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The New Front of the Epistemological War: Digital Radicalization Dynamics and Humor Strategies of the Far-Right

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how digital media environments have transformed far-right ideologies by integrating memetic communication, algorithmic amplification, and decentralized networks. Drawing on Cass Sunstein's theory of radicalization and Manuel Castells' network society framework, the study demonstrates that humor—especially in the form of memes—functions as an epistemological weapon, blurring the line between truth and fiction and facilitating the normalization of extremist discourse. Encrypted platforms such as Telegram enable the reproduction of echo chambers, reinforcing ideological isolation and fostering transnational coordination without centralized authority. Far-right actors strategically use irony, satire, and visual culture to disseminate exclusionary narratives, especially targeting younger audiences. Social media algorithms intensify this process by promoting emotionally charged content, thus reinforcing ideological bubbles. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on literature review and conceptual analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital radicalization mechanisms. It concludes that far-right digital strategies pose a profound threat to democratic discourse by reshaping how individuals perceive truth, identity, and political participation. To counter this, systemic responses must include algorithmic transparency, ethical platform governance, and investment in digital literacy to promote epistemic resilience. The research contributes to the broader understanding of how ideology and technology intersect in the age of digitally mediated extremism.

Keywords : Far-Right, Digital Radicalization, Humor, Algorithms, Meme Culture

Epistemolojik Savaşın Yeni Cephesi: Aşırı Sağın Dijital Radikalleşme Dinamikleri ve Mizah Stratejileri

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, dijital medya ortamlarının aşırı sağ ideolojileri nasıl dönüştürdüğünü; memetik iletişim, algoritmik etkileşim ve merkeziyetsiz dijital ağlar çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Cass Sunstein'in radikalleşme kuramı ve Manuel Castells'in ağ toplumu yaklaşımı doğrultusunda, mizahın—özellikle memeler yoluyla—hakikat ile

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kurgu arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştıran bir epistemolojik silah olarak işlev gördüğü ortaya konulmuştur. Telegram gibi şifreli platformlar, yankı odalarının yeniden üretimini sağlayarak bireylerin bilgi izolasyonunu derinleştirir ve merkezi bir otorite olmaksızın ulusötesi örgütlenmeyi mümkün kılar. Aşırı sağ aktörler, ironi, hiciv ve görsel kültür aracılığıyla dışlayıcı söylemleri yayarken özellikle genç kitleleri hedef alır. Sosyal medya algoritmaları bu süreci duygusal açıdan yüklü içerikleri öne çıkararak güçlendirir. Çalışma, literatür taraması ve kavramsal analiz yoluyla dijital radikalleşme mekanizmalarına ilişkin bütüncül bir değerlendirme sunar. Sonuç olarak, dijital aşırı sağ stratejilerin bireylerin hakikat, kimlik ve siyasal katılım algısını dönüştürerek demokratik söylemi tehdit ettiği vurgulanır. Bu tehditle başa çıkmak için algoritmik şeffaflık, etik platform yönetişimi ve dijital medya okuryazarlığı gibi sistematik önlemler önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Aşırı Sağ, Dijital Radikalleşme, Mizah, Algoritmalar, Meme Kültürü

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has profoundly transformed not only political communication but also the ideological architectures and mobilization strategies of far-right movements. Over the past decade, the convergence of memetic culture, social media algorithms, and encrypted communication platforms has facilitated a new form of radicalization, one that is decentralized, emotionally resonant, and epistemologically destabilizing, particularly in its challenge to mainstream truth regimes, journalistic authority, and scientific credibility. Classical far-right ideologies, traditionally grounded in ethnic nationalism and authoritarianism, have been reconfigured into dynamic digital ecosystems where humor, irony, and visual symbolism serve as ideological vectors disguised as entertainment.

Within this context, digital platforms function as both arenas of discourse and infrastructures of political manipulation. Algorithmically generated echo chambers and emotionally charged content create environments where radical ideas are normalized, while humor operates as a powerful ideological weapon that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. This memetic reframing not only conceals extremist rhetoric under the guise of "just a joke" but also fosters collective identity, amplifies exclusionary narratives, and enables plausible deniability for hate speech.

Moreover, closed and encrypted platforms such as Telegram, Discord, and Gab play a central role in circumventing mainstream content moderation, thereby activating radicalization mechanisms such as information isolation, intragroup validation, and prestige signaling, mechanisms identified in Cass Sunstein's theory of radicalization. When examined through Manuel Castells' network society theory, these far-right structures reveal an adaptive and resilient organizational model: decentralized, culturally hybrid, and transnational in scope.

Anchored in Sunstein's radicalization theory, Castells' network society framework, and memetic theory, the analysis examines how far-right actors leverage digital affordances to reconstruct identity, spread disinformation, and erode democratic norms. While Castells provides a macro-level understanding of how digital network architectures enable decentralized, transnational political movements, Sunstein offers a micro-level view of how these very environments foster individual and group-level radicalization through information isolation and echo chambers. By linking the structural affordances of networked communication with cognitive mechanisms of ideological entrenchment, the study reveals how digital platforms simultaneously shape and amplify far-right mobilization.

