

Far right extremism on social networks: an analysis of the phenomenon

A mia madre Catia e mio padre Mario, a mia sorella Francesca, mia nonna Augusta e a tutta la mia famiglia per aver sempre creduto in me.

Alla mia cara amica Gea, per avermi fatto rialzare ogni volta che sono caduto

Al mio caro amico Paolo, compagno di università e di avventure, per avermi insegnato a non mollare mai.

Che il sole possa sempre splendere su di voi, vi voglio bene

-Alessandro Colletta-

INDEX

1. Introduction..... pag.2
 - 1.1. Ur-Fascism.....
 - 1.2. Politics in post truth age.....
2. Why extremism exists on social media, causes of the phenomenon.....pag.10
 - 2.1. Web 2.0 and a lookout to the development of social network
 - 2.2. Disinformation on social media
 - 2.3. Polarization on social media and the presence of echo-chambers
 - 2.4. The paradox of intolerance and social media, the issue of radicalization
 - 2.5. The role of emotions in the process of radicalization
 - 2.6. The role of the Internet in Radicalization
 - 2.7. The role of biases in the phenomenon of radicalization on social networks
3. Why Do We Speak About Fascism on social media: cases and evidence.....pag.25
 - 3.1. A more precise definition among multiple definitions
 - 3.2. Identitarianism and Alt-Right
 - 3.3. Evidence: Anti-Asian Rhetoric during Covid-19 Pandemic
 - 3.4. QAnon, far-right extremism and the attack to Capitol Hill in Washington DC
4. How to effectively fight far-right extremism online: striking the hydra's heart.....pag.36

- 4.1. Aggressive and Subversive exposure
- 4.2. Why current policy fails to combat right-wing extremism.
- 4.3. Possible solutions and conclusion

Introduction

Fascism it is not the same as it is used to be. Many people think that fascism has ended with the death of Benito Mussolini and the consequent end of the fascist regime led by him. If we conceive fascism as a political phenomenon, we can clearly declare that fascism is dead or almost dead, due to the presence of very small far-right movements which have a limited political role and weigh in our modern and liberal societies. But, if we conceive fascism as a cultural phenomenon, it is not dead at all since its features have reproduced and adapted themselves to the cultural, political and communication structures of our societies.

All the forms of fascism that have existed since the beginning of the digital era cannot be imagined as similar as the original form of fascism. It is more correct to speak about fascist attitudes and fascist behaviour, instead of new fascist parties. They exist but,

since their small size and small political influence, we cannot claim that there is a rebirth of the fascist party. It is more proper to speak about a huge fascist legacy, which it functioned as a source of inspiration for many far-right/ conservatives parties and political movements.

There are particular features and beliefs, which are always considered evergreen by far-right movements. There is a particular type of rhetoric which repeat itself throughout history. The Italian author Umberto Eco, one of the greatest intellectuals of the XX and XXI century, analysed fascism in his academic paper named Ur-fascism (eternal fascism). He analysed the features of this type of fascism that obviously for him have not ended with the death of Mussolini. I will use this book because it explains what the common features of classical fascism and modern fascism are, these features can be used to understand how the far-right behave in the digital era and, consequently, how it interacts within the open society.

1.UR-FASCISM

The Cult of tradition

The first feature of Ur-fascism is the cult of tradition. Its features are very deep-rooted into our society and a consequence of this is the rejection of the modernity and of the diversity. This feature can be found in the new far-right movements: they fear LGBTQI+ community because they think that it can damage the development of children, they fear immigration phenomena because they think that there is a hypothetic project of ethnic substitution.

Rejection of modernism: Traditionalism

Modernism it can be considered only the surface of the Fascist and Nazi ideologies: they were based on deeper spiritual roots. One of the most famous Nazi beliefs was the one of the existences of a superior Aryan Race which must be preserved at all costs. The origin of these myth can be attributed to the German archaeologist Gustaf Kossina and the Austrian anthropologist Karl Penka: they, mistakenly, attributed the geographical origin of the Proto-Indo-Europeans to the central and the north of Europe. This theory was later used by the Nazi racial theorist Alfred Rosenberg, such racial theory of the Nazi regime, was built around the works of Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Madison Grant, and Klansman Lothrop Stoddard; all these theorists and anthropologists were strong advocates of scientific racism. The term of Untermensch was taken by the title of Stoddard's 1922 book "The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under-Man" and it was subsequently used by the Nazi regime to identify all these ethnicities considered inferior to the pure one and to justify the folly behind the atrocities committed in those dark years of the history of Mankind.

