Online discontent

Klein, Ofra; Muis, Jasper

published in
European Societies
2019

DOI (link to publisher)
10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

European Societies

ISSN: 1461-6696 (Print) 1469-8307 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reus20

Online discontent: comparing Western European far-right groups on Facebook

Ofra Klein & Jasper Muis

To cite this article: Ofra Klein & Jasper Muis (2019) Online discontent: comparing Western European far-right groups on Facebook, European Societies, 21:4, 540-562, DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293

EUROPEAN SOCIETIES
2019, VOL. 21, NO. 4, 540–562
https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293

Online discontent: comparing Western European far-right groups on Facebook

Ofra Klein [a] and Jasper Muis[b]

[a]Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Florence, Italy;
[b]Department of Sociology, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Far-right groups increasingly use social media to interact with other groups and reach their followers. Social media also enable 'ordinary' people to participate in online discussions and shape political discourse. This study compares the networks and discourses of Facebook pages of Western European far-right parties, movements and communities. Network analyses of pages indicate that the form of far-right mobilization is shaped by political opportunities. The absence of a strong far-right party offline seems to be reflected in an online network in which non-institutionalized groups are the most prominent actors, rather than political parties. In its turn, the discourse is shaped by the type of actor. Content analyses of comments of followers show that parties address the political establishment more often than immigration and Islam, compared to non-institutionalized groups. Furthermore, parties apply less extreme discursive practices towards 'the other' than non-institutionalized groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 14 September 2017; Accepted 31 January 2018

KEYWORDS Far-right; social media; social networks; discourse analysis; online participation

The Internet offers a powerful tool for far-right groups for reaching followers, connecting with like-minded groups, and spreading their ideology (Caiani and Parenti 2013; Zhou *et al.* 2005). Social media also enables 'ordinary' citizens to actively participate in online discussions and express their opinions (Zuckerman 2015).

The issues that far-right groups and their followers are concerned about – such as Islamisation, European integration and immigration – are hotly debated in almost all Western European countries. They use different channels to exert influence – ranging from institutionalized politics to street marches. Right-wing groups differ in their organization (Minkenberg 2003), the issues they emphasize and whether they take a moderate or hard line (Akkerman *et al.* 2016).

CONTACT Ofra Klein ofra.klein@eui.eu
Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293

Research on the far-right has focused on the electoral channel – political parties – and certain segments of the discourse – traditional mass media and party programs (for recent reviews, see Golder 2016; Mudde 2016; Muis and Immerzeel 2017). Far-right groups and their supporters often make use of social media, but research into this topic is still scarce (Ernst *et al.* 2017). This study addresses these two lacunas in the literature. It poses two interrelated questions: *first, what is the relationship between political opportunities and type of online mobilization (parties vs non-institutionalized groups)? Second, what are the differences in the online discourse between parties and non-institutionalized groups?* To answer these questions, we analysed data from Facebook pages of British, German, French and Dutch far-right groups.

Our results show that far-right mobilization manifests itself in different organizational forms depending on the political opportunities for the far-right. Closed political opportunities can explain why social movements are more prominent online than political parties in some countries. These findings are in line with Mudde's (2016) observation that since 2015, we have seen a strong presence of non-party organizations offline in Germany and Britain, most notably Pegida and English Defence League (EDL).

Furthermore, our comparison of comments of online followers on a selection of far-right pages reveals that the discourse is shaped by the type of actor. Parties focus more strongly on anti-establishment populism, whereas non-institutionalized groups tend to address issues of immigration and Islam more strongly. Concerning the radicalness of rejecting non-natives, our findings indicate that the debate is generally more extreme on pages of non-institutionalized groups.

Theoretical background

The core feature of far-right groups is exclusionary, ethno-nationalist xenophobia (Rydgren 2005). Far-right discourse is nativist, which refers to a combination of nationalism and xenophobia: emphasizing one's own culture, traditions and nationality, and negatively portraying culturally deviant outgroups (Mudde 2007). Far-right groups can be extreme or radical. Extremist groups are anti-democratic, they go beyond the limits of the democratic political processes. Radical groups only question some of the constitutional foundations of liberal democracies (Golder 2016; Mudde 2007). Hence, the radical right is democratic, in that it accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule (Mudde 2016). Far-right actors are not necessarily anti-establishment or populist. Nevertheless, the combination is very likely (Greven 2016).

Far-right mobilization takes different organizational forms (Caiani *et al.* 2012; Hutter 2014; Minkenberg 2003). Parties have increasingly become movement-like, networked organizations (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016; Della Porta *et al.* 2017). On social media, 'political communication of social movements, parties and ordinary citizens is meshed together much more fluidly than in a mass media setting with traditional gatekeepers' (Chadwick 2013, as cited by Stier *et al.* 2017: 1368). Content is often posted by followers (in the form of comments) instead of by groups (in the form of posts). Followers are likely to post similar content on different pages. Stier *et al.* (2017: 1381), for example, show that the same users are active on the pages of the party AfD and the movement Pegida. However, as comments are reactions to what is posted by page owners, discourse between pages varies. As Atton (2006) showed of the webforum of the British National Party, moderators might steer conversations or remove comments.

As we will explain, the type of actor is relevant for understanding differences in discursive positioning against non-natives and political elites. We distinguish parties (institutionalized) from non-institutionalized groups, which range from more organized social movements to looser online communities. In contrast to parties, movements do not take part in elections. They do have members and organize meetings or protests. Online communities are social aggregations with similar values and interests that only exist online (Shen *et al.* 2006). The differences between non-institutionalized groups are sometimes fuzzy. Caren *et al.* (2012: 167) identify a form of activism that bridges movements and online communities: the social movement online community (SMOC). They define SMOC as 'a sustained network of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement linked through quasi-public online discussions'.

Political opportunities and far-right networks

To explain variation in far-right mobilization, it is not the grievances per se that matter – we assume that discontent about immigration is similar across Western Europe. Rather, it is whether far-right groups can act effectively on existing grievances within the opportunities offered by the political-institutional setting (cf. Koopmans *et al.* 2005; Muis 2015; Kincaid 2017).