Finally, this study adopts a qualitative research framework based on conceptual analysis and an extensive literature review. The primary data sources include academic articles, books, and reports published between 2010 and 2025. Literature primarily derives from the fields of communication studies, media sociology, and political science. The methodological process involved identifying recurring themes in memetic strategies, digital communication affordances, and ideological framing techniques across far-right digital ecosystems. These themes were then interpreted through the lens of Cass Sunstein's radicalization theory and Manuel Castells' network society framework, which served as analytical tools for mapping both the micro-level psychological dynamics and macro-level structural patterns of digital radicalization. Rather than focusing on a specific case study or conducting empirical or statistical analysis, the article synthesizes theoretical insights to explore the epistemological functions and symbolic tactics of the far-right. While this methodological design limits the generalizability of the findings, it enhances conceptual clarity and analytical depth. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are not intended to be directly applicable to specific empirical contexts but instead aim to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding of digital radicalization.

1. CASS SUNSTEIN'S THEORY OF RADICALIZATION AND THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In his work *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Cass Sunstein examines the process of radicalization within human groups and their relationship with truth, analyzing several mechanisms that influence this process (2009, pp. 3–4). According to Sunstein, individuals are more likely to develop radical views when they become part of a group composed of like-minded individuals. In particular, when authoritarian figures tell group members what to do or assign them specific social roles, such groups may become more dangerous. Various studies have shown that the congregation of like-minded people tends to push them toward more extreme views. For instance, it has been found that white Americans with strong racial prejudices became even more prejudiced when they discussed issues among themselves; individuals who supported the Iraq War became more convinced of its legitimacy

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after engaging in discussions with those holding similar views; and real estate investors who gathered and shared a favorable stance on investments became more inclined to invest.

These examples demonstrate that individuals with similar opinions have the potential to gravitate toward more radical versions of those views. According to Sunstein, the most effective way to form a radical group is to isolate its members from the rest of society. This isolation can be both physical and psychological, and it serves to delegitimize external viewpoints (Sunstein, 2009, p. 22).

Accordingly, there are three fundamental mechanisms that facilitate the polarization and radicalization of a group. The first mechanism is the one-directional flow of information, which is seen as the main cause of polarization. Group members share only information that reinforces their own views, leading them to adopt more extreme attitudes. The second mechanism is the desire for validation. Individuals who gather with others sharing similar opinions become more confident in their beliefs and begin to make sharper judgments. The third mechanism is based on the desire to maintain status within the group. To preserve a positive image, individuals adopt attitudes and behaviors that conform to group norms. These mechanisms are especially amplified in online environments. In this sense, the internet facilitates a form of "cyber-balkanization". Individuals interact only with content tailored to their interests, thereby avoiding exposure to opposing views. This condition exacerbates polarization on digital platforms and allows extreme ideas to gain wider support (Sunstein, 2009, pp. 23–27, 79–80).

The algorithmic structures of social media platforms also support this process. These platforms aim to keep users engaged for longer periods by offering content aligned with their interests. To achieve this, algorithms analyze users' past interactions to present them with similar content, creating a personalized experience (Pariser, 2011; Tufekci, 2015). However, this process leads to users encountering only content that supports their own beliefs, resulting in the formation of closed information environments known as "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2017; Flaxman et al., 2016). In parallel, Aral (2022, pp. 120–121) emphasizes that social media algorithms trap individuals within specific information bubbles, significantly reducing their chances of encountering alternative views. Similarly, Webb (2021, p. 114) states that these algorithmic processes are driven by large technology companies, which, motivated by profit, focus on developing products and services that foster user dependency on their platforms.

This condition, intensified by the presence of echo chambers, has become a significant factor in deepening societal polarization. Sunstein (2017, p. 8) argues that political polarization intensifies as individuals increasingly gravitate toward groups sharing their views, making it more difficult to produce rational solutions. He also suggests that even if cognitive isolation affects only a small group of voters, their strong convictions can have a disproportionate

influence on political processes. In this context, the spread of misinformation constitutes a critical part of the algorithmically shaped digital information ecosystem. Since the primary goal of algorithms is to maximize users' time on platforms, sensational and attention-grabbing content is promoted. However, this creates a fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of unverified or deliberately false information.

Olanipekun (2025, p. 913) emphasizes that social media platforms, through algorithms, contribute to the spread of misinformation and possess a structure that encourages the circulation of disinformation. Similarly, Melhem et al. (2024, p. 241) state that propaganda content is disseminated by targeting specific groups and that algorithms amplify certain discourses, thereby increasing societal polarization. In this respect, the manipulative potential of social media platforms is also noteworthy. Fry (2018, pp. 48–49), through the Cambridge Analytica scandal, demonstrates how social media companies analyzed users' psychological profiles and guided them toward specific messages, thereby influencing their political preferences. Through micro-targeting, content tailored to individuals' cognitive needs is delivered, and this process leads to their unconscious manipulation.

Furthermore, social media platforms not only control individuals' access to information but also shape their emotional responses. To ensure users spend more time on the platform, algorithms prioritize content that triggers the most intense emotional reactions. Aral (2022, p. 260) notes that social media algorithms optimize content to capture users' attention and that this process is shaped by users' emotional responses. Especially content that evokes strong emotions such as anger, fear, and surprise is prioritized by algorithms due to its higher interaction potential. Additionally, Olivieri (2024, p. 156) emphasizes that algorithms analyze users' emotional reactions to estimate which content will generate more engagement, and this process adversely affects individuals' ability to make independent decisions. O'Neil (2020, pp. 196–197) reveals that big data systems unconsciously steer users toward specific thought patterns and that this manipulation occurs without their awareness. Thus, the content provided by social media platforms does not merely serve an informative function but also shapes users' emotional responses and, consequently, their cognitive orientations.

