

Politics and the Internet in Comparative Context

Views from the cloud

**Edited by Paul G. Nixon, Rajash Rawal
and Dan Mercea**

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square Milton Park Abingdon Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Politics and the internet in comparative context : views from the cloud /
edited by Paul G. Nixon, Rajash Rawal and Dan Mercea.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Internet--Political aspects--Case studies. 2. Communication in politics. 3. Political participation. I. Nixon, Paul G.

HM851.P6545 2013

302.23'1--dc23

2013004281

ISBN: 978-0-415-63867-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-79833-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

**From Paul
To Ingrid and Patrick
From Rajash
To Andrés, Laura and Claudia
From Dan
To Suzana**

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	xi
<i>List of tables</i>	xii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xiv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
Introduction	1
PAUL G. NIXON, DAN MERCEA AND RAJASH RAWAL	
1 Taking stock: a meta-analysis of the virtual public sphere in communication journals	10
DAN MERCEA, ELEFThERIA LEKAKIS AND PAUL G. NIXON	
2 The Internet and the decline of Euro-American democracy	26
MICHAEL MARGOLIS AND GERSON MORENO-RIAÑO	
3 The semi-sovereign netizen: the Fifth Estate in China	43
SUN HUAN, WILLIAM H. DUTTON AND WEIWEI SHEN	
4 New techniques, new mobilizations? French parties in the web 2.0 era	59
FABIENNE GREFFET	
5 Do ethos, ideology, country and electoral strength make a difference in cyberspace? Testing an explanatory model of parties' websites	75
MARIA LAURA SUDULICH	
6 "Why fix it when it's not broken?" Continuity and adaptation in Romanian presidential e-campaigning	95
MARIA MOCANU, ADINA ALDEA AND RAJASH RAWAL	

x *Contents*

7 Online party politics: studying the presence of some African political parties on the Internet	118
SUSANA SALGADO	
8 Extreme right organizations and online politics: a comparative analysis of five Western democracies	135
MANUELA CAIANI AND LINDA PARENTI	
9 Ourselves alone (but making connections): the social media strategies of Sinn Fein	154
PAUL REILLY	
10 City Hall 2.0? Italian local executive officials' presence and popularity on Web 2.0 platforms	169
CRISTIAN VACCARI	
11 Making democracy work online? Interpreting the web presence of Italian regions	186
LORENZO MOSCA	
12 MEPs online: understanding communication strategies for remote representatives	213
KAROLINA KOC-MICHALSKA AND DARREN LILLEKER	
13 Unaffiliated socialization and social media recruitment: reflections from Occupy the Netherlands	232
DAN MERCEA, PAUL G. NIXON AND ANDREAS FUNK	
<i>Index</i>	248

Figures

2.1 New NSFNET architecture	33
4.1 Percentage of French households connected to the Internet, 2002–2011	60
5.1 Box plots of information provision by country	83
5.2 Box plots of participative/interactive features by country	85
8.1 Forms of Internet use by extreme right organizations by country	145
8.2 Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations	146
8.3 Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations	147
9.1 Number of followers on Twitter for Northern Irish parties, April 2010	160
10.1 Percentages of Italian heads of local government who had a profile on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, March 2011–March 2012	173
11.1 The twenty Italian regions	187
11.2 Families by technological endowment and internet access in different geographical areas	194
11.3 Financing for the first phase of the e-government plan by territorial area	195
11.4 Financing for the second phase of the e-government plan by geographical area	196
11.5 Diachronic ranking of the websites of Italian regions	198
11.6 Values of sectoral indexes by geographical area	200
11.7 Values of the synthetic index by region and geographical area	201
11.8 Results of tests carried out on three regional council departments	203
12.1 Potential audiences for political websites	217

Tables

4.1 Features of French Party websites, May 2007, legislative election campaign	62
4.2 Cyber-presence of the six main candidates and their campaign and parties, March 2012	65
4.3 Internet expenditure of the six main candidates at the presidential election, 2002–2012	68
4.4 Cyber-presence of the political forces during the presidential election campaign 2012	69
4.5 Presence on online social networks for the six main candidates, April 24, 2012	71
4.6 Political uses of the Internet within the group of French Internet users, 2007–2012	72
5.1 Parties analyzed, by country	79
5.2 ANOVA table for information provision by country	84
5.3 T test information provision, large vs. small parties	84
5.4 Regression explaining variation in participative activities	86
5.5 Probit model explaining immediate participatory activities	87
5.6 Regression explaining overall variation in parties' websites	89
6.1 Keywords searches concerning the 2009 political campaign	97
6.2 Components and elements of Webstyle analysis	100
6.3 Verbal content analysis	101
6.4 Interactive content	108
6.5 The online presence of candidates during and after the 2009 political campaign	111
6.6 Candidates' blog post appeal strategies	113
8.1 Extreme right organizations identified by broader categories and sampling (example for United Kingdom)	138
8.2 Examples of online surveys conducted by extreme right websites	140
8.3 International and cross-national ties of the extreme right organizations	145
10.1 Results of logistic regressions predicting local elected officials' presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube ($N=675$)	175

10.2 Results of OLS regressions predicting local elected officials' popularity on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (logged values)	177
11.1 Matrix of correlations between the principal analytical dimensions of regional websites	204
11.2 Possible explanatory factors for the performances of regional sites (Pearson's coefficients)	206
12.1 Regression for adoption of websites and most used social networking site and microblogging platform	222
12.2 Audiences targeted: overall means	223
12.3 AOP for different audiences and web performance for MEP without SN and with SN	223
12.4 Overall online performance among members of the European Parliament	225
13.1 Usage of Internet platforms	241

