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Soft Power on the Frontlines: How Ukrainian Cultural Diplomacy Confronts Russian Disinformation

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FROM I TO WE: HOW HATE BECOMES COLLECTIVE

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Törnberg, A., & Törnberg, P. (2024). *Intimate communities of hate: Why social media fuels far-right extremism.* Routledge.

The far-right shift and the growing development of anti-liberal sentiment have long attracted societal, political, and academic attention, yet this interest has intensified in recent years due to broader forces advancing anti-liberal agendas. How are far-right ideologies mobilized and sustained in a highly mediated world where much of social interactions unfold online? Given that it has become virtually impossible to avoid even occasional references to phenomena such as hate speech or disinformation campaigns, academic inquiry into these issues offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which online communities of hate operate. At the same time, scholarship on extremism has a tendency to shift between technologically deterministic views based on the affordances of digital

spaces and psychological interpretations. This leaves a conceptual gap concerning the social and relational dynamics of radicalization, the area to which the book under review makes a substantial contribution.

Work by sociologists Anton Törnberg from the University of Gothenburg and Petter Törnberg from the University of Amsterdam is perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies that demonstrate the mechanics of how radical groups are formed within online spaces. Drawing on two decades of data from one of the oldest and most influential white supremacist forums, Stormfront, the authors examined the social processes that shape the digital lives of far-right extremists. A deliberate focus on Stormfront as an empirical site enabled them to explore individual trajectories along-

side the broader, long-term consolidation of a transnational extremist community.

Overall, it is most common in academic discourse to conceptualize online community formation through the frameworks of echo chambers (e.g., Sunstein 2001) and filter bubbles (e.g., Pariser 2012), which are essentially rooted in the Habermasian idea of public rational discussion (Habermas & Burger 1998). In other words, it is interpreted as a consequence of isolation when participants primarily encounter opinions that amplify their pre-existing beliefs rather than challenge them. While the underlying causes may be debated, ranging from the affordances of participatory spaces to algorithmic curation by platforms, the core hypothesis remains the same: overexposure to one-sided arguments. The Törnbergs, however, propose a significant shift toward a sociological understanding grounded in ritual, emotion, and symbolic belonging. Drawing from Collins' (2004) adaptation of Durkheim's theorization of community, they conceptualize online discussions as digital rituals that create collective identity, emotional energy, and shared worldviews (Törnberg & Törnberg 2024). In doing so, they situate the debate on extremism within a broader sociological tradition and provide an empirically grounded counterpoint to the theorization that attributes radicalization primarily to overexposure to homogeneous content in terms of views.

This shift is important for how we think about radicalization. Essentially, through a detailed exploration of interactions between community members of Stormfront, the authors conclude that neither persuasion nor argumentation plays a significant role. Instead, communication serves not only as an informational function, but primarily as an

emotive one, fostering a sense of belonging and emphasizing similarities and differences to distinguish an "us" from a "them" (ibid., p. 7). This is crucial in understanding the mechanics of how online communities operate. In Durkheimian theory (Durkheim & Fields 1995), rituals connect identity, narratives, and emotions, reflecting our fundamental need to belong and make sense of the world. Authors argue that radicalization and extremism can be understood as arising from the very same social drives, specifically through the formation of in-groups (us) and out-groups (them). External threats, therefore, can potentially reinforce internal cohesion, while strong in-group bonds may intensify hostility toward outsiders. (ibid., p.9). Importantly, the process appears to be primarily symbolic and relational rather than rooted in rational deliberation or isolation from opposing arguments. In contrast to the echo chambers theory, which presupposes a lack of contact with opposing views, the authors demonstrate how engagement with outside events and actors serves as raw material for strengthening in-group bonds. This reframing is one of the book's main contributions and directly engages current debates on the relational nature of online participation.