These algorithmic processes have a direct influence on political discourse and electoral processes. Social media platforms, especially during election periods, can shape voters' political preferences and facilitate more effective propaganda mechanisms. Matlack et al. (2024, p. 2) note that social media played a central role in events such as the 2020 U.S. Capitol attack and that online propaganda mechanisms directly intervened in electoral processes. Similarly, Melhem et al. (2024, p. 241) assert that propaganda networks create highly centralized structures that accelerate the spread of provocative messages prior to elections. Social media platforms, aiming to maximize users' attention, analyze their emotional responses to deliver content, thus facilitating their orientation toward specific viewpoints. Olivieri (2024, p. 156) argues that algorithms expose users only to certain types of content,

thereby reducing cognitive diversity. Aral (2022, pp. 263–264) emphasizes that the attention economy is built entirely on a profit-oriented model, which leads to user behavior being subjected to certain forms of manipulation. In this context, the power of algorithms to shape political discourse increases the likelihood of intervention in electoral processes and becomes a direct factor influencing democratic participation. The relationship between algorithms and politics —particularly the far-right— becomes pronounced in these settings.

2. IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE FAR-RIGHT

Within the scope of this study, far-right ideology is based on the concept of an "essence" attributed to a specific group. This essence is considered a quality that has historically belonged to the group and is inherently present in every individual member from birth. This "superior essence," typically associated with a particular race, is believed to be absent in other groups. Therefore, far-right ideology advocates that those who possess this essence should naturally occupy a superior position in society, evaluating the social order through a hierarchical and security-oriented lens. This perceived superiority can only be preserved through a securitarian perspective and the use of force. In this context, far-right ideology places immigration and security issues at its core, framing them as threats to national security.

In the United States specifically, far-right ideology represents a worldview grounded in ethnic nationalism, exclusionary policies, and authoritarian elements. At the heart of this ideology lies the belief that a particular group (most often the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity) is naturally superior to others and that this superiority must be preserved on both cultural and political levels (Balleck, 2014). In this regard, the far-right promotes conspiracy theories such as the "Great Replacement," which claims that —left-liberal-leaning— Western elites are deliberately replacing the native white population with immigrants (Neiwert, 2017). These narratives foster fear and paranoia in society by suggesting that immigrants have high crime rates, thereby aiming to legitimize anti-immigration policies in the public sphere (Mudde, 2022, pp. 44–45).

Moreover, the far-right portrays the current political order as corrupted, often attributing this corruption to “other” groups—immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals. This rhetoric serves to glorify authoritarian leaders as “the voice of the people against the system” (Berger, 2018). Potok (2015) emphasizes that such movements manipulate the masses by claiming to hold a monopoly on truth, thus suggesting that the far-right poses not only a political but also an epistemological threat.

In addition, Mudde (2018) argues that far-right ideologies can be divided into two categories based on their attitudes toward democracy: the extreme right and the radical right. The extreme right outright rejects the core principles of democracy, while the radical right accepts democracy only instrumentally, rejecting liberal democratic values such as pluralism,

minority rights, and the rule of law. In other words, while the extreme right tends to legitimize political violence as a tool, the radical right seeks to institutionalize its authoritarian tendencies within a legal framework (Mudde, 2018, p. 2).

The historical roots of the American far-right lie in the ideology of "nativism," which posits that the country rightfully belongs to the native white population. This idea took organized form in the 19th century with parties such as the "Know Nothing" movement (Mudde, 2018, pp. 4-5). In the mid-20th century, the rise of racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan brought forth more violent forms of this ideology. Balleck (2014) notes that such movements often reemerge during periods of crisis, as political or economic instability creates space for the far-right to expand.

In the 1990s, far-right groups organized around constitutional themes such as the "Second Amendment" and gained attention with the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. This attack revealed the far-right's capacity for direct violence and led to increased government repression. However, with the election of President Obama in 2012 and the subsequent cultural fractures, these movements regained momentum (Neiwert, 2017). Events such as the September 11 attacks, the 2008 Financial Crisis, and the 2015 Refugee Crisis provided fertile ground for both Islamophobic and anti-globalist discourses, significantly amplifying the American public's economic and cultural security concerns.

These dynamics created space for the far-right to grow. Berger (2020) observes that during this period, the far-right redefined its organizational structure within digital spaces, moving away from centralized leadership and toward network-based formations. The new era that Neiwert (2017) terms "Alt-America" denotes the phase during which far-right ideologies began to penetrate mainstream politics. Within this context, Donald J. Trump's presidency is seen as a period in which far-right ideas became normalized within the Republican Party and were disseminated through the media. Potok (2019) argues that this shift moved the far-right "from the margins to the center," dramatically deepening political polarization.

Accordingly, it can be asserted that Trump's rise in the political arena coincided with the resurgence of far-right movements. Particularly in light of Mudde's conceptualization of the far-right paradigm, it seems more accurate to classify Trump within the radical right. Indeed, the anger and exclusionary attitudes of the white working class toward other ethnic groups and minorities played a decisive role in Trump's ascent. These sentiments are fundamentally rooted in deep anxieties among white Americans over losing their identity and economic status due to immigration (Mudde, 2018, p. 33).

White Americans from the lower and middle classes, in particular, blamed immigrants for deteriorating living conditions. This belief, combined with Trump's harsh anti-immigration rhetoric, earned him widespread support. Additionally, demographic projections that the white population will become a numerical minority in the U.S. by 2043 (Butt & Khalid,

2018, pp. 113–114) reinforced fears of demographic decline. These demographic concerns and economic insecurities helped Trump's populist and nationalist policies resonate with the public, making him a powerful figure among those who supported far-right ideologies. As Blee (2002) argues, individual belonging and social ties within far-right movements are as decisive as ideological commitment.

