which outline how media carry as well as normalize far-right political and other discourse and ideology, but also how they become the tool and the target of far-right politics, we show that the entanglement between far-right ideas and actions on the one hand, and media and journalism on the other, has become ever stronger as well as ever more complex. At the same time, we also point to the practices in the wider public spheres where, inter alia, the pervasive presence of alternative far-right media and uncivil society and its news sources has posed wider and indeed numerous challenges. These have become evident in the ongoing radicalization of both online/offline media and journalism and of wider public opinion and imagination wherein the normalization of undermining of values and norms of liberal democracy has become increasingly prevalent and widespread.

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Keywords

Media, journalism, far-right, normalization, mainstreaming, discourse, liberal democracy

Introduction

Given the recent, transnational upsurge of far-right populism, nativist authoritarianism and the wider set of far right discourses, ideologies and political groups (see, *inter alia*, Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2015), we have seen a large volume of scholarship addressing a variety of questions concerning socio-political, politico-economic and other ontologies and roots as well as formats and variants of political movements comprising the current, global ‘wave’ of what, sometimes perhaps too cumulatively, has been termed as ‘populism’ (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). At the same time, a huge volume of works and indeed even several wider, noticeable trends have also been developed, mainly with the aim of explaining the logics and trajectories of recent far-right populist dynamics and its short- and long-impact on not only politics but also wider society, economy and/or culture (see e.g. Salo and Rydgren, 2021).

Of those many tendencies in research on the far right populism of late, especially one trend looking into so-called ‘mainstreaming’ (Hainsworth, 2000; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Odmalm and Hepburn, 2017; Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019) or ‘normalization’ (Kallis, 2021; Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2018b; Krzyżanowski et al., 2021; Krzyżanowski et al., 2022; Krzyżanowski, 2020a, 2020b; Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2020) of the far right has clearly been standing out for a number of reasons. Notably, rather than explaining – as has usually been the case in ‘populism’ studies looking at where the far-right comes from or how it is comparatively similar or different in various contexts – work on its normalization/mainstreaming has aimed to address the huge complexity of the historical and contemporary global/regional/local conditioning of the far right’s growing acceptance in European and global societies and political spheres of the early 21st century. Its other, yet somewhat corresponding, distinctive feature has also been that, going beyond the realm of political theory/analysis, this trend has been characterized by an exceptionally interdisciplinary scholarship including qualitative and critical social as well as discourse research (see, in particular, Krzyżanowski, 2020a; Wodak, 2020).

It seems, however, that while the work on normalization/mainstreaming of the far-right has been performed from a number of disciplinary standpoints and considerations and has focused on a number of, in particular, national contexts, it has to date mainly been preoccupied with political discourses, logics and processes. These were mainly related to the far right’s ‘march to the mainstream’, most obvious in right wing populism’s parliamentary successes and public performances. Therein, the key focus has been especially on the party-political dynamics conditioned by the mainstreaming/normalization. Here, the interest has been in the duality of, on the one hand, mainstreaming of the radical right parties (RRPs) and – though to a lesser degree – on the ongoing radicalization of the political ‘mainstream’ on the other (for different takes, see *inter alia*, Akkerman et al., 2016; Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Moffitt, 2021; Odmalm and Hepburn, 2017; Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019; Salo and Rydgren, 2021). At the same time, the politically-oriented work on normalization/mainstreaming has also looked

beyond just the field of political practice as such, and explored historical contingencies of far-right thinking and articulations including their more or less obvious, and sometimes outright connection to historical tenets of, for example, fascism, racism and wider radicalism (Finchelstein, 2017; Kallis, 2013, 2021).