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8 Extreme right organizations and online politics

A comparative analysis of five Western democracies

Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti

Introduction¹

Over the last decade, many Western democracies have experienced a dramatic rise in extreme right political parties and movements. Furthermore, profound changes have been observed in the mobilization ability of these political forces in terms of their ideology, discourse, organizational structures and action strategies (Marchi *et al.* 2011). Also notable has been the increase in their use of the Internet to do politics by other means (Karmasyn *et al.* 2000; Mininni 2002). Indeed, while formerly on the political fringes, extreme right parties now have significant political weight in several national Parliaments (e.g., Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden, etc.), as well as at the EU level. The growth of these actors over the past decade has been mirrored online.

To date, existing research on the Internet and collective actors has primarily focused on left wing organizations and movements (for a review see Mosca and Vaccari 2012). Attention to the extreme right and its political activity in the digital age has been episodic and mainly concentrated on the use of the Internet by political parties during electoral campaigns (for example Margolis *et al.* 1999; Cunha *et al.* 2003; Trechsel *et al.* 2003; Ackland and Gibson 2004). Furthermore, comparative works concerning the extreme right and the Internet are rare (mostly focused on the American right).

This chapter aims to address this gap. Focusing on different types of extreme right organizations in four European countries (France, Spain, Italy and Great Britain) and the USA and conducting a formalized web content analysis of their websites, we investigate, in a comparative perspective, the forms and the intensity of the use of the Internet by extremist right wing groups, with particular attention to the construction of a *common identity* and *political engagement*. In order to broaden the descriptive knowledge of the Internet and the variegated galaxy that composes the extreme right in each of our countries, our analysis includes both political parties and non-party organizations (a total of 255 groups).

According to observers, a new generation of right wing militants are emerging who are making skillful use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Roversi 2006; Sunstein 2007). In Europe hundreds of websites, run by

neo-Nazi and Skinhead organizations, have been identified. In addition, transnational networks and domestic radical groups have been found to use the Internet to overcome restrictions imposed on them by the state (e.g., Tateo 2005; TE-SAT Report 2007: 15). Moreover, all around the world, extremists are increasingly active on social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and their own alternative online press agencies, i.e., Metapedia,² In order presumably to reach out to younger generations. The “watchdog” organization, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), stresses that in 2010 about 1000 far right groups were online in the United States³ and the same phenomenon has been observed in Europe.

Looking beyond their increasingly numerous presence on the Web, research has started to reflect on the role that the Internet plays within right wing organizations (Garrett 2006). Indeed, as highlighted by scholars, the Internet allows “the construction of new public spheres where social movements can organize mobilizations, discuss and negotiate their claims, strengthen their identities, sensitize the public opinion and directly express acts of dissent” (Mosca 2007: 2). In particular, empirical studies of both the Internet and radical organizations have stressed that extreme right groups use the Net for a variety of goals, including the dissemination of propaganda and incitement to violence (Glaser *et al.* 2002).

Illustratively, a study of American groups has shown that extreme right organizations use the Internet to facilitate recruitment, reach a global audience and connect with other groups (Zhou *et al.* 2005). Others have suggested that the Internet is used by right wing activists to create and reinforce a “sense of community” (De Koster and Houtman 2008). Research on social movements argues that the Internet can help in generating collective identities by facilitating the exchange of resources and information, creating solidarity and shared objectives (della Porta and Mosca 2006: 538). Last but not least, the Internet is also considered to play a role in mobilization by reducing the costs of communication between a large number of individuals (*ibid.*: 542) and even allowing organizations to conduct transnational demonstrations (Petit 2004).

This chapter continues with a presentation of our research method. Following that, we discuss how and the extent to which extreme right groups make use of the Internet for various political purposes: the creation and promotion of “virtual communities” of debate and information exchange; mobilization and recruitment, including at a transnational level. We then go on to show the main characteristics of the use of websites by different types of groups (e.g., political parties vs. subcultural youth groups), and underline the most important differences and similarities among them. In the conclusion, the results are interpreted against the (offline) political and cultural opportunities and constraints offered to the extreme right organizations in their respective countries.

Method and sources

Lists of all extreme right organizations with an online presence have been obtained using a “snow ball” technique. The most important extreme right organizations in each country (i.e., the main political parties) were first identified

through secondary sources (e.g., official reports, secondary literature). Then, by examining the websites of these organizations and following hyperlinks (contained under sections with titles such as “our partners” or “friends”), we discovered additional websites for less known extreme right groups. We identified approximately 100 organizations per country (the marked exception being that of the USA with 300 organizations). Finally, using a standardized codebook, we conducted a *content analysis* of their websites which was performed on a reduced sample of half the groups in each category (see Table 8.1).⁴

For the construction of the codebook, we relied on similar studies that have used a standardized approach to the analysis of collective actors’ websites (e.g., Gerstenfeld *et al.* 2003; Zhou *et al.* 2005; della Porta and Mosca 2006; Qin *et al.* 2007). Our analysis focuses on the following broad aspects that we consider relevant to internet use by right wing groups: *virtual community/debate* (with variables indicating the use of a website as an arena for online interactivity with and among members and sympathizers e.g., discussion fora, newsletters, chat applications and the presentation of narratives concerning the operations of the group); *information* (including variables measuring how much the organization diffuses materials such as articles, book references, news reporting, etc.); *communication* (including variables measuring the degree to which the organization’s website makes use of communication tools such as email, telephone contact, feedback forms, etc.); *propaganda* (with variables to capture the presence of content concerning propaganda towards insiders and outsiders, e.g., banners, hate symbols, multimedia materials); *mobilization* (i.e., the use of the Internet as a tool for member activation in offline and online actions such as the publicizing of political campaigns, promoting online petitions, etc.); and *internationalization* (i.e., the use of the Web to build transnational contacts)⁵ (for details, Caiani and Parenti 2013).