2.1. Alt-Right as the Digital Expression of Far-Right Politics

The digital representation of the far-right is conceptualized through the term *alt-right*. The relationship between the far-right and the alternative right (alt-right) can be analyzed along both ideological and strategic continuities. In this regard, the alternative right functions as a digitally rebranded and technologically mediated version of traditional far-right politics. While the far-right encompasses movements characterized by extremist tendencies such as nativism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia, the alt-right conveys similar messages through digital culture, network-based infrastructures, and meme aesthetics, presenting them in a style that is more accessible and appealing to online youth audiences (Thompson & Hawley, 2021; Brown et al., 2021).

One significant dimension of this relationship lies in the shared ideological tendencies between the two. The literature frequently points out that alt-right discourse often echoes core themes of the traditional far-right, such as white nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment. For instance, Valasik and Reid (2023) demonstrate that alt-right groups share common narratives centered around white identity and supremacy, presenting these narratives in a less overtly aggressive form. In this way, the alt-right can be regarded as a reformulated version of far-right ideology, serving as a bridge between online millennial culture and deeply rooted far-right political movements (Ganesh, 2020).

Another important dimension is the role digital platforms play in blurring the boundaries between these two phenomena. Alternative digital ecosystems like Gab are identified as spaces where both alt-right and broader far-right discourses are nurtured and strengthened (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022). These digital environments enable the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged and provocative content, facilitate operational specialization, and mainstream the discursive violence of traditional far-right rhetoric (Donovan et al., 2018). These digital restructurings allow the alt-right to maintain an independent presence while simultaneously transforming far-right narratives, shifting the Overton window toward greater societal acceptance of extremist ideas (Thompson & Hawley, 2021; Brown et al., 2021).

In this context, the alt-right is understood as a digitally reconstituted form of traditional far-right ideologies. Through aesthetic tools such as humor, irony, and visual symbols, these ideologies are made more accessible to wider and younger audiences in online spaces, thereby

constructing a new form of radicalization in the digital realm. Nevertheless, to ensure conceptual coherence in this study, the term "far-right" is employed as an umbrella concept, with digital practices examined as contemporary derivatives of this primary category.

2.2. Populist Logic of the Far-Right

Building on this framework, it is essential to note that the digital transformation of the far-right does not operate in isolation from broader political strategies. Far-right movements have increasingly incorporated authoritarian populist elements to expand their mass appeal and challenge liberal-democratic institutions. This convergence is not coincidental; rather, it reflects a calculated synthesis of populist political style with exclusionary, nativist, and authoritarian ideologies. Core to this synthesis is the portrayal of a virtuous and homogeneous "people" in conflict with a corrupt and disconnected elite—a structure that forms the conceptual basis of populism as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 5–7). By fusing this antagonistic binary with authoritarian governance tactics, far-right actors develop a potent political formula that undermines democratic pluralism.

Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populism becomes particularly volatile when embedded within broader ideological projects like the radical right, which emphasize nativism and authoritarianism (2017, pp. 32–36). In such instances, populism serves not to enhance democratic responsiveness, but to erode institutional constraints, delegitimize dissent, and centralize power. Far-right leaders often use elections and democratic mandates to dismantle the very systems that legitimize them—an authoritarian use of democratic form.

Benjamin Moffitt's theory of populism as a political style further illuminates this process. According to Moffitt, populist leaders thrive through the performance of crisis, constructing political narratives that dramatize social instability and position themselves as the only viable solution (2020, pp. 180-186). This perpetual crisis performance allows far-right populists to cultivate a state of urgency, reinforcing their moral claim to represent the "real people" against the elite. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, became a stage for populist crisis politics, as seen in the far-right's framing of health regulations as authoritarian overreach—mirroring earlier mobilizations like PEGIDA during the refugee crisis (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).

In his study on authoritarian populism and the environment, John McCarthy illustrates how populist-authoritarian regimes weaponize localism and cultural protectionism to undermine environmental regulations and civic resistance (2019, pp. 302–308). By fusing nativist rhetoric with critiques of globalism and liberal institutions, these regimes position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty. This strategy reflects a deeper authoritarian logic: the marginalization of civil society, criminalization of opposition, and re-framing of pluralism as national weakness.

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These core theoretical perspectives are complemented by empirical insights. For instance, the securitization of migration remains central to far-right populist discourse. In Europe, immigrants are often depicted as existential threats to national identity, thereby transforming migration from a policy challenge into a cultural crisis (Štefančík et al., 2021; Karataşlı & Kumral, 2022). Such framing reinforces the us-versus-them logic described by Moffitt and Mudde, facilitating nationalist mobilization and democratic erosion.

Furthermore, Krzyżanowski and Ekström (2022) demonstrate how far-right populist rhetoric becomes normalized in public discourse through media diffusion. The mainstreaming of exclusionary narratives shifts political boundaries, enabling far-right actors to appear as legitimate stakeholders while subtly dismantling democratic norms. This aligns with Moffitt's contention that media visibility, even in conflict, benefits populist leaders (2020, pp. 82–86).