While our work presented here builds on the aforementioned, vital scholarship which considered politically-practical and politically-theoretical as well as politically-ideological aspects of the recent upsurge of the far right, our ambition is to, in particular, heed some of the recent calls for broadening of the normalization/mainstreaming research agenda including, very prominently, onto the social, political and mediated discourses that in various ways support the spread and normalization of far-right thinking and doing. Here, we particularly side with recent work by, for example, Krzyżanowski (2018a, 2020b) or Mondon and Winter (2020) which argued that from the second half of the 2010s onwards we have seen an important new stage in the mainstreaming process due to both their growing depth of impact on society but also their increasing breadth in terms of the number social fields affected by transformation towards far-right-based perceptions of policies and intergroup relations. Accordingly, calls were made to look into the normalization/mainstreaming processes from a much wider perspective than before, and while not only considering actions of mainstream actors - such as the aforementioned politicians, but also widely conceived media, and even academics and intellectuals far-right ideas and ideologies – but also while looking equally scrupulously on the secondary spheres of recontextualization and re/mediation of the far-right ideological catalogue in social and online media, or, in the very significant area of the (online and offline) ‘uncivil society’ (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017; Krzyżanowski et al., 2021).

For the reasons spelled out above, this Special Issue of *Discourse & Society* wishes to tackle the complex and indeed very multifarious role of media (widely-conceived) and journalism in the processes of normalization and mainstreaming of the far right. While we are aware that normalization on the one hand, and mainstreaming on the other, might be concepts which are somewhat different in terms of their philosophical and disciplinary ontology and use (for a discussion, see, inter alia: Krzyżanowski, 2020a; Mondon and Winter, 2020), we still choose to treat them as semantically close, mainly as they describe a largely similar set of discursive and related material processes. Therein, far-right ideologies eventually become accepted as ‘normal’ or treated as, or at least as close to, the procedural or institutional and otherwise defined socio-political ‘mainstream’. And, while doing so, we are not as much interested in discerning whether it is ‘normalization’ or ‘mainstreaming’ of the far-right that our contributions analyse discuss – especially given they do focus on these either separately or in combination – but instead explore how, and in what way, media, journalism and the broader tendencies and dynamics in contemporary public spheres correlate with the ongoing and ever more complex and hybrid processes of the normalization/mainstreaming of the far right discourses, ideologies and politics.

In general terms, we contend that, despite its obvious role and importance, media, journalism and indeed the wider logics of contemporary mediated public spheres have so far been missing as a more pronounced focus in normalization/mainstreaming research. And, while to be sure, the focus on media has also been to some extent present in the politically-oriented scholarship (see above), there have been some notable exceptions of media-centred analysis. Therein, there have been, for example, studies focusing on either

traditional mainstream media's role in carrying the far-right populist message (see especially Thornborrow et al., 2021 but also Deacon and Wring, 2016) or somewhat broader work looking into re-mediations of populist-political discourse from politics to the media and vice versa (see especially Krzyżanowski, 2020b, but also Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017). Nevertheless, we argue, questions about the role of wider re/processes as well as populist-facilitating tendencies and affordances in the wider public spheres – including media and journalism – still require a much more pronounced, in-depth attention.

In line with the above aims, our key argument that links many of the studies included in our collection is that authoritarian and nativist populism posed some very significant challenges to contemporary media and journalism. Those challenges resulted in calls for critical discussions about the norms and practices of journalism – and especially the sometimes obviously active role of journalism and news discourse in normalizing the nationalist and nativist political and other authoritarian discourse openly undermining values and norms of liberal democracy (see, especially, Zelizer, 2018, but also: de Jonge, 2019; Ekman and Krzyżanowski, 2021; Ekström et al., 2020, 2021; Patrona, 2020).

We specifically wish to address two wider – albeit to some extent contradictory – issues. On the one hand, namely, we want to explore the ways in which media as such have been the target or the object of far right populist politics as the latter have seriously and repeatedly challenged the established status of professional journalism in rhetorical attacks, disruptions of news reporting routines and fake news (see e.g. Farkas and Schou, 2019; Wright, 2021), and in specific policies aimed at restricting the freedom of speech and journalism or at controlling media organizations (see, inter alia, numerous recent MFRR reports¹). At the same time, however, as media criticism has been lauded as the new approach to defending public spheres from misinformation propelled under the far right, a very specific 'own' media criticism has also been forwarded from the right wing populist political side (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019) to effectively discard and/or silence critical voices in media opposing far-right ideologies and policies.