The political opportunity structure (POS) is typically defined by the openness of the political system, the stability of elite alignments, the

presence of allies among the elite and state repression (McAdam *et al.* 1996). Scholars applying the concept specifically to far-right parties have pointed at the electoral system and at 'political space' left open by political competitors (Koopmans *et al.* 2005; Muis and Immerzeel 2017).

Strong far-right parties are more likely in an open political context. In closed contexts, far-right groups have to find alternative ways to mobilize and express their grievances, resulting in more non-parliamentary action groups (Hutter 2014). In addition to joining social movement organizations, people can establish or join online communities when they feel that the political arena neglects their concerns (Awan 2016). The political opportunity model assumes that actors make a rational choice among alternatives. For instance, street violence is a relatively costly strategy, which is mitigated where less costly alternatives are available (Koopmans 1996). The electoral channel seems to effectively substitute for street activity and violence (Minkenberg 2003; but see Jäckle and König 2017). Thus, we expect:

> *Hypothesis 1:* open political opportunities for far-right groups will result in a strong far-right party and an online network that consist mainly of institutionalized actors; closed political opportunities lead to a network consisting mainly of non-institutional actors.

Furthermore, we expect that open political opportunities will yield a more concentrated network, structured around a prominent institutionalized actor. Most non-parliamentary groups will establish links with this actor since they 'treat parties as their champions in the electoral arena' (Arzheimer 2015: 8). More extreme movements strategically link to prominent right-wing parties, as these might serve the 'hard-core groups in their recruitment efforts' (Burris *et al.* 2000: 323). In contrast, closed political opportunities result in a segmented network, with several prominent non-institutionalized actors. Consequently, we predict that:

> *Hypothesis 2:* open political opportunities will yield a more concentrated network, structured around a prominent institutionalized actor, whereas closed political opportunities result in a segmented network, structured around several non-institutionalized actors.

Type of group and far-right discourse

Far-right groups differ in the issues they emphasize and the extremity of their frames. Cultural 'outgroups' (nativism) and political elites (populism) can be frequently discussed or not, depending on the type of group. Movements tend to articulate issues that are left unaddressed by institutional actors, and vice versa (Hutter 2014: 26). Moreover, non-institutionalized groups

tend to be more ideologically outspoken and single-issue focused than its party variants (Minkenberg 2003). Parties need to address a broader spectrum of issues than social movements to attract broader support (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Additionally, far-right parties often downplay controversial issues. Constraints imposed by cultural norms are more relevant for groups that mobilize via the parliamentary channel (Minkenberg 2003). Therefore, we expect far-right parties to focus more on anti-establishment populism, rather than on the exclusion of non-natives (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Stier *et al.* 2017). Hence:

Hypothesis 3a: Nativism is less salient in the online discourse of parties than in the discourse of non-institutionalized groups.

Hypothesis 3b: Anti-elitist populism is more salient in the online discourse of parties than in the discourse of non-institutionalized groups.

Far-right groups furthermore differ in their extremity of discourse (Maan *et al.* 2017). As we pointed out, parties aim to appeal to a broader support base. The expectation is that parties adopt a more moderate discourse, specifically on nativism, than non-party actors (Golder 2016; Rydgren 2005). Ideological extremism tends to decline when groups become more entrenched in the electoral channel (Minkenberg 2003; Piven and Cloward 1979). Groups without formal membership or structures tend to adopt more extreme positions (Goodwin *et al.* 2012: 6) and more activist forms of mobilization online (Caiani and Parenti 2013: 107). Consequently, far-right parties often distance themselves from movements. In Austria, for instance, the FPÖ considers integration and assimilation possible, while this is unacceptable for the Identitarian Movement (Maan *et al.* 2017). We expect thus:

Hypothesis 4: The online discourse on nativism is more extreme on the pages of non-institutionalized groups than on pages of institutionalized groups.

Methods

The countries included in this study – The United Kingdom, Germany, France and The Netherlands – vary in party systems and standing of far-right parties (cf. Engesser *et al.* 2017).

Table 1 illustrates the electoral successes of far-right parties in each country when we collected our data.

According to Kitschelt (2007: 1191) 'the institutional configurations most unfavourable to the rise of radical right-wing parties exist in Britain'. The First Past the Post electoral system limits possibilities to

Table 1. Electoral success of British, German, French and Dutch far-right parties (March 2014).

Country	Party	Data of latest national elections	Popular vote	Parliamentary seats
France	Front National (National Front)	41,070	13.4% (3.7%)	2 (of 577)
Germany	Die Republikaner	41,539	0.2%	—
	NPD		1.3%	—
	Alternative Für Deutschland (AfD)		4.7%	—
Netherlands	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	41,164	10.1%	24 (of 150)
UK	British National Party (BNP)	40,304	1.9%	—
	UK Independence Party (UKIP)		3.1%	—

Source: Immerzeel (2015).
Notes: Figure for France is based on the vote in the first round (second round between brackets). Figures for Germany are based on the Party list ballot.

achieve electoral success. Far-right parties have historically been isolated by hostility from mainstream parties and have failed to gain and consolidate many parliamentary seats (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

In Germany, a threshold hampers niche parties in gaining electoral success. Moreover, mainstream parties refuse to form coalitions with far-right parties (Backes and Mudde 2000). At the time that we collected our data, parties, such as the NPD, Die Republikaner and the AfD, were relatively marginal (Arzheimer 2015). In the 2013 General Election, the AfD did not pass the electoral threshold.

The French two-round majoritarian electoral system is more forgiving to niche parties than the British electoral system, but still hinders the electoral success of the far-right on the national level. Potential allies have always rejected any electoral agreement with the far-right (Caiani and Parenti 2013). The Dutch electoral system of proportional representation with a low threshold offers parties such as the PVV the most favourable opportunities to gain electoral success (Akkerman *et al.* 2016; Muis 2015). We thus conclude that during the time of our research, political opportunities for the far-right were closed in the UK, open in the Netherlands, and intermediate in France and Germany.