The extreme right and the construction of (virtual) communities

Studies of extremist organizations contend that these flourish with the formation of peer groups which contribute to increased involvement in an organization (della Porta 1992). In this respect, it is argued that websites can work as an arena for debates among like-minded people, where activists can “meet” and support each other (Caldiron 2001). Websites can also define a particular group’s “enemies” and “allies” as well as their main goals (Benard 2005). Furthermore, groups can use their websites to reinforce internal solidarity (De Koster and Houtman 2008).

Our data show that, in general, almost all of the extreme right websites analyzed (79 percent) provide a section containing basic information on the group (such as “about us,” “who we are,” etc.) and the majority of them (57 percent of cases) have sections which portray the *goal and mission* of the group (e.g., “mission statement,” “statute,” “constitution,” “manifesto,” “what we want,” etc.). Moreover, approximately one-third of the organizations (29 percent) have

Table 8.1 Extreme right organizations identified by broader categories and sampling (example for United Kingdom)

Type of group	Sample of the ER population	Selection and sample for content analysis	Example group (name and URL)
Political party	21	17	http://brp.org.uk/
Political movements	14	7	www.civilliberty.org.uk/
Nostalgic and revisionist	17	3	http://ety.com/HRP/index.htm
Neonazi groups	10	7	www.aryanunity.com/page1.html
Cultural, new age and neomystical	14	4	http://archive.righttolife.org.uk/
Youth subcultural area, skinheads, sport and music	6	3	http://enrest.com/
Commercial organizations and publishers	5	2	www.ns88.com/shop/
Nationalistic organizations	23	7	www.englishdefenceleague.org
Other	18	5	http://sioeengland.wordpress.com/
Total (N)	129	55	

an archive where the annual reports or the chronology of the history of the organization are collected. Some websites sum up the goal of the group in a few sentences, highlighting special key words, as for example the case of the Italian group Casapound⁶ which simply declares: "We will build the World we want. We don't want to see our people dying in the middle of the road," or the political movement Fronte della Nova Gioventù, on whose homepage the values of anti-communism, militancy and freedom are stressed. Others offer a detailed description of the core values and the history of the organization as, for instance, on the website of the English Ku Klux Klan, where it is explained that

being all about "heritage" is not a racist thing; no members are permitted to have criminal records involving hate crime ... We are here to protect our family and race and our honor as white Europeans, if you feel you hate us leave the site.⁷

Furthermore, in approximately one-third of the analyzed cases (27.5 percent), extreme right organizational websites contain a section with a *narrative of events* concerning the activities of the group, such as occupations, protests, demonstrations, clashes with the police and political adversaries or commemorative marches (these videos are often posted on their websites or on YouTube).⁸ This plays an important role in emphasizing the existence of a numerically significant group behind the site, as well as in conveying the group's ideology and identity (Tateo 2005).

Beyond the use of a website as a sort of display case of the group, our analysis also points to the considerable effort made by extreme right organizations to create "cyber communities" of *debate*. Spaces of discussion such as fora, mailing lists and guest books are widely used by right wing organizations (in 24.7 percent of all cases). In particular, around one-fourth of organizations have a "newsletter" on their websites (23.5 percent), namely a bulletin to which it is possible to subscribe, indicating a commitment to liaising with their affiliates.

Right wing extremist websites less frequently contain "online surveys" and "questionnaires" (in 11 percent of cases). Interestingly, where they are present, they are mainly polls on current political and social issues relevant to the organization (e.g., on the topic of withdrawing crucifixes from schools, the future of the country's current government, the EU), immigration policies,⁹ as well as citizens' opinions on the organization itself.¹⁰ For example, on the Italian website Benito Mussolini there is a specific section dedicated to surveys on Italian democracy and politics (e.g., the form of the State, Monarchy vs. Republic, immigration issues, forced repatriation of illegal immigrants). Similarly, on the website RAS we found questionnaires concerning international political affairs such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, American occupations, etc. (see Table 8.2).