However, on the other hand, it would be a grave mistake to see media and journalism as just passive bystanders or, what would be even worse, as innocent 'victims' of the far-right populist wave. On the contrary, we contend that – very similarly to the media's previous, often tacit, yet more often than not extremely efficient endorsement of wider ideological tenets that progressively proved highly detrimental to the wider society, as has been the case with, for example, neoliberalism (see Krzyżanowski, 2016; Phelan, 2014) – the success of the many right-wing populist parties and projects internationally has equally been clearly propelled by media's own practices and logics (Brown and Mondon, 2021; Thornborrow et al., 2021). At the same time, many of the broadcasting as well as traditional and online reporting media path-dependencies and propensities – as evidenced with, inter alia, Brexit in the UK (see e.g. Berry et al., 2021; Gavin, 2018; Maccaferri, 2019) – must also be seen as influential on furthering far-right agendas and projects and at least not safeguarding the wider public sphere from their promotion and spread.

Tackling the dual logics above is, and will remain, continuously necessary not only given the sustained electoral success of the authoritarian, indeed often neofascist,

right-wing populism or its wider, persistent, global presence as well as its still ongoing normalization/mainstreaming. As we contend, namely, the specific challenge is also in the fact that, given its widely debated ‘ideological’ thinness and volatility (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), far-right populism remains extremely fluid in its form and contents – as so frequently evidenced via its numerous enunciative and articulatory strategies carried by various mediated and other discourses.

But, perhaps even more importantly, right-wing populism remains responsive to the new social dynamics with far-right political actors, demagogues and ideologues often using crisis as the carriers for its further normalization and an entry door to the even deeper slide toward social wide anti- and post-democratic action (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski et al., 2022). The above has been very clearly evidenced in the context of the recent COVID-19 crisis. Therein, on the one hand, namely, the COVID 19 situation has to some extent challenged and weakened the ideological positioning of right-wing populism with media and journalists ‘calling the bluff’ of populist and authoritarian politicians unable to cope with the pandemic as a ‘real’ and indeed global – rather than just ‘imagined’ or local – crisis. Moreover, as often exposed by journalists and the media, many aspects of distinctive populist rhetoric (scapegoating, appeals to crisis, questioning of expertise, etc.) seem to have lost potency in the COVID context. However, while the above logics have indeed weakened the populist dynamics, COVID-19 has at the same time also initiated several reverse tendencies. The closure of physical borders and limits on cross-national mobility, namely, often reignited the strongly reinvigorated nationalistic rhetoric in many countries and often re-enabled and normalized the strongly nativist thinking – in everyday and public/media discourse – which not only pertained to the pandemic-related emergency response issues/actions but also to more profound thinking about society, community and trans/national responsibility.

Given the above and indeed very complex as well as still rapidly evolving context, *the ambition of this Special Issue – which gathers leading representatives of current interdisciplinary scholarship in critical discourse studies, media, communication, as well as in wider critical social and political research – is to not only showcase but also consolidate the scholarship on the above topics while also exploring potential future avenues of research.* These, we argue, must be developed with regard to analysing/deconstructing the discursive media/journalism and right-wing populism/authoritarianism connection especially under the newly created and rapidly accelerating, recurrent dynamics of the ongoing crises such as, at present, the still unfinished COVID-19, or the more recent atrocious fascist attack by Russia on Ukraine which started in February 2022.