Data were retrieved from Facebook using Netvizz (Rieder 2013). We mapped the online networks using a snowball technique (cf. Caiani and Parenti 2013). We first gathered the direct links for the following initial sample of Facebook pages: *BNP; UKIP; Britain First; Infidels of Britain; I am proud to be British* (United Kingdom); *Alternative für Deutschland; Identitaire Bewegung; Pegida; Wir sind das Volk* (Germany); *Génération Identitaire; Bloc Identitaire; Patriotes de France; Front National* (France); *Nederland mijn Vaderland, Wij zijn Tegen het nieuwe regeerakkoord; PVV aanhangers; PVV; Identitair verzet* (the Netherlands). The

selection was based on earlier research and by searching for pages within Facebook using keywords. Subsequently, the links of pages that were discovered though the crawling of this sample were also gathered to generate a bigger network and identify less well-known groups.

The networks contained several pages that might fit the far-right ideology in specific contexts, such as homophobic pages in the French network, and animal rights and anti-paedophilia pages in the British network. We excluded these pages, irrelevant pages (such as those of brands) and pages from different countries, as to allow a better comparison between the networks in the different contexts.

Network analyses were performed using Gephi (Bastian *et al.* 2009). To identify influential groups in the network (H1), we calculated the number of likes that a Facebook page receives from other pages in the network – the in-degree (Caiani and Parenti 2013).

A cluster analysis was performed to map the clusters making up the far-right network and reveal the segmentation of the network (H2) (Zhou *et al.* 2005; Caiani and Parenti 2013). As our hypotheses indicate, we are mainly interested in which type of actor (institutionalized versus non-institutionalized) dominates the online network. To further substantiate our network analysis, we also provide the main topics these groups focus on. Using the picture, banner and info-section on the Facebook pages, groups were categorized as focusing on *immigration*, *Islam*, *nationalism*, *national-* or *European anti-establishment populism,* or on *supporting* a far-right party or politician. Pages addressing multiple issues were categorized as *general*. The page *Ban the Burka in UK* was, for example, categorized as a page about Islam. A random selection of 55 pages was hand-coded by both authors to assess the intercoder reliability (Krippendorf's alpha: 0.96).

For the discourse analyses, five pages – at least one party and a variety of non-institutionalized actors – from each country were selected. For each actor-type, we selected the most popular pages, based on likes of users. One prominent page – the *English Defence League* – could unfortunately not be included in the selection for technical reasons.[1] For all pages, except for the extremely active *Pegida* and *Nederland mijn Vaderland*, data covering a year (March 2014–March 2015) were gathered (Table 2). Because of this long timespan, we expect that specific events do not significantly influence the findings. Most pages included in this analysis have now

[1]This page was reinstalled making earlier posts inaccessible. Instead, the page of the closely related *Infidels of Britain* was included.

either been permanently removed, or have been reinstalled, thus making earlier posts inaccessible.

We analysed comments instead of posts, as posts often solely consist of images, links or videos. Furthermore, comments are posted by 'ordinary people' and reflect more diverse opinions than posts. Automated text analyses were done using Python's Natural Language Toolkit (cf. Bird *et al.* 2009).[2] Comments were pre-processed by removing punctualization, uppercases and stopwords.

To analyse the salience of topics (H3), frequency analyses were performed. We used thematic word clusters in English, French, German and Dutch around the issues of nativism (immigration, Islam) and anti-elitist populism (the national and European political elite). Clusters contained synonyms and misspellings, such as 'immigrants', 'foreigners' and 'foreners' for the immigration cluster.[3] We selected words for the clusters after manually reading a random selection of 100 comments from which words related to these issues were identified.

To analyse the extremeness of claims by far-right groups (H4), the most often occurring words in comments containing cultural 'outgroups' and political elites were analysed. In addition, we carried out qualitative analysis, consisting of the authors reading 50 comments from each page.

Results

Description of the online networks

We first describe the networks in the four countries. Subsequently, the prominence of actors in each network is linked to the POS in which these operate. The French and German online networks are much bigger (810 and 476 pages) than the Dutch and British networks (69 and 225 pages). This is important to note, since the network size influences the maximum in-degrees.

The British network (Figure 1) is centralized around the *EDL*, which has the highest standing (in-degree = 64). The party *UKIP* has a relatively low in-degree (in-degree = 31). The British network is rather homogeneous: three out of four clusters (purple, red and green) consist of anti-Islam movements (see Table 3). The *EDL*-cluster encompasses 37% of all pages. The fourth cluster (light blue), representing pages related to *UKIP* (e.g. youth divisions, politicians), is relatively far removed from

[2]See supplemental online material for additional information.
[3]See supplemental online material for the word clusters.

Table 2. The pages selected for the discourse analysis.

	Type	Likes on 22 March 2015	Comments
British			
I am proud to be British	Community	234,835	713,78
Infidels of Britain	Movement	52,602	110,549
Britain First	Movement	692,127	614,72
British National Party	Party	178,351	105,629
UKIP	Party	342,126	450,703
German			
Ich bin Patriot aber kein Nazi	Community	55,232	55,236
Wir alle sind deutsch	Community	19,206	26,420
Identitäre Bewegung – Deutschland	Movement	13,203	5632
Pegida	Movement	159,594	197,103
Alternative für Deutschland	Party	138,902	68,369
French			
Patriotes de France	Community	79,839	48,904
La Vraie France	Community	42,743	53,522
Bloc Identitaire	Movement	39,423	19,628
Génération Identitaire	Movement	61,809	22,294
Front National	Party	220,289	64,794
Dutch			
PVV aanhangers	Community	24,546	77,617
PVV (unofficial)	Community	11,198	12,101
Het volk is het zat	Community	16,578	7737
Nederland mijn Vaderland	Community	137,123	4374
Identitair Verzet	Movement	6181	11,275

these movements. *UKIP* indeed distanced themselves from the more openly xenophobic stances of radical counterparts, such as the *BNP* (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

The German network (Figure 2) is highly fragmented, containing several small and demarcated clusters. The blue cluster at the lower right part of the network contains the party *Alternative für Deutschland*, the small pink