It is worth noticing that spaces of synchronous discussions¹¹ such as chats are less frequently present on extreme right websites (only appearing in 9.4 percent of all cases investigated) than spaces of a-synchronous (namely indirect) discussion. This indicates that these groups are still facing difficulties exploiting all the

Table 8.2 Examples of online surveys conducted by extreme right websites

<i>Are you in favor of the fact that some comrades sing for a free Palestine?</i>	
Yes, I'm fed up with Israel and America!	252 votes (49%)
No, they only have to think to Italian patriotism by deleting from their minds what is occurring abroad!	258 votes (51%)
Total votes: 510	
<i>Do you agree with politics in soccer games?</i>	
Yes	200 votes (45%)
No	248 votes (55%)
Total votes: 448	

Source: www.ilras.tk/ (our translation)

available tools for interactivity offered by the Internet. However, common to some of them is the presence of published "policies or rules" that govern the participation within their virtual arenas for deliberation (in 13.3 percent of cases). In these cases, extreme right organizations appear to want to be in the internet mainstream while using their websites to control their image¹² (Gerstenfeld *et al.* 2003: 40) and manage their web-content.¹³ Usually, policies and rules prohibit offensive language, blasphemy and the use of violent and racist words. This is done in order to assert that the group is non-violent and not hate-oriented, as in the case of the French right wing website Aime et Sers where we can read that:

It is absolutely denied to publish on this forum messages inciting to armed struggle, to martyrs, to terrorism ... In this forum is not possible to display public maps, schemes, plans, news and instructions for the hand building of weapons, ammunitions and explosives.¹⁴

Similarly, on the forum of discussion of the American neo-Nazi organization Stormfront, the rules of conduct allow the webmaster to screen published posts and decide which ones are acceptable and which are not. Similar rules on discriminatory content in relation to one's nationality, religion and gender are also frequently found on right wing websites. Nevertheless, we identified other cases in which the goal to distinguish between "in group" and "out group" prevails and only those "who share the group ideology," or "who are fascists" are cleared to participate in a debate. Discrimination on "in-group"/"out-group" boundaries might create what Downing terms the "repressive radical media" of the far right (namely media where internal democracy is dissolved by the principle of hierarchy, 2001: 94-95; see also Atton 2006: 574). Nonetheless, such discrimination is also considered to have positive effects on group identity (Gaßebner *et al.* 2003: 40).

In fact our data also show that in general, extreme right websites rarely contain "explicit claims" stressing that *the group is not violent* and that it does not incite violence or racism (in only 6.3 percent of cases). These anti-racist and

anti-violence statements often have a double value: on the one hand, they help to protect the group from the risk of being banned from the Net. On the other hand, they are used to emphasize core values, defending the group itself on the grounds of the same principles (related to racism, violence, etc.) on which their stigmatization in society is usually based. This is evident, for example, on the National Democrats' website, where the right of "pluralism of races" is defended:

we believe in respect for, and preservation of, different races and cultures ... however, each race should have its own homeland. Britain has always been primarily a white, Christian country and to preserve our culture we would halt any further immigration and encourage those immigrants resident in Britain to return to their land of ethnic origin.¹⁵

Similarly, on the webpage of the group Order of the White Knights its opposition to "hate on the Web" is made explicit:

There is a common media spin and misconception that those who love the White Race hate other races. This is a stereotypical Hollywood myth perpetuated through the mainstream media ... We are for love. Love of our children, women and White Race. Love your race. Respect other races. Hate your enemies.¹⁶

Information, communication and propaganda via the Web

Both the European and American extreme right organizations we examined make strong use of their websites for an important cognitive aspect related to group identity building, namely the collection and dissemination of *information*. More than two-thirds of extreme right websites (68.2 percent) contain a section in which they publish "articles, papers and dossiers" and half of them (50.6 percent) have a "news section" in which they post newspaper articles, or provide news coverage, sourcing information from various newspapers or TV programs. Moreover, 40.8 percent of the websites provide materials for the political education of citizens such as "bibliographical" sources. This informative material is diverse while some country context specificities are noticeable. The material ranges from "classic" texts of the extreme right literature (Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, texts from authors such as David Irving, David Lane, Evola, etc.), to biographies of leaders of the fascist, Nazi or Franco's period,¹⁷ to commentaries, pamphlets and reports concerning political and social issues, either current or historical (e.g., on bioethics, abortion, the Freemasons, bilingualism or anti-multiculturalism).

What is striking for such extremist organizations always at risk of being banned from the Web is the prominent place afforded to tools of *communication* with the public on their websites. Over half of them contain information about the "reachability of the organization" (54.9 percent), such as a street address, phone and fax number and 82.4 percent provide an e-mail address. Crucially,

our data also stress that extreme right organizations are very much committed to using the Internet for *propaganda* (towards outsiders and insiders) and disseminating a variety of typical "hate symbols" and/or material explicitly recalling fascist iconography and rhetoric (in 37.6 percent of cases) via the Internet. The most common of these materials are: swastikas or burning crosses, eagles, *fascii littori* and *gladio* (the traditional fascist symbols),¹⁸ photos of Mussolini and Hitler, images related to the German Reich and stems and flags from the fascist past. Images such as fire and flames, swords, guns, escutcheons, fists and armed soldiers are also prominent,¹⁹ as are representative figures (banners), graphic symbols or seals meant to incite hate against social and political adversaries (e.g., burning flags of enemy – American, Israeli – countries). For example, on the English website of the Manchester British Peoples' Party we found the image of an Arab person cancelling the words "freedom of speech," a bulldog biting the European Union flag, "wake up, Britain!". The frequent presence of hate symbols and banners on the websites of extreme right organizations allows them to use the infrastructure of the Internet to bring about:

a purpose and a renewed commitment, a sense of shared identity within an ideology whose history is revisited and presented as a rational alternative to mainstream political parties – one that vindicates the homeland assaulted by people of all races, one that is able to speak to the underprivileged, the youth, the marginalized.