Outline of the special issue

*The Special Issue opens up with a set of papers providing a bridge between the sphere of politics and the media and, in particular, showing the impact on ideologies within or of the political as these are being re-mediated in and via media discourse. At first, **Bart Cammaerts** analyses and deconstructs the recent ‘anti-woke’ culture war through the notions of metapolitics in fascist discourses – linked to the Gramscian ‘hegemonization’ and ‘the war of position’ – as well as to the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction coupled*

with theories of deviance and moral panics. The appropriation of the neo-fascist culture war discourse by the mainstream right in the UK is then analysed discursively, combining political discourse analysis, the CDA's discourse-historical approach and discourse-conceptual analysis. The anti-woke culture war by the British conservative party as well as rightwing media serves to analyse how social justice struggles like anti-racism, anti-sexism and pro-LGBTQ rights are being abnormalized and positioned as extreme deviant political positions. Linked to this, so-called 'cancel culture' is strategically deployed by dominant groups to neutralize contestations against racist, sexist and anti-LGBTQ views. Finally, freedom of speech and the right to offend is weaponised to protect racist and discriminatory language and to position these ideas as valid opinions worthy of democratic debate.

Remaining within ideological debates that were not only sparked but also strongly amplified by the far right via its uptake in media discourse, **Sean Phelan** draws in his article on Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic framework. Mouffe has long criticized the moralization of politics in its neoliberalized Third Way which informed her analysis of the rise of the far right as partly been enabled by moralizing antagonisms that inhibit a culture of agonistic political contestation. Phelan's article hence uses Mouffe to think about the current condition of mediatized public discourse, extending her critique of moralized politics to a wider set of targets. Through an analysis of a BBC Newsnight report discourse that thematizes the 'toxic' nature of public debate about the science of COVID-19, the article shows how the report internalizes sedimented 'culture war' discourses about the polarized nature of today's public culture and, in the process, offers oblique insights into how far-right discourses are normalized. The article ends by considering some of the limitations of Mouffe's work as a resource for thinking about how to counteract the far right.

The focus on wider socio-political debates and their deployment in/via media is then also furthered in the following paper, by **Mats Ekström, Marianna Patrona and Joanna Thornborrow**, who offer a comparative critical discourse analysis of news discourse on terrorism with respect to the coverage by two Swedish and two UK broadsheet newspapers. The focus here is on terrorist attacks that took place in 2017 in, respectively, Stockholm and London. The research goal is to investigate the type of discourses mobilized that help enact far-right 'politics of fear', and to compare the constitutive elements of this rhetoric within the same, and across the two national contexts. The findings point to three major representations as points on a continuum of discourses that emphatically affirm, give rise to, as well as also resist and counteract, the said politics of fear. At the same time, the article sheds light on processes of normalization at work in the routine discursive practices of press coverage, but also to the rise of counter-discourses that resist, downplay, or take a critical stance towards the core elements of a politics of fear. It is argued that these latter discursive practices may work in the opposite direction, namely to de-normalize or marginalize a dominant politics of fear.

Finally, closing the first set of papers on the interface between politics and the media, **Léonie de Jonge and Elizaveta Gaufman** argue, that, although there is widespread agreement in the literature that some media play an instrumental role in furthering right-wing populism, there are still few studies that examine the micro-mechanisms at play that facilitate the normalization of the far right in and by the media. Their article, therefore, seeks to redress that gap by focusing on the Netherlands, where the authors trace the

ways in which the media has accommodated populist far-right politicians and their parties in the run-up to the 2021 Dutch general elections – while thereby discursively shifting the boundaries of what is considered appropriate or ‘normal’. The analysis is centred on the far-right political newcomer, Thierry Baudet, the leader of the *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy or FvD, also referred to as Forum). Using discourse-conceptual analysis of Dutch newspaper articles, the article provides illustrative evidence that Dutch mainstream media outlets adopted an accommodative stance towards Baudet and his party in the run-up to the elections. The findings suggest that this media strategy effectively contributed to the normalization of the far right in the Dutch public sphere.

Then, *in the following set of papers, the Special Issue moves towards the related processes in which media are not only the carriers of far-right message but also become its ‘objects’* – indeed either as tools and channels of far-right propaganda machineries or as the actual targets of far-right policies and related practices aimed at curtailing media freedom and silencing media-opposition voices. As a first in this section, **Ruth Wodak** contends that far-right politics instrumentalizes the media and effectively intervenes into processes of mediatization in significantly different ways. The focus of the article is, therefore, on what the author defines as ‘message control’ i.e. one of the many ways propagandistic tools are employed to control the relevant agenda and information being disseminated by both traditional and online media. Taking the case of Austria and message control deployed by the former far-right Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the article points therein to a new media logic based on favouritism, nepotism, and clientelism was established and normalized. Message control, therefore, illustrates one of many steps of normalization of far-right agenda and implies launching and thus controlling select information via weekly press conferences, briefings, personal conversations, back-room debates, and text messages, and to financially subsidize only those media that reported favourably about the activities of the far right.