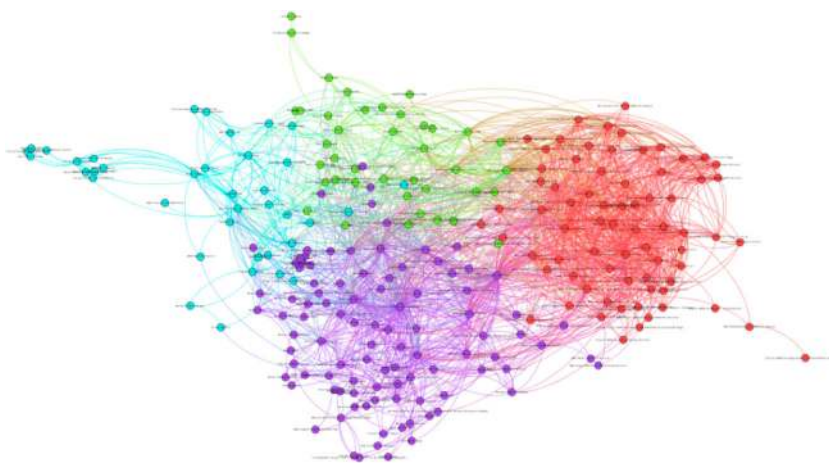

Figure 1. British network (relation = if a page likes another page, directed).

Table 3. Overview of the type, content and proportion of pages belonging to the clusters in the networks.

Country	Cluster (figure1–4)	Dominant type	Dominant content	Proportion
British	Red	Movement	Islam	0.37
	Purple	Community	Islam	0.22
	Green	Community	Nationalism	0.20
	Blue	Institutionalized	UKIP (party)	0.21
German	Orange	Community	Immigration	0.26
	Green (middle)	Community and Movement	Islam	0.23
	Green (top)	Movement	Islam	0.15
	Blue (bottom)	Party	Alternative für Deutschland (party)	0.14
	Green	Community	Nationalism	0.13
	Pink	Party	PRO NRW (party)	0.05
	Blue (scattered)	Party	Die Rechte (party)	0.03
French	Pink	Community	Nationalism, Islam, immigration	0.35
	Green (bottom)	Institutionalized	Front National (party)	0.20
	Yellow	Community	Anti-establishment	0.18
	Blue	Community	Anti-establishment	0.13
	Green (top)	Movement	Islam	0.11
Dutch	Blue	Community/Movement	Islam, Nationalist, immigrant	0.28
	Green	Communities	Immigrant	0.12
	Pink/purple	Communities	Anti-establishment	0.22
	Purple/blue	Communities	Party support	0.10
	Red	Communities	Nationalist, anti-establishment	0.25

Note: The percentages do not lead up to 100, since some pages do not belong to any cluster.

cluster consists of pages related to the party *PRO NRW*, and the dark blue cluster in the middle of the network relates to *Die Rechte*. Interestingly, the three biggest clusters consist of anti-Islam and anti-immigrant pages of movements and online communities. The latter type of group mainly manifests itself in the form of local anti-asylum seekers pages, such as '*No to Asylum Shelter in* [*town name*]', which make up about 26% of the network (the orange cluster). These online communities resemble groups that emerged after sexual assault reports during New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne. On Facebook alone, more than 100 anti-immigrant 'security watch groups' were active (Saal 2016). The green–yellow cluster at the top of the network consists of pages that belong to the anti-Islam movement *Identitäre Bewegung*. The seagreen cluster in the middle of the network contains pages related to *Pegida*. While *Pegida* is the most prominent actor (in-degree = 92), the German network does not clearly revolve around it.

In France, pages related to the *Front National* (*FN*), such as pages of politicians and youth divisions – in the light-green cluster at the bottom of the network – make up about one-fifth of the network (Figure 3). The network revolves around the *FN*, with most prominently, the pages of *Marine Le Pen* (in-degree = 168), *Front National* and *Marion Maréchal-Le Pen*. The main

Figure 2. German network (relation = if a page likes another page, directed).

groups in other clusters have a substantially lower standing. The green cluster at the top of the network contains anti-Islam movements *Géneration Identitaire* and *Bloc Identitaire* (11%). Finally, the pink cluster (35%) consists of a variety of nationalistic community pages, as well as anti-immigrant and anti-Islam pages. Two other clusters in this network (in total 31%) contain anti-political elite pages.

The Dutch network (Figure 4) is relatively small and consists mainly of online communities. The most prominent actor is the movement *Identitair Verzet* (in-degree = 12). It is located in the largest, blue cluster (28%). The red cluster contains several nationalistic, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam pages. Similarly, online communities in the green cluster mobilize against asylum shelters in the Netherlands. The pink–purple cluster consists of anti-political establishment groups. Pages supporting the party *PVV* or Geert Wilders (e.g. *I do NOT file a complaint against Wilders*) make up the purple/blue cluster. The Dutch network does not contain any official party pages. Neither the PVV nor Wilders had an official Facebook page. This can be explained by the fact that Wilders