The question now is how to contextualize the theories created during that age into the post-war age. Following to Roger Griffin's analysis of the so-called "New Right", the European New Right created a theory of history basing their idea on the thought of Julius Evola, which, according to Nicholas Goodrick-Clark, have contributed to the creation of a sophisticated alternative to the Neo-Nazism that was developing in the US in the post-war

period. The latter was based on a proto-form of populism mixed with xenophobia while the former developed through an intellectual process which goal was to continue the survival of far-right ideas created during the first half of the XX century.

The cult of the tradition can be interpreted, through Evola's lens, as something which aim is to conduct the masses towards the creative destruction of the dominant system of liberalism, which is considered as decadent and corrupted. Many far-right politicians and activists continuously claim that immigration, homosexuality and more in general progressivism are destroying the Western World. Speaking about deep spiritual and cultural roots, the idea of struggling against the decadent war is described by Krishna in the Hindu Bhagavad Gita: a religious warrior with an aristocratic character who fights the higher principles of the community and more in general of the existence itself. (Tuters 2020) Julius Evola considered the idea of a human awakening through heroic experience as a path to enlightenment. This idea, that I will continue to stress in this paper, is still present in the contemporary far-right rhetoric on the heroical struggles which must be achieved for the survival of the homeland, of the culture and of the values.

Irrationalism

The third feature of Ur-Fascism is irrationalism, there is a huge distrust towards science and intellectualism. Today far-right movement criticize modern society because of the presence of a hypothetic New World Order (NWO) that want to destroy our society. Often this irrationalism is reflected in the anti-scientific and aggressive attitudes of far-right movements in the digital era.

A great example of this can be given by two major events in the past few years: one is the Capitol Hill Attack on January 6th, 2021, in Washington DC and the other is the CGIL attack in Rome on October 7th, 2021. The common feature of the two attacks is that both groups wanted to find a precise enemy as a target, and this is the point that I want to stress: fascism has always been characterized by a continuous effort that aims to find an enemy to fight and destroy. The irrational aspect of Ur-Fascism is also reproduced in the communication style of the Far-Right, there is a huge opposition towards environmentalism, new types of food, intellectualism and it is never justified with critical-oriented positions or thoughts. Far-right activists and politicians often attack modernity with irrational position by guiding the public opinion using a certain type of propaganda based on fake-news and alarmism. To activate this trap, which is crucial in the explanation of the process of radicalization, that I will further analyse in the next chapter, it is important to exploit the ignorance and the functional illiteracy of the masses, which cannot analyse and select critically the information received through the media.

Disagreement is treason.

This aspect is based on the one of irrationalism. Science is based on a continuous and critical process and disagreement is crucial to improve knowledge. For fascism there is no necessity of improving knowledge, otherwise there would be the possibility of being wrong. Traditions must be preserved, and everyone should be aligned to the principles and the beliefs dictated by the regime propaganda. Nowadays these principles can be seen in

the continuous attacks on social media: political opponents but also common people are victims of the media pillory launched by far-right politicians. This contributes to the creation and the alimentation of hate caused by social frustration, which will be analysed later.

Disagreement means diversity.

Diversity is the enemy of absolute consensus; homologation is the key. This fear of difference is alimented by the social discourse on immigration and globalization. If leftist anti-global movements oppose globalization because of its capitalistic and exploiting nature, far-right movements, people, and parties oppose to globalization because of the fear of diversity, which is identified as the enemy of the preservation of the tradition and of the culture. When fighting diversity, it is important to create a credible and stable discourse on each possible debatable issue: people cannot doubt their own beliefs, so it is important to activate a machine of rhetoric and propaganda which continue to make people belief what they already believed. The role of fake news and political communication here, again, is even more than crucial as it will be analysed later in this paper.

Social Frustration

The sixth, but nonetheless particularly important feature of Ur-Fascism is the continuous presence of social frustration from which it derives it. A common characteristic of the new far-right movements, which differed from the ones of the past because of the influence of populism, lays in the style of political communication. Parties like Fratelli d'Italia, Vox and Front National (but also the more extreme movements like Forza Nuova and Casapound) has, as targets of their propaganda, a frustrated low-middle class which has been humiliated by the economic crisis and the previous governments. The left is often defined as too far from the needs of the low-middle class, this disenchantment made possible for far-right movements to find a new type of political electorate in an age characterized by high political volatility.