Finally, socio-psychological and economic vulnerabilities also enhance receptivity to authoritarian populist appeals. McCarthy emphasizes that feelings of marginalization—especially in economically declining regions—are harnessed by far-right movements to generate protest voting and loyalty through emotional identification rather than policy coherence (2019, pp. 309–311). The promise of restored pride and order resonates with those who feel abandoned by liberal democratic structures.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS OF THE FAR-RIGHT IN DIGITAL SPACES

Far-right movements are becoming increasingly organized and effective through the use of social media platforms, alternative media networks, and digital propaganda techniques. In this regard, the far-right develops various strategies to reach wide audiences in the digital realm, disseminate its narratives, silence opponents, and attract new supporters. At this point, Manuel Castells' theory of the "network society" offers a critical theoretical framework for analyzing how digital communication networks fundamentally transform social structures and enable contemporary political mobilization. According to Castells, modern society is no longer shaped around centralized and hierarchical structures but rather through fluid, multi-centered digital networks connected via information and communication technologies (Castells, 2010). This approach helps to explain how far-right groups can organize without relying on traditional leadership models and how they circulate radical ideologies in digital environments. Indeed, based on Castells' framework, Anttiroiko (2015) emphasizes that power flows not from the center but through dispersed digital networks, which can mobilize individuals rapidly based on shared beliefs and emotional bonds.

This networked structure allows far-right groups to communicate in low-cost and real-time formats through digital infrastructures such as social media platforms, online forums, and encrypted messaging applications. Consequently, they create alternative public spheres beyond the control of state authorities and traditional media oversight. These spheres are

evaluated within Castells' concept of "networks of outrage and hope" and function as political spaces where anti-system actors can disseminate their narratives without institutional censorship (Castells, 2012).

Furthermore, the network society represents not only an organizational but also a cultural transformation. Digital technologies not only facilitate communication but also reshape cultural expressions of everyday life, giving rise to a technoculture where political identity is constructed performatively (Castells, 2010; Castells, 2012). Wijayanto (2023) highlights that this cultural transformation is functional for far-right groups in constructing collective identities and normalizing radical discourses through meme aesthetics, viral content, and algorithmically promoted messages. Castells (2009) also stresses that communicative power involves not only the control of information but also the shaping of identities; in this context, digital media produces not only content but also meaning.

Revisiting the theory of the network society in a contemporary context, Fernández-Ardèvol and Ribera-Fumaz (2022) argue that the digital processes envisioned by Castells have matured structurally and now enable the permanent organization of political mobilization over digital infrastructures. They claim that far-right movements use advanced digital networks not only for propaganda but also to forge transnational ideological ties, create discursive unity, and coordinate offline actions. As such, the network society is not merely a communication medium but also a catalyst that provides momentum and continuity for far-right mobilization.

Aligned with Castells' theory of spatial transformation, digital networks present not only a communication channel but also a new spatial order in which the public sphere is reconstituted. Knox (2021) states that modern digital interactions redefine the boundaries of political participation and that echo chambers created in virtual spaces serve to entrench radical political participation. Far-right actors use this spatial reconfiguration to build closed communities, parallel public spheres, and centers of radical discourse. This illustrates how the flexibility and speed of the network society, as conceptualized by Castells, are effectively instrumentalized by far-right groups.

These digital practices transform the organizational forms of the far-right by enabling a shift from centralized leadership to network-based, flexible, and autonomous structures (Cesarino & Nardelli, 2021, pp. 16–17). Atar (2024, p. 220) notes that social media functions as a platform and lever for reinforcing far-right discourses. Additionally, the far-right reinforces its narratives by creating echo chambers on alternative digital platforms with limited oversight. In this context, Miller-Idriss (2023, p. 223) argues that the far-right accelerates radicalization by using both mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Twitter (renamed as "X"), Facebook, and alternative platforms like Gab and Parler, steering users toward more extreme views through the formation of echo chambers. These platforms' algorithmic and

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anonymous structures allow the leaderless far-right movement to reach more young people (Winter, 2019, p. 50). Consequently, these platforms help construct a discourse that challenges the legitimacy of mainstream media narratives and reinforces a "us vs. them" binary (Davis, 2019, p. 4).

Another prominent strategy of the far-right in the digital realm is the use of tactics defined as cyber guerrilla warfare. Cesarino and Nardelli (2021, pp. 17, 19) explain far-right online activities through the concept of "digital guerrilla warfare," drawing parallels with traditional military strategies. These tactics include smokescreening (dissemination of misleading information), false flagging (attacks under false identities), and firehosing (flooding the public with large volumes of disinformation). The core objective of these strategies is to create informational chaos, weaken credible sources of information, and deepen societal polarization. For example, during the 2020 U.S. elections, far-right groups systematically spread claims of electoral fraud—one of the leading narratives behind the January 6 Insurrection (Masalha & Baş, 2023, p. 159).

Far-right media outlets like Breitbart and InfoWars play a crucial role in empowering the far-right in digital spaces. Breitbart, in this context, formed close ties with the Trump administration, mainstreaming far-right ideologies by spreading anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and anti-globalist discourses. With a large following on social media, Breitbart frames its news as “truths censored by liberal media,” leading its readers to rely exclusively on far-right media sources (Davis, 2019, pp. 5–6). These outlets propagate conspiracy theories such as “cultural Marxism,” interpreting social events through an ideologically skewed lens (Dafaure, 2020, p. 16).

The influence of this media structure in digital spaces is not limited to content production; it also contributes to the transformation of organizational structures through online platforms that facilitate interpersonal communication and decentralized decision-making. Far-right digital networks, therefore, not only produce propaganda but also develop models of mobilization based on direct participant interaction. Zhang and Davis (2022) describe such digital structures as “amorphous assemblages” — loosely connected online communities centered around ideology and lacking a centralized command chain. These decentralized structures, operating in anonymous and low-cost communication environments, allow for the rapid organization of spontaneous actions and enable far-right actors to create spaces independent of state control. Similarly, Rothut et al. (2023) show that German-speaking far-right influencer networks on Telegram distribute authority across many subgroups instead of centralizing it, thereby creating more flexible and resilient structures.