(Padovani 2008: 756)

Propaganda towards outsiders on the other hand is strongly related to *recruitment*. In fact, extreme right organizations focus often on the recruitment of young people (Verfassungsschutzbericht: see www.bmi.gv.at/cms/bmi_verfassungsschutz/). Although commentators are divided on the viability of the Internet as a recruitment tool due to the lack of face to face interactions (Burris *et al.* 2000: 231), our data indicate that multimedia materials, such as video and music downloads, are often present on extremist sites (in 50.2 percent of cases). There are video and audio recordings of sermons and speeches by leaders of the fascist/Nazi regimes, videos of recent demonstrations, public speeches by political parties and music such as fascist and Nazi songs.²⁰ On some radical right websites even ringtones and screensavers for PCs are offered, as well as more advanced multimedia materials, such as the "BNP television" provided by the British National Party.

Mobilizing via the Internet: toward a transnationalization of the extreme right?

As already mentioned, the Internet is seen as an important element in political mobilization (as well as for the development of transnational organizations). It is also adopted for its capacity for low cost coordination and for the quick diffusion of information (Petit 2004), which overcome problems of leadership and

decision-making (Castells 2000), and are propitious for transnational "solidarity" (Chase-Dunn and Boswell 2002). In addition, political relations and shared identities that are built online can easily be translated offline (Chadwick 2009), with significant political (and even electoral) effects. In fact, governmental sources underline the fact that the Internet can be utilized "by extremist organizations to promote their agenda, organize campaigns, collect information on future targets, claim attacks and inform other members of the group" (TE-SAT 2010: 6).

Our data show that extreme right organizations have started to use the Internet for a *mobilization* function, although this use is still moderate. Most importantly, this mobilization effort takes several forms on their websites. Approximately one-fifth of the organizations analyzed (18.8 percent) offer an "event calendar or agenda," providing information on meetings, demonstrations and cultural or political events (e.g., concerts) among activists and sympathizers. Another 23.9 percent utilize the Internet in order to publicize their own (offline) "ongoing political campaigns." The Manchester British Peoples' Party, for example, launched a political campaign against the Euro in the United Kingdom; the Church of Jesus Christ in the USA supported through its website an anti-abortion campaign, protection of families and against pornography. Other examples of campaigns launched and supported via the Internet are the ArabOilBoycott launched by the American Aryan Racial Loyalist Party (to boycott anti-American countries that sell oil in United States), and the campaign to protect "White rights" against the violence by black people, initiated by the American organization The European-American Unity and Rights Organization (EURO), as well as campaigns for the boycott of Chinese²¹ and Israeli products; against the Turkey accession to the EU; against drugs and homosexuals. In many countries, however, right wing websites publicize campaigns against immigration²² and some of them have been constructed specifically for this goal (as for example Inmigración Masiva in Spain and Campaign for a Referendum on Immigration in the United Kingdom).

Rarer, however, are attempts to organize political actions directly on the Web (see Mosca 2006) by extreme right organizations (only in 5.1 percent of cases). When this happens, the initiatives are usually "online petitions" such as the case of the England First Party, which invites people to sign an online petition for tracing ethnic identity in the 2011 Census;²³ or the campaign promoted by the French group Solidarité & Progrès (collecting almost 5000 signatures) for the establishment of a Commission to investigate on the financial crisis and the temporary seizure of banks. Other protest actions, less likely to be staged directly on the Web, are "mailbombings," which constitute sending thousands of emails to a website or a server until it overloads and jams. This is an action adopted by the American organization American Knights of the KKK which provides pre-printed mails and addresses of Deputies and Senators on its website in order to ask them to adopt some policies.

Moreover, the Internet is also used by extreme right groups for fundraising, where more than one-third of the groups investigated (36.5 percent) use their websites to sell some kind of merchandise (*e-commerce*), such as clothes, military paraphernalia and souvenirs from WWII, in order to financially support

Table 8.3 International and cross-national ties of the extreme right organizations

Country	USA	Italy	Spain	France	UK	All countries
International and cross-national ties (%)	7.1	7.5	6.7	3.5	7.8	32.6

their activities. For example, on the Italian site Militaria Collection it is possible to buy uniforms and accessories from WWII. Similarly, the website of the American youth subcultural group Micetrap Distribution sells a wide gamut of collectibles such as compact discs, flags, clothing, DVDs and VHS tapes. It is likely that these items, too, serve a double function. On the one hand, they help to advertise the group and diffuse its message. On the other hand, they provide an income to sustain the organization (Gerstenfeld *et al.* 2003: 36).

Finally there are efforts, among the extreme right organizations we have analyzed, to orientate the group and its activities internationally via the Web: 32.6 percent of all cases have hyperlinks/ties on their websites to international or cross-national right wing organizations abroad. These average 15 cross-national and/or international links each (Table 8.3).

Along similar lines, right wing groups also address an international public by offering some of their website content in other languages (in 10.2 percent of all cases). More interestingly, when this is the case, it mainly concerns sections that contain important information about the identity of the group (such as the sections "about us," "who we are," "our goals and mission," etc.), indicating a desire by extreme right organizations to use the Internet to make their causes known worldwide. For example, the American neo-Nazi group National Alliance offers some sections of its website in German, Spanish, French, Italian, Hungarian, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian and Slovak.