This social frustration leads again to violence, as I have explained in the previous section. It also modifies the type of language and expressions used on social networks: leftist people are called “radical chic”, immigrants are always invited to go back to their countries because there is this feeling that they are dangerous for national security.

In the next section I will make a more-in-depth analysis of the issue of extreme far-right movements on social media.

Sense and construction of the national identity

As Eco stated, the only one who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. It is important to mark a thick and distinctive line between Us (the nation) and Them (the outside, the aliens and whatever can endanger the national community). It important to create the obsession for an international plot which is a menace for the nation. Often these discourses end up in speeches and conclusions about the existence of a hypothetical New World Order that wants to annihilate the nations, the easiest way to fight the plot is appeal to xenophobia because foreigners are considered the one that will end up in destroying the

western society. Far-right political communication, in fact, is always orbiting around the concept of the endangered nation and community: the “outside” of this community is considered extremely dangerous and cannot penetrate the “inside”, which boundaries are built through the development of the sense of national identity and national belonging.

Life is lived for struggle

Pacifism is considered as a form of collaboration with the enemy; thus, it cannot be accepted. Life is a permanent warfare, and this creates the so-called “Armageddon complex”: there must be a final battle in which, after the win on the enemy, there will be a Golden Age. As pointed out above, this belief comes from the Hindu myth of the Bhagavad Gita. This discourse contradicts the principle of the permanent warfare, the fact is that there is not a precise date for this battle, but it will arrive soon or later, and the nation must always be prepared to fight for the sake of the people, of the homeland and of the society.

Elitism

The eternal fascism advocates a sort of popular elitism. Every citizen belongs to the best nation, so there is the concept of the myth of the homeland for which such homeland has been born from a heroic struggle. The people who are member of the party are the best among its citizens and every citizen should become a member of the party, political opponents are considered enemies of the state and they must be persecuted and punished. The role of the leader, since it does not derive from the will of the people but rather by the use of force, it then derives from the weakness of the people who needs a strong leader due to their weakness.

Fascist intellectualism of the elites consisted in attacking modern culture and liberal intellectuals, whose ideas were considered betrayers of the traditional values.

Heroical education

In a fascist regime, heroism is the norm, and everyone should be educated to become a hero for his motherland. Heroism is achieved through sacrifice and there is evidence of the devotion that fascist regimes and leaders had for the cult of death. The motto of the Falangists was “Viva la Muerte”, there was an exaltation of the death and of the heroism that derives from the “ultimate sacrifice” of soldiers and people.

Modern fascist-like rhetoric often put stress on the heroic aspect of the army, because they are the ones who sacrifice themselves for the homeland, the Ur-fascist hero does not fear death because death is the best reward for a heroic life, but the truth is that this type of attitude often leads to violent attitude and aggressiveness of States. Nazi-fascist regimes have exaggerated this concept of heroism and following the analysis of the United States Holocaust Memorial, between 15 and 17 million died in the concentration camps.

Sexual education, machismo

Machismo is a feature of fascist regimes, attitudes, and rhetoric. Women are considered to be inferior and subordinated to men while nonstandard sexual habits are severely condemned: homosexuality was considered mental illness during the years of Nazism and Fascism and in fact homosexuals were sent to concentration camps.

Nowadays most states in the world do not persecute homosexuals anymore, but extreme-right leaders are often taking positions against homosexuals or the LGBTQ+ community. They justify their homophobic positions on the ground of the need of defending the society, the western culture and the so-called “natural family”. Their range of policy action consist basically in limiting same-sex marriages and adoption by couples of the same sex. Right-wing policies for women are often limited to economic-aid for pregnancy and newborns, this is the evidence of the traditional and obsoleted idea that women’s role is limited to the one of being mother and raising children for the future of the homeland.

1.2 Politics in post-truth age

As already stressed, the point described above do not solely represent features of the fascist and nazi regimes, they represent particular mechanisms that can reproduce themselves through history, leaders and their speeches but also through the ideas of particular far-right/extremists’ groups. The rest of the paper will not only analyse social networks, it will rather demonstrate how the points presented by Umberto Eco in his book “Ur-Fascism” can be found in the mechanisms of social networks and especially in the activity of political leaders and political movement, parties and organizations.