Another critical dimension of these digital organizational forms is their transnational character. Far-right networks often transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, constructing

global public spheres where interaction occurs without the necessity of shared language, territory, or institutional coordination. Doerr (2017) demonstrates that such groups foster cultural cohesion across disparate communities through the circulation of shared racist imagery and symbols, forming transnational symbolic repertoires in response to perceived collective threats such as immigration. These visual and discursive tools function as vehicles for the construction of a common ideological framework, enabling far-right actors to bypass linguistic and cultural barriers and mobilize across geopolitical contexts. This transnational infrastructure is not only symbolic but also algorithmically sustained. As Noble (2018) emphasizes, digital platforms—particularly search engines like Google—play an active role in amplifying and legitimizing racist ideologies through algorithmically curated content. These algorithmic processes do not merely reflect user input but reinforce existing biases, contributing to the infrastructural entrenchment of far-right discourse. Consequently, the interplay of user-generated content, algorithmic visibility, and aesthetic strategies creates a dynamic ecosystem in which far-right ideologies are not only disseminated but structurally elevated.

The organizational dynamics of these decentralized networks are based on the principles of "connective action" as defined by Bennett and Segerberg (2015). In this model, individuals come together through personalized communication channels and transform into broader political forces without requiring centralized authority. Far-right movements use this flexibility to reconstruct their mobilization strategies in real time, allowing them to quickly respond to countermeasures or target new areas of influence. Supporting this view, Urman and Katz (2020) reveal that far-right networks on platforms like Telegram are highly decentralized, with influence and coordination distributed along ideological or national lines. One advantage of these structures is the dispersion of responsibility and risk across different nodes, ensuring that the removal of a single subgroup or platform does not collapse the entire network.

The use of encrypted communication tools enhances privacy and security at the outset—an aspect that is vital for far-right actors operating in environments of intense state surveillance and anti-extremist interventions. Rothut et al. (2023) emphasize that the operational environment of far-right groups necessitates the protection of participants from potential legal repercussions or social exclusion, making anonymity and encryption essential. These encrypted digital platforms thus function as safe spaces where members can freely express thoughts, develop strategies, and coordinate actions, while avoiding the risks posed by more open and insecure platforms.

Moreover, these platforms also allow for the formation of specialized subgroups focused on specific action domains. These structures enable task specialization in areas such as propaganda production, logistical planning for rallies, or fundraising. Jasser et al. (2021) argue that platforms like Gab provide spaces where different far-right factions can unite to

share common victimhood narratives and develop collective responses to the "technosocial repression" imposed by mainstream social media. This specialization supports a structurally diverse movement, where different groups operate on targeted issues while serving a shared ideological framework.

These semi-private communication channels also enable selective participation and information sharing within closed structures. Zehring and Domahidi (2023) reveal that during the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right online communities integrated conspiracy theories into their ideologies and used encrypted groups to operationalize both thematic agendas and broader extremist narratives. This thematic adaptability increases the action capacity of these structures by uniting different interests under a shared ideological umbrella. At the same time, the effectiveness of communication is further enhanced through visual content commonly used in far-right discourses. Rothut et al. (2023) emphasize that the use of memes, images, and video content allows engagement with users who may not respond to text-heavy materials, thus facilitating the rapid dissemination of ideological messages in easily shareable formats. This is particularly critical in mobilization processes.

Additionally, the decentralized nature of these platforms prevents the emergence of a singular authority, thereby complicating infiltration efforts by anti-extremist groups or law enforcement. Zhang and Davis (2022) argue that this structural resemblance aligns closely with the operational organization of radical Islamist groups, enabling internal communication, event planning, and training processes to occur without centralized supervision. These formations create a networked system in which individuals assume roles in their areas of expertise without direct orders, providing operational efficiency through a shared collective drive toward a common goal.

3.1.Weaponizing Humor in Far-Right Digital Discourse

One of the most striking methods developed by far-right movements through the process of digitalization is the strategic use of humor as an ideological tool. In this context, memetic propaganda occupies a central position in the far-right's online communication strategies. Dafaure (2020, p. 2) emphasizes that the process known as the "Great Meme War" refers to the efforts of far-right groups to disseminate political messages through humorous, ironic, and visual content in order to reach broader audiences. Platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and Telegram have become hubs for far-right propaganda activities; through the content produced on these platforms, mainstream media is positioned as an ideological enemy (Dafaure, 2020, p. 20). Humorous content is shaped by attacks on political opponents as well as messages centered on "racial awareness" and "anti-immigration," thus presenting far-right ideologies as a natural part of popular culture and making them more easily adopted, especially among young users.

In this context, political humor functions as a powerful ideological instrument in far-right digital discourse. Such humor normalizes exclusionary ideas by concealing extreme ideological rhetoric behind layers of irony and satire, while simultaneously preserving a foundation for plausible deniability. McSwiney and Sengul (2023) focus on how far-right groups strategically use humor, often through the defense of "just a joke." This strategy softens explicitly aggressive, ideological, and exclusionary content, emotionally appealing to core supporters through laughter and making marginal views more accessible to broader, seemingly apolitical audiences.