Figure 8.1 summarizes in indexes the various functions of the websites explored so far.²⁴ It points to the emergence of some patterns. First, American organizations are more active in the use of the Internet than their European counterparts on most aspects (propaganda, communication with the public, mobilization etc.). Second, in Europe, Italian organizations are the most active²⁵ while the Spanish ones are the least active. American (and Italian) right wing extremist websites mainly provide "bibliographical materials" for the political education of citizens (in 65 percent and 43.8 percent of cases respectively); "newsletters" and "news coverage" (50 percent in both cases) while they are best equipped to provide information about the "reachability" of the group (almost all of them). On the other hand, the Spanish radical right groups are the least likely to have a "news" section on their websites (only in 10.4 percent of cases); or to offer a means for visitors to "communicate" with the group (32.8 percent). They are also less likely to provide "articles, papers and dossiers" (48.3 percent), or to organize "political mobilization" through their websites, either offline or online. Moreover, they do not systematically attempt to stimulate "virtual debates" among adherents (only 18.9 percent of them have a "forum" and 2.7 percent a virtual chat room).

Are you in favor of the fact that some comrades sing for a free Palestine?	
Yes, I'm fed up with Israel and America!	252 votes (49%)
No, they only have to think to Italian patriotism by deleting from their minds what is occurring abroad!	258 votes (51%)
Total votes: 510	
Do you agree with politics in soccer games?	
Yes	200 votes (45%)
No	248 votes (55%)
Total votes: 448	

Source: <http://www.ilras.tk> (our translation)

Figure 8.1 Forms of Internet use by extreme right organizations by country (mean values).

However, our research also underlines that, in spite of the different country-contexts, there are similarities among the same types of extreme right organizations in the five countries, regarding their political use of the Web, suggesting that the offline organizational characteristics (i.e., belonging to the same sector of the extreme right milieu) may have an impact.

As indeed our analysis reveals (for the aggregate data on types of groups and Internet uses not divided by country, see Figure 8.2) in all countries,²⁶ extreme right political parties and movements are those more likely to use the Web to fulfill more traditional internet functions such as "informing" (mean value on the index for political parties and movements, 0.43) and "communicating" (mean value 0.45) with a potential audience – using the Internet as an additional channel to the usual political means of consensus seeking. However, in the majority of countries, subcultural youth organizations and neo-Nazi groups are the types of groups more likely to use the websites for "mobilizing" adherents (mean values on the index 0.15 and 0.16 respectively) and for building "international contacts" (mean values 0.26 and 0.38 respectively). For example, subcultural and neo-Nazi groups are the more likely to provide "multimedia" materials for propaganda and organize their "political campaigns" on their

websites (in 72.2 percent and 59.1 percent of cases respectively). This indicates a quite innovative use of the Internet by these groups as an alternative arena for face-to-face interactions and social processes.

Finally, surprisingly for such traditional extreme right organizations, in all countries, nostalgic, revisionist and negationist groups are characterized by high levels of political activism on the new arena of the Internet particularly for that which concerns propaganda and virtual debates (mean values on the two indexes respectively 0.80²⁷ and 0.28).²⁸

Conclusion

Research to date has paid little attention “to right wing media as alternative media” (Atton 2006: 574). However, as shown in our study, there is an active use of the Internet by extreme right groups in all Western democracies that we have analyzed. This suggests that the increasingly ubiquitous ICTs represent, and are exploited as, an opportunity for these groups to have their demands visible.

First of all, as has emerged from our research, the extreme right makes strong use of internet technologies as an instrument of information. Indeed, as underlined by Padovani (2008), one of the main function of their websites is to forward information about local, national and international events of political, social and/or cultural relevance to the movement (ibid.: 760); and, as we found, to solicit financial contributions for their groups. The majority of the extreme right organizations are also well equipped in terms of online instruments to facilitate the users’

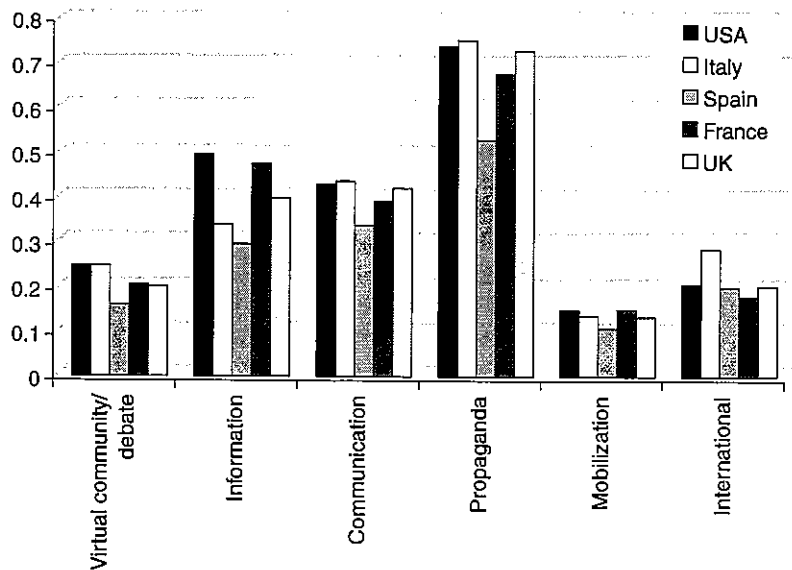


Figure 8.2 Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations (mean values).