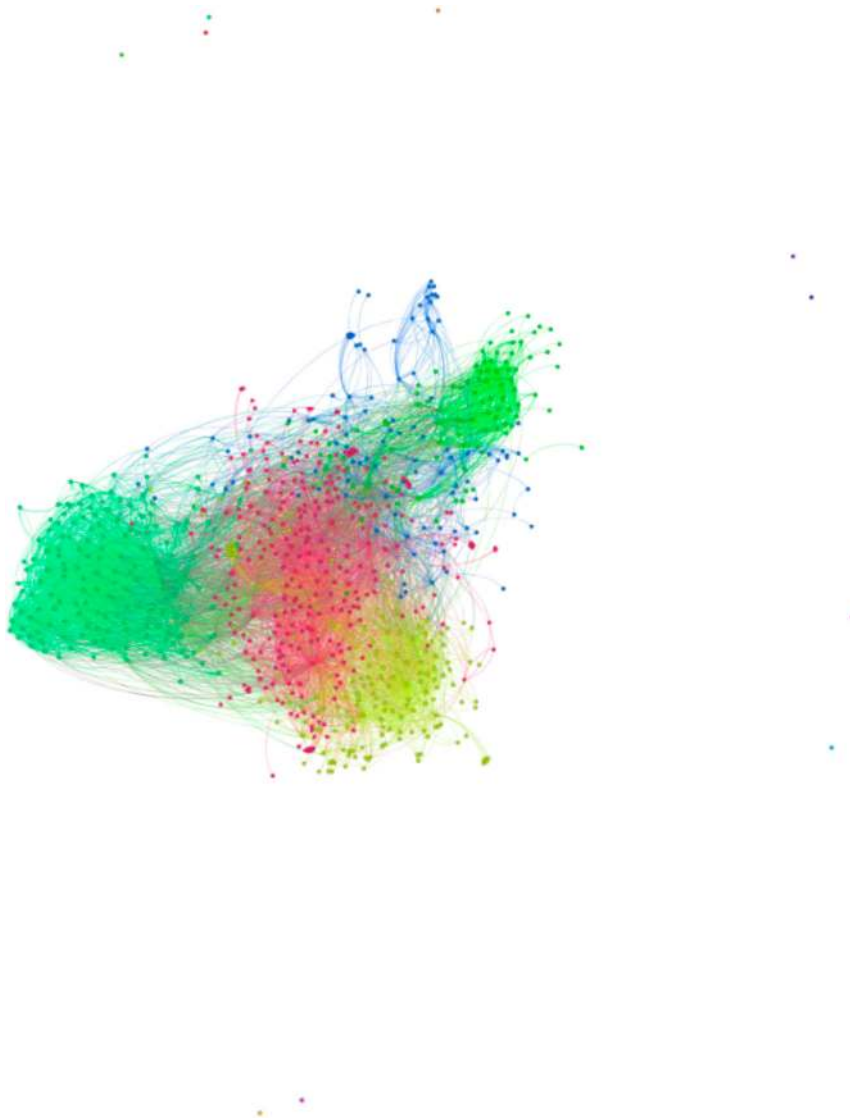

Figure 3. French network (relation = if a page likes another page, directed).

keeps tight control over all party communication. The PVV is a party without any members and Wilders relies almost exclusively on Twitter.

Political opportunities and nature of networks

We expected that a closed political structure, such as in Britain, would result in non-parliamentary groups being more prominent in the online network (H1).

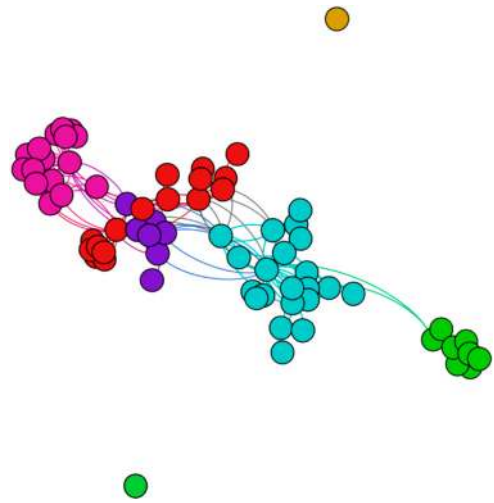

Figure 4. Dutch network (relation = if a page likes another page, directed).

The street movement *EDL* indeed represents the most 'visible' online actor for expressing far-right views. We expected parliamentary groups to be more prominent in online networks in open political contexts, such as the Netherlands. The Dutch network, however, consists mainly of online communities and action groups. Nevertheless, several Dutch groups clearly revolve around support for Geert Wilders – the attitudes and identities of followers are tied to this far-right party. Analogous to Caren *et al.* (2012), we could conceptualize this form of online activism as 'a political party online community'. Germany and France have an intermediate POS. In both countries, the online networks have a combination of both parties and movements.

Furthermore, we hypothesized that open political structures yield dense networks, structured around prominent far-right parties (H2). The Dutch network, however, lacks a dominant institutional actor around which it revolves. The French network is centralized around *FN*. We expected more segmented networks in closed political contexts, in which a dominant far-right party is less likely. This is confirmed in the German context, which consists of many demarcated clusters, with few intra-group links between parties and movements. However, the British network is rather dense and structured around the movement *EDL*.

Description of the online discourse of far-right groups

After describing the discourse of far-right groups in each country, we draw a conclusion on whether similarities and variations are related to the type

Table 4. Frequency of words for each 10,000 words on the Facebook pages.

	Elite	Europe	Islam	Immigration
British pages				
Proud to be British	62	16	51	35
Infidels of Britain	120	52	130	59
Britain First	92	15	238	26
British National Party	76	21	163	47
UKIP	120	131	24	68
German pages				
Ich bin Patriot aber kein Nazi	35	17	58	30
Wir alle sind Deutsch	77	21	46	35
Identitaire Bewegung	16	29	64	21
Pegida	39	19	94	33
Alternative für Deutschland	47	65	14	14
French pages				
Patriotes de France	25	17	28	30
La vraie France	14	13	25	34
Bloc Identitaire	25	24	49	33
Generation Identitaire	17	18	26	15
Front National	61	31	25	25
Dutch pages				
PVV Aanhangers	80	31	76	27
PVV	146	42	45	24
Het Volk is het zat	131	74	31	20
Nederland mijn Vaderland	139	23	23	10
Identitair Verzet	96	41	138	20

of group. Table 4 presents the number of times words related to the national political elite, Europe, Islam and immigration are mentioned per 10,000 words. Tables 5–8 show word co-occurrences of these 'targets' of the far-right for a selection of pages. Combined with our qualitative analysis, they show how strongly non-natives and the political establishments are rejected by online followers of the far-right.

On pages of the movements Infidels of Britain and Britain First, the Islam is clearly the most salient issue. In contrast, the comments on the UKIP page suggest that its followers focus more on the political elite. The national elite and Europe are discussed 120 and 131 times per

Table 5. Collocates of non-natives and political elites on the British page *Infidels of Britain*.

Europe	Elite	Immigrants	Islam
Fuck	Fuck	Country	Country
Country	Country	Illegal	British
Land	Fucking	People	People
Countries	British	Benefits	Fuck
Immigration	Mr	Stop	Countries
Ukip	Ukip	British	Fucking
Vote	Vote	Fuck	Terrorists
Leave	Back	Britain	Extremists
British	People	English	Scum
Rights	Stop	Labour	Stop

10,000 words, respectively (Table 4). Islam (24) and immigration (68) are mentioned less often. The issue of populism is also remarkably salient on the community page Proud to be British.