Additionally, the use of memes examined by Askanius (2021) and Greene (2019) highlights the dual function of far-right humor. These memes present ideological messages in more digestible and appealing ways, enabling the repackaging of radical political positions in humorous formats and their rapid dissemination across digital networks. In this regard, aesthetic strategies such as irony and reductive satire come to the fore. At the same time, these memes generate a shared discourse loaded with implicit ideological subtexts that strengthen in-group solidarity. This dynamic is further reinforced through tactical tools such as "hashjacking," as defined by Darius and Stephany (2019). In this strategy, far-right actors hijack popular digital hashtags and forums to disrupt mainstream political narratives and construct polarized, alternative counter-public spheres.

A key concept emerging in far-right digital culture is "redpilling." Winter (2019, p. 52) uses this term to describe the process by which individuals gravitate toward far-right ideologies and internalize these views, eventually joining radical groups. On platforms such as 4chan and Reddit, "taking the red pill" is framed as a revelation of truth and an unmasking of liberal propaganda. Through such narratives, young men are specifically targeted, and the process not only facilitates the spread of far-right ideologies but also encourages the organization of radicalized individuals and potential engagement in violent actions (Winter, 2019, p. 53).

Moreover, as McSwiney and colleagues (2021) demonstrate, the transnational circulation of such humor forms shows that far-right meme cultures are not confined to local contexts but contribute to global digital hate networks. The combination of humor and digital communication platforms creates a dual impact: on one hand, it masks ideological extremism by presenting it in softer forms; on the other, it amplifies political influence, thereby fostering the adoption of radical ideas—sometimes unknowingly—under the guise of entertainment. Similarly, Darius and Stephany (2019) emphasize that far-right digital discourse produced on platforms like Twitter embeds extreme content within seemingly harmless jokes, making humor a powerful tool for political mobilization and identity construction.

In this context, particular attention must be paid to the "us versus them" dichotomy created through meme usage. Far-right propaganda employs memetic symbols to visually and

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succinctly encode complex ideological narratives, reinforcing the distinction between "us" and "the other." In this regard, memes are used as multifunctional discursive tools that blend humor, irony, and historical references, constructing symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them" (Sakki & Pettersson, 2015; Moreno-Almeida & Gerbaudo, 2021). Through visuals, texts, and intertextual references, prejudiced meanings are integrated into everyday digital discourse, normalizing exclusionary identities and positioning "the other"—often immigrants, ethnic or religious minorities, or dissenting groups—as the source of social and political problems (Sakki & Pettersson, 2015; DeCook & Yoon, 2021). Such political othering is not merely a visual persuasion strategy but a discursive technique that obscures the visibility of extremist intent, making it more difficult for external observers to identify such content as hate propaganda (DeCook & Yoon, 2021).

Within this framework, the function of memetic symbols is multilayered. Mihailescu (2024) argues that meme creators deliberately manipulate symbolic images that align with specific ideological biases, mobilizing audiences through existing cultural prejudices. Baspehlivan's (2023) concept of "spatial ontologies" explains how digital spaces are transformed into "memescapes" through memetic symbols, redefining traditional political boundaries. Digital symbols determine fields of identity and exclusion, turning these areas into stages for political struggle. Sakki and Pettersson's (2015) research similarly reveals how far-right political blogs construct imaginary collective identities by using symbolic rhetoric to exclude "the other." These practices in blogs serve as precursors for transferring memetic symbols to wider digital platforms, reinforcing far-right propaganda centered on the "us versus them" binary.

Chagas (2024) emphasizes that the structural features of digital platforms further enhance the reach and impact of memetic symbols. Due to core dynamics of the digital environment—rapid dissemination, algorithmic amplification, and selective exposure—far-right symbols multiply quickly and gain strength through constant validation within echo chambers. Accordingly, the combination of creative symbol manipulation, identity politics in digital spaces, and the inherently viral nature of memes provides the far-right with a powerful political framework for digital othering. The far-right employs this strategy by appropriating specific meme trends.

In line with this, the movement strategically utilizes figures such as *Pepe the Frog* and *NPC* (Non-Player Character). Through these figures, the boundary between the idealized "us" and the demonized "other" is drawn using simple but emotionally charged political narratives. Initially vague and passive, these symbols have been repurposed to represent far-right identity, with humor serving to veil exclusionary political agendas. Therefore, it is worth explaining them in detail.

Pepe the Frog, initially a harmless cartoon character, was later appropriated by far-right actors as a visual shorthand for ideological messages. Askanius and Keller (2021) argue that far-right communities reinterpreted the Pepe figure as a symbol of resistance against so-called "cultural decay" and political correctness, depicting political opponents as corrupt societal elements. Pepe memes make complex ideological messages such as white identity politics and anti-system sentiment easily understandable, while the ambiguity inherent in meme imagery enables denial of accountability through humor or irony in the face of hate speech accusations. Thus, far-right discourses are normalized through seemingly harmless symbols.

Similarly, the *NPC* meme functions as an archetypal representation of the unthinking, mechanized "other." Gallagher and Topinka (2023) argue that the NPC meme consolidates reactive subcultural practices and reproduces existing ideological fault lines by mocking individuals who do not conform to far-right norms. By portraying political opponents as intellectually empty and automatic individuals, this meme belittles dissent and delegitimizes political deliberation. In this way, the political landscape is simplified, a clear symbolic figure is created around which supporters emotionally rally, and individuals labeled as "NPCs" are presented as lacking independent thought or moral reasoning, devalued "others." While humor serves as a gateway to normalize radical ideas, its application is not monolithic; different far-right factions strategically adapt memetic discourse to align with distinct ideological and cultural agendas. This strategic fragmentation merits closer examination.