The authors introduce the concept of tribal epistemology (p. 35) to illustrate how online communities develop distinct systems for understanding and evaluating information. They identify four interconnected elements that structure interactions: forums as communal gathering places that foster a sense of shared identity; community-specific language that helps to establish boundaries and clearly distinguish insiders from outsiders; a mutual focus of attention through recurring topics; and a collective emotional atmosphere. This

lens helps explain why contested truths, conspiracies, and emotionally charged narratives flourish in such settings. It happens not due to informational isolation but because they sustain a ritualized sense of “we.” The book goes so far as to frame these communities as digital tribes, drawing an analogy with Aboriginal communal gatherings (p. 9). While it may appear bold, it effectively captures the depth of symbolic and emotional investment that characterizes long-term participation in extremist spaces. Moreover, the notion of tribal epistemology resonates with current debates on mis- and disinformation, where questions of truth are increasingly intertwined with identity and loyalty. This study, however, further grounds these discussions in an empirically rich reconstruction of interaction rituals, rather than in abstract concerns over truth and falsehood.

To contextualize the empirical basis for researching such interaction rituals, it is important to note that Stormfront, founded in 1996, functioned as a discussion-based forum with strict moderation rules and clear ideological boundaries (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). It gained the grim reputation of being the “murder capital of the Internet,” with its users linked to almost one hundred murders since 2010, including Anders Breivik’s 2011 attacks (Törnberg & Törnberg 2024, p. 51). Despite numerous attempts to shut it down, Stormfront remained active until 2017, leaving an extensive archive (more than 10 million posts by around 100,000 users) encompassing more than two decades of far-right discussions. It also highlights how long-standing infrastructures of participation prefigure contemporary platform dynamics, complicating narratives that investigate the roots of online extremism solely in newer social media architectures.

Such a large dataset indeed offers, on the one hand, unprecedented longitudinal coverage and the opportunity to trace community formation and observe how individual users descend into extremism; on the other hand, it poses significant challenges due to the volume of content. To overcome those challenges, the Törnbergs adopt what they call critical methodological pluralism (p. 40), integrating computational tools with qualitative digital ethnography. Their research design essentially moves between pattern detection in big datasets, close interpretive reading, and hypothesis refinement. This design exemplifies current attempts in computational social science to maintain interpretive sensitivity while working with large datasets. Although a detailed description of the methodology isn’t the primary aim of this review and the book itself may initially seem overwhelming to readers unfamiliar with computational sociology, it is crucial to note that it offers substantial value for readers interested in moving beyond the quantitative vs. qualitative dichotomy and exploring how computational tools can be integrated with digital ethnography. This approach enables researchers to handle a vast dataset while maintaining access to nuanced, in-depth analysis of social phenomena. In the context of existing scholarship, this is not a radical shift but rather a sophisticated consolidation of emerging mixed-methods practices in the research of online spaces. Its true innovation lies in the consistent use of these tools to support an established theory, rather than treating computational outputs as ends in themselves.

The question remains: How does the study empirically demonstrate that radicalization is a social process of community formation rather than a development driven by the ex-

change of arguments in isolation from opposing opinions? The empirical analysis focuses on how Stormfront users responded to and interpreted two major political events: the 2008 election of Barack Obama as U.S. president and the 2016 election of Donald Trump. These highly mediated moments enabled the authors to trace the formation of collective identity, emotional energy, and shared worldviews. By focusing on reactions, they demonstrate that extremist communities do not withdraw from the broader public sphere but actively reinterpret it through their own ritualized lenses. The key empirical patterns can be distilled into three main insights.

Rapid adoption of the community language

The analysis revealed that first-time posters initially stand far from the forum language but converge relatively quickly. For example, first-person singular pronouns (I, my, I'm) are over time replaced by second-person plural forms (you, your), referring to the Stormfront community, as well as by group identifiers such as "wn" (White Nationalist) or the abbreviation "sf" for the forum itself. Similarly, while new members tend to use personalization such as "I White," "I believe/think/agree/disagree," this gradually shifts toward collective identity markers such as "We Whites," "We nationalists," "We fighting," "We act," and "We want," reflecting an increasingly established sense of community's in-group. Beyond pronoun shifts, the study also identified systematic lexical substitutions that marked ideological alignment and adaptation to the community's discursive articulation. Terms like "government" were increasingly replaced by "zog", short for Zionist Occupational Government, referring to an antisemitic conspir-

acy theory. Similarly, "media" was substituted with "msm" ("mainstream media") or, again, with "zog." And so on. Overall, according to the researchers, almost complete linguistic convergence had occurred after approximately 20 posts (pp. 65-69). These findings illustrate that users tend to align quite rapidly with the community's dominant discourse, gradually internalizing and reproducing its shared identity as they continue to participate and transition into active membership. The analysis thereby adds empirical weight to longstanding qualitative observations about "learning the language" of extremist groups, but in a way that makes visible the tempo and scale of this adaptation across thousands of users.