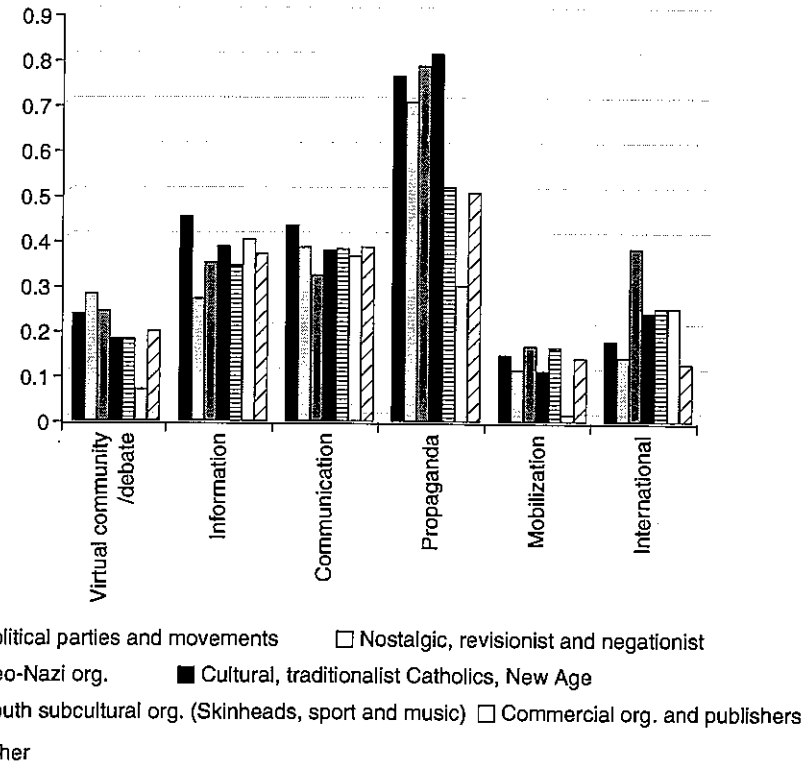


Figure 8.3 Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations (mean values).

requirements, and pay significant attention to communicating with them. Moreover, they skillfully employ multimedia materials for their propaganda via the Web, with the goal of targeting new and principally young members (disaffected youth being the main target of the radical right, see Chroust 2000: 116).

As seen, radical right wing groups diffuse, through their websites, an “identity kit” of similar and redundant symbols, images, icons, norms and values referring to National Socialism, fascism and the core ideas of the extreme right, (such as ethno nationalism, law and order and xenophobia, Mudde 2007: 21). This they do in order to strengthen the faith of existing members and sympathizers. In this way, they use ICTs to promote a coherent and unitary ideology (Roversi 2006).

Extreme right organizations seemed to make attempts to promote debates on their websites, creating “virtual” agoras where like-minded people can meet and exchange ideas. However, as we have noted, truly interactive spaces of debates are rarer than asynchronous arenas and, where they exist, they are closely supervised by the leadership both for the purpose of “content management” and to trace the boundaries of the group.

Finally, mobilization via the Internet seems to have been only partly exploited by extreme right groups who increasingly rely on it for advertising their offline actions (periodically publicizing campaigns of various kinds on their websites), but rarely staging online actions. Protests staged directly on the Web are more frequently used by left wing movements (see della Porta and Mosca 2006: 543). The Internet, however, has emerged as a very powerful (and also empowering) tool for these organizations, offering them the possibility to link (nationally and transnationally) to one another both electronically and logistically. As a result, it is argued, "even geographically isolated groups with only a few members can become part of a collective." (Gerstenfeld et al. 2003: 40) This not only "facilitates the sharing of information and other resources, but it also helps forge a stronger sense of community and purpose" and therefore a collective identity (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, beyond this general picture, some country specificities both in the degree and the forms of internet usage by extreme right groups have emerged, which we can try to understand and explain with the "political and cultural opportunities" offered to these organizations (offline) in their respective countries (Tarrow 1994). Indeed, in line with similar studies conducted on radical left wing movements and other civil society organizations (Bruszt *et al.* 2005; della Porta and Mosca 2005), we believe that the characteristics of the external environment (both the general context and the organizations) matter when explaining the online presence of these collective actors (della Porta and Mosca 2006: 545).

In this regard, it is worth noting that in terms of political opportunities, i.e., potential institutional allies in power, the presence of – few – legal constraints toward right wing groups (see Mudde 2007), Italy seems to be the most open country to right wing political mobilization. The same can be said with respect to its cultural and discursive opportunities (that can determine a message's chance of success in the public sphere; Koopmans and Olzak 2004), which seem to be favorable to right wing groups. Italy is a country characterized by diffuse population mistrust in representative institutions, as well as anti-immigrant appeals by political elites (see EUMC 2004: 17; ECRI 2006; Wetzel 2009: 327). Against this background, the Italian extreme right tends to be very active on the Web, organizing its political activities both in the real world and online.

By contrast, the US political context (similarly to the English and to some extent the French ones) appears more "closed" to the accession of the extreme right to the political arena. That is either because there are no relevant political parties in the system with which the extreme right could align; or because the electoral rules – especially in the USA and UK – don't offer parliamentary representation to these forces. However, whereas the French and English extreme right organizations show an intermediate level of political activism, the American right wing movements proved to be very active in conducting online politics. This result might be linked to the more favorable cultural and "technological" opportunities²⁹ that the American context offers to extreme right groups. Indeed, in the US case (where freedom of speech tends to overcome other concerns), right wing extremist claims diffused online can be seen as a more

acceptable public opinion than in the European countries (where the fascist experiences left legacies of legislation and policies concerning racist violence and crimes; Caiani *et al.* 2012).