Returning to analyses focused on, and embedded by, the far-right’s mis-appropriation of the recent ‘crisis’ of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Michał Krzyżanowski and Natalia Krzyżanowska** focus in their article on how the recent discourse of ‘the new normal’ – re-initiated and widely used in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in national and international media and political discourse – has marked the advent of a new approach to ‘crisis’ in the normalization of far-right populist politics. Drawing on the example of the analysis of ‘policy communication’ genres that pre-legitimized Polish right-wing populist government’s recent actions aimed at curtailing media freedom and controlling opposition media, the article shows that, in the context of the undisputed crisis such as the recent pandemic, the right-wing populist imagination has gradually and strategically altered its approach to crisis. The latter’s new, (quasi) ‘factual’ imaginary has, as is shown, become a key tool in the further escalation and normalization of far-right political strategies and policies, especially with regard to the media as the target of new far-right strategies of media control aimed at the systemic colonization of the wider public sphere. Therein, far-right actors often resort to a very peculiar – yet by now common – adoption of many pro-democratic arguments yet while often ‘flipsiding’ them in favour of far-right arguments and goals to thus pre-legitimize their own undemocratic politics of control and exclusion.

Finally, the part closing this Special Issue take a somewhat broader perspective and one that, at least to date, has not been strongly embraced by the traditional 'dual' vectors encompassed by the above connections between politics, the media and their impact on normalization/mainstreaming of the far- or even extreme-right. Hence, *the final two papers of this collection look into the wider re-mediations of right-wing radicalism and even extremism by looking into their recontextualization in 'mainstream' media or their own patterns of self-mediation, mainly in/via the online contexts.* Therein, at first, **Phil Graham and Harry Dugmore** look at media's role in re-mediating ideological foundations of right extremism from a perspective on normalization that turns on public pedagogies – that is, on ambient, ever-present systems of mediated experience that consciously teach ways of seeing, evaluating, acting, and reacting – further focused by theories of literacy and utopianism. The authors take the view that we are in, or at least fast moving towards, post-literate cultures for which instructions to achieve political utopias are grounded in the devices of narrative mnemonics. They demonstrate their highly relevant perspective using discourse analysis and show how narrative elements from extremist manifestos get normalized through the mediations and remediations of mainstream politicians, and through print and broadcast journalism, greatly aided at every stage by the volatile environments of digital media.

Finally, last but certainly not least, **Jason Roberts and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen** look specifically at the right-wing news website Breitbart that has been a subject of increased academic scrutiny especially following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2016 and due to its prominence during the campaign, where it became the most significant news website within the conservative media sphere. As the article shows, despite Trump's demise as a politician, Breitbart remains highly influential within the conservative media sphere, particularly as a result of its attacks on mainstream media actors and organizations, which remain a prominent feature of its coverage and represent an ongoing form of meta-journalistic discourse in the struggle to re-define the boundaries of journalism. The authors seek to examine how Breitbart built journalistic authority and legitimacy amongst their readership as a result of attacks on liberal and conservative journalists alike, and while emotionally appealing to normative, 'common-sense' understandings of journalism. In particular, Breitbart frequently used recontextualized news as a method of attacking oppositional journalism whilst simultaneously bolstering their own – de facto dubious – journalistic credentials. As the article argues, in a media ecology in which emotional content is prioritized in order to commodify the anger of citizens, practices of recontextualization will continue to play an important role in the battle over the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practice.

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Note

1. <https://www.mfr.eu/library/> last accessed 27-03-2022.

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Author biographies

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