In contrast with our expectation, our results suggest that the British National Party deem nativism, rather than anti-elitism more important. Even though the party has adopted a more moderate discourse over time, it maintained its core ideology of racial prejudice (Edwards 2012). The discourse seems to be more extreme on the pages of Infidels of Britain and Britain First than on the other pages. This is visible in the kind of words that are most often used in relation to Islam and immigrants (Table 5), such as terrorists, fuck and scum. Allah is referred to as 'evil and Satan in disguise'. References are made to bomb, detaining and deporting Muslims. Islam itself is referred to as cult, curse and plague. For example:[4]

> they breed like rats cos contraception is unislamic, they go to the government with outstretched arms begging for money. [*sic*]

The discourse of UKIP and BNP differs from other British pages, as comments contain more civilized language. On the page of UKIP, the framing of immigrants and Muslims is more in terms of socio-economic issues and failure of government. The debate on these pages is more moderate because a number of commenters criticize Islamophobes and distinguish between moderate Islam and extremists.

Comments on the German pages of the movements Pegida and Identitäre Bewegung both mention issues related to Islam most often, respectively, 94 and 64 times per 10,000 words. Alternatively, the comments on the AfD page mainly address the European (65) and national political elite (47). Islam (1) and immigrants (14) are mentioned less often. Interestingly, both populism and nativism are salient on the community pages *Ich bin Patriot aber kein Nazi* and *Wir sind alle Deutsch*.

In line with the focus of German citizenship on 'origin' (Koopmans *et al.* 2005), Islam and immigration are frequently discussed in relation to incompatibility with German nationality and Christian traditions (Table 6). One follower of Alternative für Deutschland for example argues: 'we are part of the Christian tradition (…) Do you want to betray our past to open the gates to Islam?!'

Nativism is clearly most extreme in the discussions on the pages Pegida and Identitaire Bewegung. Users express a 'fear of Islamisation of Germany'. Some comments are even calling for killing 'all followers of

[4]See online supplemental material for more examples.

Table 6. Collocates of non-natives and political elites on the German page *Ich bin ein Patriot aber kein Nazi*.

Europe	Elite	Immigrants	Islam
Deutschland	Frau	Man	Deutschland
Man	Deutschland	Gegen	Gehort
Islam	Angela	Mehr	Gegen
Krieg	Man	Deutschland	Religion
Gehort	Wahlen	Deutsche	Man
Menschen	Weg	Land	Christentum
Usa	Macht	Gut	Deutsche
Welt	Volk	Weg	Land
Continent	Politiek	Jahre	Menschen
Deutschen	Gewahlt	Polen	Europa

Islam' and accuse the government of genocide of their 'own people'. Paradoxically, this follower of Pegida criticizes the 'dangerous ideology' of Islam by associating it with Nazism:

> Islam must be treated in the same way as the ideology and the glorification the Third Reich. There are dangerous similarities. Aggression, racism, call to kill, intolerance, oppression

In France, non-institutionalized actors seem more focused on nativist issues than on the political establishment. The community pages *Patriotes de France* and *La Vraie France* focus somewhat more on immigration than on Islam, and the movements *Bloc Identitaire* and *Generation Identitaire* discuss Islam most often. The comments on the page of *FN* are more populist in nature, addressing mainly the national political elite (61) and the European elite (31).

Interestingly, we hardly notice any differences between pages in terms of the extremeness of discourse. The French online far-right debate about Islam emphasizes 'adaptability' to French culture and stresses that public manifestations of religion should not be allowed. Moreover, Islam is frequently referred to as a cancer, fascism, and Muslims are sometimes

Table 7. Collocates of non-natives and political elites on the French page *Génération Identitaire*.

Europe	Elite	Immigrants	Islam
France	France	France	France
Bravo	Ordre	Pays	Pays
Francais	Merde	Francais	Religion
Pays	Racialle	Enfants	Francais
From	Marine	Parents	Vivre
Contre	Proteste	Algerie	Interdit
Jeunesse	Honte	Racaille	Monde
Jeunes	Serinent	Clandestins	Europe
Invasion	Amalgame	Bravo	Anti
Islam	Socialiste	Absolument	Contre

Table 8. Collocates of non-natives and political elites on the Dutch page *PVV Aanhangers*.

European	National	Immigrants	Islam
Weg	Weg	Nederlanders	Nederland
Geld	Wilders	Genoeg	Land
Nederland	Mark	Jaar	Mensen
Betalen	Kabinet	Nederland	Haat
Miljoen	Mensen	Komen	Goede
Rutte	Volk	Land	Joden
Konten	Nederlands	Net	Terug
Likkers	Stemmen	Volk	Moeten
Genoeg	Pvv	Islam	Onderdrukking
Bende	Woorden	Vol	Vele

referred to as paedophiles. The political elite is blamed for letting in immigrants and the Islam in. Some express the fear of a future war against Islam in Europe. Community pages are often less extreme in their frames.

Lastly, if we turn our attention to Dutch far-right pages, it is remarkable that anti-elitist criticism is the most salient topic on almost all of them. On the unofficial PVV page, for instance, the political elite is mentioned 146 times per 10,000 words, which is more often than immigrants (24) and Islam (45). The movement *Identitair Verzet* slightly differs from this observation. The comments mention Islam much more often than on the other pages (138).

The Dutch discourse on immigration is mostly related to socio-economic topics, criminality and healthcare. Moreover, critique on the Islam is generally discussed by emphasizing the lack of adaptation to Dutch norms and values. In this respect, the anti-Islam movement *Identitair Verzet* again differs from the other pages because the discourse on the Islam is rather extreme, for example:

> the Islam mentality is full of disrespect, agression, violence, pedophelia, murder and torture out of the name of a sadistic fairytale figure

Remarkable for the Dutch case is the high frequency of counterspeech: comments on tolerance towards Muslims. For instance, on the page PVV Supporters, party leader Wilders is criticized for his extreme views on Muslims:

> [Wilders] forgets that he is talking about people (…) the Netherlands is a multicultural society, and I am proud of that. I also disagree with certain parts of the Quran or Islamic culture. But this does not mean that 'they' force me to believe in what they believe in.