Transformation of individual moral shocks into collective cohesion

According to the analyzed data, newcomers tend to express strong emotions, such as shock, fear, and disgust, while long-term members adopt a more neutral tone. This analysis was primarily based on content posted around the 2008 American presidential election. The authors conclude that for new members, the election of Obama constituted a moral shock, and through shared narratives, their feelings were collectively transformed into solidarity, creating a sense of belonging and empowerment. Long-term members, already immersed in the community's established narratives, served as a buffer against shock. Here, the book convincingly demonstrates how moral shocks do not radicalize individuals in isolation, but are collectively processed and transformed into collective cohesion, offering an empirically grounded explanation for why extremist communities can absorb destabilizing events and turn them into opportunities for further integration.

Collective meaning-making through discursive struggles

The study demonstrates that constructing a communal worldview was not a straightforward process, as community members negotiated competing interpretations. The authors conceptualize it as grassroots framing. Through the examination of discursive narratives following the 2008 and 2016 elections, they were able to distinguish between four main categories: Obama as a threat (keywords: white slavery, end of the White race, economic stagnation) or an opportunity (keywords: eye-opener, wake-up call), and Trump as trustworthy (keywords: great opportunity, victory for whites, white awakening) or untrustworthy (keywords: pacification of White people, system is the problem, Trump's connections to Jews) (pp.82-92). A key finding is the discursive transformation of "disasters" into "opportunities," with Obama fitting a "worse is better" frame and Trump a "better is better" frame, showing how political events empower communities through framing. This suggests that extremist communities judge events less by facts than by frames that align with their values, thereby reinforcing their worldview and sense of belonging. The interaction of narrative and identity also explains extremism's link to misinformation, where truth is shaped by identity and desire, allowing conspiracies to persist. By highlighting grassroots framing struggles, the book challenges portrayals of extremist communities as monolithic and emphasizes internal contestation as an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of how radical worldviews are stabilized.

The book offers a comprehensive theoretical contribution and a rich empirical basis to contemporary research on extremism, challenging the currently dominant echo cham-

ber paradigm and demonstrating that online radical spaces are not isolated, but actively engage with and interpret opposing viewpoints. Moreover, exposure to these opposing viewpoints can actually strengthen radical beliefs, as radicalization is primarily social rather than informational in nature. This reframing has important implications for policymakers and scholarship alike, suggesting that interventions targeting information flows or algorithmic exposure alone may be insufficient.

The book further illustrates that online participatory spaces have the potential to fundamentally transform how people engage with political and social issues by shaping identities and fostering communities with strong in-group bonds, something that passive consumption of information cannot facilitate. It is important, however, to situate the study within its context. Stormfront represents a structure from the early days of discussion forums, and its organization and dynamics differ from the affordances of contemporary social media platforms. Furthermore, while Stormfront was not the only space for extremists, its unique history, nature, and longevity raise questions about the generalizability of the study's findings. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the book overall is an important academic work for scholars of sociological research on extremism, as well as for computational sociology, offering a significant methodological approach that integrates computational tools with human annotation. For readers accustomed to thinking about radicalization through the shorthand of echo chambers and algorithmic personalization, the study serves as a timely reminder that collective rituals, shared emotions, and identity work remain central to understanding why extremist communities endure. At the same time, the focus

on a single, highly specific forum means that further research will be needed to test how far this ritual-based perspective travels to more fluid, platform-specific environments such as mainstream social media or encrypted messaging apps. Despite this, the book stands out as a theoretically ambitious and empirically

grounded contribution that invites scholars to rethink far-right mobilization and radicalization online, offering a perspective that both complements and challenges existing paradigms, making this work a valuable resource for scholars across sociology, media studies, and computational social science.

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