3.2. Fragmentation of Far-Right Humor Strategies

Building upon the previous analysis of humor as a memetic weapon, this section delves into how diverse far-right groups utilize this tool within fragmented yet strategically coordinated digital ecosystems. Different far-right factions strategically employ digital humor and memes as tools of ideological construction and audience mobilization within decentralized online networks. This phenomenon can be observed through various mechanisms, where the multimodal nature of memes serves both to crystallize ideological values and to promote a collective sense of identity among supporters. Far-right groups utilize humor and irony, often embedding serious messages within seemingly innocuous or amusing content, thus increasing the accessibility and shareability of their narratives. For instance, Hakokӧngäs et al. highlight how Finnish far-right groups use multimodal memes to encapsulate their ideologies in concise, easily digestible formats that can attract new supporters and mobilize existing ones (Hakokӧngäs et al., 2020). Furthermore, the humor employed often challenges established social norms, as discussed by McSwiney and Sengul, who argue that comedic techniques can mainstream exclusionary discourses, thereby diminishing the perceived severity of far-right rhetoric (McSwiney & Sengul, 2023).

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Moreover, panoramic memes serve as visual narratives that reinforce collective identities and play a significant role in constructing these ideological frameworks. Hagen emphasizes how these memes act as focal points for political divisions and identity conflicts online, suggesting they have significant mobilizing power in far-right contexts (Hagen, 2022). The ability of memes to operate across different platforms facilitates a cross-pollination of ideas and strategies, allowing for a broader dissemination of far-right ideologies. For example, Kasimov et al. note differences in far-right communication styles between X and 4chan, showing how platform-specific factors influence the production and spread of memetic content during key events like the Capitol insurrection (Kasimov et al., 2023).

These digital strategies encompass a range of tactics, including framing and leveraging popular culture. Far-right movements often harness mainstream cultural references in their memes to garner sympathy or normalize radical ideas. Chagas et al. discuss how polarization on social media leads to framing strategies that both respond to and deny alternative movements, revealing the intricate interplay between humor and serious political messaging prevalent in far-right discourse (Chagas et al., 2022). The strategic use of humor also extends to apolitical arenas, which allows for rhetoric that can slip under the guise of comedy while subtly advocating specific ideologies, as evidenced in the work of Burnham et al., who explore how hateful memes can gain traction among unsuspecting audiences (Burnham et al., 2022).

In terms of transnational connectivity, the digital landscape facilitates the sharing of ideas across borders. Ristić illustrates how far-right memes have evolved to engage individuals in various cultural contexts through appeals to specific historical grievances, such as the memory of the Yugoslav wars, demonstrating the adaptability of far-right narratives and their reliance on humor and memes as tools to forge a sense of belonging and instigate collective action across decentralized networks (Ristić, 2023). Ultimately, the strategic use of digital humor and memes by far-right factions illustrates a sophisticated understanding of contemporary media dynamics. These factions have effectively turned the playful, often irreverent nature of memes into a potent tool for ideological dissemination and audience engagement, thereby reshaping public discourse in ways that challenge established norms and mobilize sentiments against perceived outgroups.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the digital transformation of far-right movements constitutes not merely a shift in communication style but a fundamental reconfiguration of ideological, organizational, and epistemological dynamics. Drawing on memetic theory, Sunstein's model of radicalization, and Castells' network society framework, the analysis reveals that digital media environments serve as infrastructures through which far-right actors

normalize exclusionary ideologies, destabilize epistemological frameworks, and circumvent democratic oversight mechanisms.

One of the central findings is the strategic use of humor in far-right digital discourse. Far from being apolitical or incidental, humor functions as an epistemological tool that allows far-right narratives to be embedded within layers of irony, satire, and pop-cultural references. This practice facilitates the normalization of radical views, enables plausible deniability, and increases the virality of extremist messages, particularly among younger and less politically engaged audiences. These memetic strategies blur the distinction between ideological content and entertainment, complicating efforts to regulate or counter such discourses through traditional moderation mechanisms.

The research also underscores the organizational shift from centralized hierarchies to decentralized, networked structures. Far-right groups now utilize encrypted platforms, algorithmic infrastructures, and real-time digital interactions to construct ideologically insulated echo chambers. These decentralized models not only enable the dissemination of radical content without a single point of control but also facilitate operational resilience, task specialization, and transnational ideological cohesion. The structural affordances of the network society—speed, anonymity, and flexibility—are effectively leveraged to amplify radicalization processes while minimizing exposure to legal or social repercussions.

Algorithmic systems further reinforce these dynamics by prioritizing emotionally provocative content, thereby deepening cognitive and affective polarization. This phenomenon is not merely a consequence of individual behavior but is structurally embedded in the business models of major platforms that optimize user engagement over informational integrity. As such, the technological infrastructure itself becomes an active agent in the circulation and amplification of extremist content.

Responding to these multidimensional challenges may require a systemic and interdisciplinary strategy. This includes fostering transparency in algorithmic governance, developing regulatory frameworks for platform accountability, and investing in critical digital literacy programs that empower users—especially younger demographics—to navigate digital content with epistemic awareness. Additionally, supporting inclusive digital publics and strengthening civil society's capacity to engage in pluralistic discourse may offer alternative spaces to resist the narrative dominance of exclusionary ideologies.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how digitally mediated far-right radicalization challenges democratic norms and epistemic stability. It underscores the necessity of analyzing not only the content of far-right discourse but also the infrastructural and aesthetic mechanisms that sustain its appeal. Future research could extend

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this framework by incorporating empirical case studies, platform-specific data, or comparative analyses across national contexts to further elaborate the evolving relationship between ideology, technology, and public discourse in the digital age.

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