Comparing the online discourse of far-right groups

As expected (H3), nativism is less salient in the online discourse of far-right parties than of non-institutionalized groups. Followers of *UKIP*,

FN and *AfD* generally mention the political elite relatively often compared to movements and communities and focus less on Islam and immigrants.

The Dutch case differs from this picture, since discontent on Dutch far-right online communities also strongly revolves around anti-elitism. The open political opportunities for the far-right in the Netherlands could perhaps explain this. Wilders has considerable electoral support. Consequently, his anti-Islam stance figures prominently in the traditional media and political debate. At the same time, however, all established parties ignore or criticize the PVV.

Parties and non-institutionalized groups also differ in the extremeness of the discursive practices of their followers. As expected, we find that British and German movements employ indeed a more extreme nativist discourse than parties (H4). In France, however, differences in extremeness between the different types of groups are not as evident. FN and the Identitarian Movements seem to hardly differ from each other in this respect, whereas French community pages are often less extreme in their frames than both FN and movement pages.

Conclusion and discussion

This article investigated the networks and discourses of far-right Facebook pages in Western Europe. Our findings show that limited political opportunities for far-right parties yield more online engagement in protest politics in Britain, and that intermediate political opportunities in Germany and France result in online networks with both parties and movements. The open POS is not reflected in the Dutch online far-right network, which consists mainly of online communities.

The clustering within the far-right networks reflects the offline realm to some extent: Germany has a fragmented network composed of small separated clusters, including different far-right parties that have some success at the regional level; the French online network is relatively cohesive and centralized around a party. Overall, however, the structure of the networks cannot be clearly linked to offline political opportunities for the far-right. Most notably, in contrast with what we expected, the closed British political context has a dense, centralized online network structured around a prominent movement (*EDL*). Allen (2011: 286) notes that its exceptional, inclusive strategy led to a broad, 'multicultural' coalition: 'unlike other far-right organizations, the *EDL* is proud to recognize and proclaim its diversity'.

Secondly, our research analysed the discursive practices of supporters of far-right groups. Our findings show that the comments on pages of far-right

groups clearly differ between types of actors. Online followers of parties discuss the national and European political elite more often and focus less on immigration and Islam than social movements and communities. Furthermore, discourse on party-related pages is generally less extreme than on pages of movements. Thus, the distinction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized groups is relevant. Additionally, our study highlights that there are different types of non-institutionalized groups. Except for the French case, community pages were generally more anti-elitist compared to social movement pages. Moreover, community pages were often less extreme in their discursive practices than movements.

Sometimes the division between parties, movements and communities cannot be easily made. Different types of groups sometimes overlap: for instance, some community pages focused on supporting a specific party or leader (e.g. PVV supporters) and some groups are so-called 'party-movements' (e.g. Britain First). Further research could focus more on the overlap and differences between types of online far-right groups.

Our comparison of far-right online groups across four European countries serves as a robustness check to determine whether our findings hold in different contexts. No claims are made about how well the four countries represent all Western democracies, but given their variation in terms of far-right mobilization and political-institutional context, the findings could perhaps be generalizable beyond the four countries at hand.

All studies have shortcomings and our study is no exception. Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses have their limitations. First, although automated text analyses are very reliable, frequent co-occurring words do not provide a deeper understanding of discursive practices. For instance, sarcasm is difficult to detect. Therefore, we also conducted a qualitative analysis and manually read comments. The downside of this method is that we did not manually code comments. Further research could incorporate qualitative and automated analyses more systematically.

Far-right online mobilization might differ between platforms, depending on legal regulations about the harmful speech. Further research could extend cross-group and cross-national comparisons to other platforms. Due to privacy restrictions, we only selected public pages and ignored closed Facebook groups (Cleland *et al.* 2017). Moreover, like private discussions at home, closed groups cannot be considered as belonging to the 'public' discourse we studied in this paper.

Finally, our sample of followers of far-right groups might not represent the views of all far-right supporters, or of offline membership. This is not necessarily a weakness. The opinions and statements of far-right Facebook

members are interesting themselves. Nowadays, people increasingly acquire their opinions via social media. The online world is not a separate world, but part of the real world, influencing offline interactions and decisions (Awan 2016; Golder and Macy 2014). Online political involvement of far-right supporters generally extends offline, where they 'are far more likely to get involved in political activism compared with the general public' (Bartlett *et al.* 2011: 22). Facebook, thus, 'acts as a bridge to offline activism rather than a replacement' (2011: 40). Studying far-right groups online is, therefore, an important and valuable addition to studying them offline.

Notes on contributors

Ofra Klein is a PhD researcher at the European University Institute. She previously studied Social Sciences and Digital Humanities. Ofra worked as a research assistant at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. Her research interests are in the field of right-wing populism.

Jasper Muis is an assistant professor at the Sociology Department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research interests include right-wing populism and protest behaviour. His dissertation (2012) about the rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands received the prestigious Dutch Research Prize of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Ofra Klein http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6847-1015

References

Akkerman, T., De Lange, S.L. and Rooduijn, M. (2016) *Radical Right-wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?*, London: Routledge.

Allen, C. (2011) 'Opposing islamification or promoting islamophobia? Understanding the English defence League', *Patterns of Prejudice* 45(4): 279–94.

Arzheimer, K. (2015) 'The AfD's Facebook wall: a new hub for far-right mobilisation in Germany?', paper presented at APSA annual meeting, San Francisco, USA, September 3–6.

Atton, C. (2006) 'Far-right media on the internet: culture, discourse and power', *New Media & Society* 8(4): 573–87.

Awan, I. (2016) 'Islamophobia on social media: a qualitative analysis of the Facebook's walls of Hate', *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 10(1): 1–20.

Backes, U. and Mudde, C. (2000) 'Germany: extremism without successful parties', *Parliamentary Affairs* 53(3): 457–68.

Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J. and Littler, M. (2011) *The New Face of Digital Populism*, London: Demos.

Bastian, M., Heymann, S. and Jacomy, M. (2009) 'Gephi: an open source software for exploring and manipulating networks', paper presented at the international AAAI conference on weblogs and social media, San Jose, USA, May 17–20.

Bird, S., Klein, E. and Loper, E. (2009) *Natural Language Processing with Python*, Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media Incorporation.

Burris, V., Smith, E., and Strahm, A. (2000) 'White supremacist networks on the Internet', *Sociological Focus* 33(2): 215–35.

Caiani, M., Della Porta, D. and Wagemann, C. (2012) *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Caiani, M. and Parenti, L. (2013) *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

Caren, N., Jowers, K. and Gaby, S. (2012) 'A social movement online community: Stormfront and the white nationalist movement', in J. Earl and D. A. Rohlinger (eds), *Media, Movements, and Political Change*, Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 163–93.

Chadwick, A. (2013) *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chadwick, A. and Stromer-Galley, J. (2016) 'Digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns: party decline or party renewal?', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(3): 283–93.

Cleland, J., Anderson, C. and Aldridge-Deacon, J. (2017) 'Islamophobia, war and non-muslims as victims: an analysis of online discourse on an English defence league message board', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*: 1–17.

Della Porta, D., Fernández, J., Kouki, H. and Mosca, L. (2017) *Movement Parties Against Austerity*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Edwards, G. O. (2012) 'A comparative discourse analysis of the construction of 'in-groups' in the 2005and 2010manifestos of the British national Party', *Discourse & Society* 23(3): 245–58.

Engesser, S., Fawzi, N., and Larsson, A. O. (2017) 'Populist online communication: introduction to the special issue', *Information, Communication & Society* 20(9), 1279–92.

Ernst, N., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Blassnig, S. and Esser, F. (2017) 'Extreme parties and populism: an analysis of Facebook and twitter across six countries', *Information, Communication & Society* 20(9): 1–18.

Ford, R. and Goodwin, M. J. (2014) *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, London: Routledge.

Golder, M. (2016) 'Far-right parties in Europe', *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 477–97.

Golder, S. A. and Macy, M. W. (2014) 'Digital footprints: opportunities and challenges for online social research', *Annual Review of Sociology* 40: 129–52.

Goodwin, M., Ramalingam, V. and Briggs, R. (2012) *The New Radical Right: Violent and Non-violent Movements in Europe*, London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

Greven, T. (2016) *The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States. A Comparative Perspective*, Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Hutter, S. (2014) *Protesting Economics and Culture in Western Europe: new Cleavages in Left and Right Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Immerzeel, T. (2015) 'Voting for a change: the democratic lure of populist radical right parties in voting behavior', Ph.D. thesis, Department of Sociology, Utrecht University.

Jäckle, S. and König, P. D. (2017) 'The dark side of the German 'welcome culture': investigating the causes behind attacks on refugees in 2015', *West European Politics* 40(2): 223–51.

Jagers, J. and Walgrave, S. (2007) 'Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties discourse in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research* 46(3): 319–45.

Kincaid, J. D. (2017) 'Theorizing the radical right: directions for social movements research on the right-wing social movements', *Sociology Compass* 11(5): 1–10.

Kitschelt, H. (2007) 'Growth and persistence of the radical right in postindustrial democracies: advances and challenges in comparative research', *West European Politics* 30(5): 1176–206.

Koopmans, R. (1996) 'Explaining the rise of racist and extreme right violence in Western Europe: grievances or opportunities?', *European Journal of Political Research* 30(2): 185–216.

Koopmans, R., Statham, P., Giugni, M. and Passy, F. (2005) *Contested Citizenship: Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Europe*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maan, N., Schmid, F., Hametner, M., Šlerka, J., Ausserhofer, J. and Puschmann, C. (2017) 'Le Pen schenkt HC ein like: Wie sich europas rechte vernetzen', *Der Standard*, 24 May.

McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. D. and Zald, M. N. (1996) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Minkenberg, M. (2003) 'The West European radical right as a collective actor: modelling the impact of cultural and structural variables on party formation and movement mobilization', *Comparative European Politics* 1(2): 149–70.

Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. (2016) 'Introduction to the populist radical right', in C. Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader*, New York NY: Routledge, pp. 1–10.

Muis, J. and Immerzeel, T. (2017) 'Causes and consequences of the rise of populist radical right parties and movements in Europe', *Current Sociology* 65(6): 909–30.

Muis, J. (2015) 'The rise and demise of the Dutch extreme right: discursive opportunities and support for the center democrats in the 1990s', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 20(1), 41–60.

Piven, F. F. and Cloward, R. A. (1979) *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, New York NY: Vintage.

Przeworski, A. and Sprague, J. (1986). *Paper Stones*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rieder, B. (2013) 'Studying Facebook via data extraction: the Netvizz application', *Proceedings of the 5th Annual ACM Web Science Conference*: 346–55.

Rydgren, J. (2005) 'Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family', *European Journal of Political Research* 44(3): 413–37.

Saal, O. (2016) 'On patrol with the new German vigilantes' in M. Fielitz and L. L. Laloire (eds.), *Trouble on the Far-right. Contemporary Right-wing Strategies and Practices in Europe*, Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 73–8.

Shen, Z., Ma, K. L. and Eliassi-Rad, T. (2006) 'Visual analysis of large heterogeneous social networks by semantic and structural abstraction', *IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics* 12(6): 1427–39.

Stier, S., Posch, L., Bleier, A. and Strohmaier, M. (2017) 'When populists become popular: comparing Facebook use by the right-wing movement Pegida and German political parties', *Information, Communication & Society* 20(9): 1–24.

Zhou, Y., Reid, E., Qin, J., Chen, H. and Lai, G. (2005) 'US domestic extremist groups on the web: link and content analysis', *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 20(5): 44–51.

Zuckerman, E. (2015) 'Cute cats to the rescue? Participatory media and political expression', in D. Allen and J. Light (eds.), *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in the Digital age*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 131–54.