Finally, as for the Spanish context, it does not seem very favorable to right wing mobilization. In terms of online "technological opportunities," it should be noted that Spain is one of the European countries that shows the lowest rates of internet penetration, measured by access to the Internet of the country population (60 percent in 2010; see www.internetworldstat.com). In addition, the extreme right milieu is characterized by traditional organizational and ideological weakness (Rodríguez 2006), since, as many commentators stress, right wing leaders have been unable to manage the political and social changes of the transition to democracy, with the result of electorally weak right wing political parties and limited social acceptance (Casals 1999; Norris 2005). It seems that this weakness of the Spanish extreme right is reflected in its inability to exploit Internet opportunities for its political action. In sum, our results suggest that the offline characteristics of collective actors do matter in explaining their behavior online (della Porta and Mosca 2004).

This is also confirmed by our other findings in this chapter which underline that different types of right wing organizations use the Internet for serving different purposes, according to an apparent division of labor. In particular, youth subcultural and neo-Nazi groups in all countries appear as more actively committed to the innovative use of the Web, as an alternative channel for mobilization. This is in contrast to the more "institutionalized" political parties, who use the Internet mainly to showcase their organizations, instead of utilizing it as a new interactive political arena. This suggests a possible relationship between the high degree of formalization of a group and a more traditional and instrumental usage of the Web (della Porta and Mosca 2006: 546).

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on data derived from the project on "Right-Wing Political Mobilization Using the Internet in Six European Countries," funded by the Austrian National Bank (Jubiläumsfondsprojekt ONB, Nr. 14035), directed and conducted by Manuela Caiani at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) of Vienna.
- 2 Created in 2007 by some Swedish extreme right activists, it mirrors the model of the famous collective Encyclopedia Wikipedia (wiki), collecting all those voices which are expelled by wiki moderators.
- 3 SPLC Report, "Rage on the Right. The Year in Hate and Extremism." Intelligence Report, Spring 2010, Issue Number: 137.
- 4 The classification of the extreme right organizations has been based on the self-definition of the group and the content of the message transmitted through the website. We used some diffused typologies for the study of this phenomenon (see Burris *et al.* 2000; Michael 2003; Tateo 2005).
- 5 The web content analysis was conducted in: March–June 2009 (for the Spanish case); August 2009–January 2010 (for the American case); December 2010–April 2011 (for all the other cases). The analysis was undertaken by coders (proficient in the language of the specific country) trained in the sampling selection and coding procedure. Reliability tests have been performed.

- 6 The list of the extreme right organizations and their URLs is available on request.
- 7 www.kkk.com/.
- 8 See the newspaper article "Neofascisti all'assalto della RAI" (Neofascist onslaught of RAI), *La Repubblica*, 5 October 2008.
- 9 E.g., the Spanish skinhead group N.B.P La ultima cruzada barrio del Pilar publishes an online questionnaire that equates immigration with criminality.
- 10 For example, on the Spanish website of the group Inmigración Masiva we found an online survey about people's attitudes toward the right wing political party Plataforma por Catalunya.
- 11 Spaces of a-synchronous online discussions such as fora allow members of a community to interact easily with one another, at any place and time convenient to them, while synchronous spaces of communication such as chats and online conferences are possible only when people interacting are online at the same time.
- 12 On netiquette see www.emilypost.com/.
- 13 See the following article: www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/mormons-using-the-web-to-control-their-own-image/2011/08/11/gIQA1J6BMJ_story.html.
- 14 www.aime-et-sers.com/.
- 15 www.natdems.org.uk/f106t1.htm.
- 16 www.orderofwhiteknights.org/.
- 17 E.g., see the website of the Spanish group Fundación División Azul.
- 18 See for example Brigata Nera.
- 19 See also the website Nuovo MSI.
- 20 See the website of the Italian extreme right magazine *Il Popolo d'Italia*.
- 21 E.g., GipuzkoA88.
- 22 The American site Knights of the KKK has launched a campaign against immigration, together with campaigns against adoption for homosexual couples and for defending "white" Christian values.
- 23 "Became a signatory to The English Claim of Right. Both England and Scotland as part of their Acts of Union of 1707 lost their own national Parliaments and instead Westminster became, and remains home to, the Union Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."
- 24 The six additional indexes of the forms of Internet usage (which express the degree of online activity by right wing groups) are each derived from the sum of the lower level indicators used for each dimension (see the second section) which in turn have been normalized in order to vary between 0 and 1. Finally, each index has been standardized to the 0 to 1 range by dividing the resulting score by the maximum possible value.
- 25 As we can see from Figure 8.1, the USA shows the highest values on three out of six indexes of political activism (virtual community/debate 0.25; information 0.50; mobilization 0.15) and the second highest on three out of six. Italy shows the highest values on three out of six indexes (communication 0.43; propaganda 0.75; internationalization 0.28) and the second highest on two out of six. Spain has the lowest values of online activity on five out of six indexes.
- 26 However, in France, right wing cultural associations perform better on these two functions of the Internet than political parties and movements.
- 27 E.g., bibliographical references are especially present in the websites of cultural organizations (20.2 percent).
- 28 E.g., nostalgic groups are those on whose websites "hate symbols" and banners are more frequent (17.7 percent).
- 29 We refer here to the degree in which a country provides opportunities for citizens' easy access to new technologies (i.e., the so-called "digital divide") and the USA has lower scores of digital divide on many more indicators than Europe. For example, the USA is classified 11 on the Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) measured at a global level, followed by all other European countries.

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