Instead of creating a “credible truth”, for neo-fascist groups and leaders is rather important to create a persuasive and often alternative narrative of reality, but why so? It is important to persuade the masses because the 21st century is characterized by an age of insecurity, this insecurity has been clearly exploited by populist right-wing parties for political and electoral purposes. Following the Oxford Dictionary, the word “post truth” was first used by the American author Ralph Keye in 2004, according to him lies used to be treated as something unacceptable while in a media-driven society they became acceptable in some situation. In the same year, after the misleading statements made by the Bush administration in relation to the 9/11 attacks, the American journalist Eric Alterman accused the political environment of transforming itself in a post-truth one.

Other important authors and scholars, like the American academic Moustafa Beyoumi, heavily criticized the US government declarations and policies after the Invasion of Iraq in 2003 because the use of “noble lies” became institutionalized but what is a noble lie? This term comes from Plato’s Republic, and it is a myth or a lie that can be propagated by the political elite to maintain social harmony.

The use of lie in politics and in particular in the post-truth, have gone way beyond the need of maintaining social harmony and social stability in modern societies. Lies are used for political and for electoral purposes nowadays, according to the famous political scientist Colin Crouch post-democracy is a model of politics where elections still exist and can change governments but where the public electoral debate is controlled and managed by teams of professional experts of communication that assists politicians in presenting some

topics rather than others to get public consensus (Crouch).

The post-truth reality is a condition exploited by political leaders to gain consensus: the goal is no more centred around imposing a particular truth or suppressing unwanted ideas (noble lies are used to suppress all those ideas considered subversive or dangerous), the goal is to inundate medias with information to sow doubt and create alarmism and instability. In the post-truth age people isolate themselves into echo-chambers because they produce a sense of comfort zone that contributes to the further development of political polarization. In a situation of political polarization, people will hardly believe the information that are not conforming with their own ideas or with the ideas and the rhetoric build, by their favourite political leaders. The case below is a clear example of how people do not believe to information and journalistic investigation when they are not conforming with their own ideas. This phenomenon should not be justified behind the idea of freedom of thought, evidence and truths cannot be denied by any type of political ideology. When this happens, the whole political discourse can degenerate towards a climate of hate, social networks function as catalyser of this process which can end in becoming dangerous for the concept of democracy itself

In October 2021, the Italian newspaper Fanpage published the outcome of the Lobby Nera investigation. Such activity has been conducted by Salvatore Garzillo, Sasha Biazzo and Luigi Scarano: Garzillo infiltrated inside the circles of the radical-right and extreme-right wing in Milan, all these circles were related to the Italian far right parties Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. One of the main discoveries of the investigation was that several members of FdI, including the MEP Carlo Fidanza, praised Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and anti-Semitism. Mr. Fidanza also made fun of Paolo Berizzi (journalist of La Repubblica), who is the only journalist in Europe who is under escort for neo-Nazi Threats.

The head of the so-called Lobby Nera is Roberto Jonghi Lavarini, he is a neo-Nazi, and he has been candidated by Fdi for the Chamber of Deputies in the national elections of 2018. He has been condemned in 2020 for fascist apology but despite of this, Fdi and its leader Giorgia Meloni have never really distanced themselves from people such as Lavarini and extremists ideology in general.

While MPs Emanuele Fiano declared the intention of proposing a motion for the dissolution of Forza Nuova and Casapound, Giorgia Meloni, who was MP at the time, began to spoke of a conspiracy by the so-called "poteri forti" because of the investigations against her party. In such declaration is clear to see how the point mentioned in 1.3 is reproduced and represented: there is the necessity of create alarmism and conspiracy theories to unify and mobilize party's supporters. The truth is that many people that positioned themselves against the Lobby Nera investigation without even watching the video or reading the documents related to such investigation.

There are several evidence of the fact that the Italian radical-right had ambiguous positions when it has been time to distance itself from neo-fascism and fascist legacy. Following the analysis made by Drs. Valerio Alfonso Bruno, James Downes and Alessio Scopelliti, the failure of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in distancing her party from fascist legacy have raised two questions that will analyse more in depth in this paper. (Bruno, Downes,

Scopelliti)

The first one is what is the legacy of fascism within the modern Italian politics, and I will broaden such question by contextualizing it in the field of social network and political communication. The second question regards the analysis of the political significance that radical right and neo-fascist culture have in the right-wing ideology, not only in Italian politics but also in Europe and in the United States.

2 WHY EXTREMISMS EXISTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA, ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON

2.1 Web 2.0 and a lookout to the development of social network

Web 2.0 is a term coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999, she predicted all the effects it would have on public relations. The term Web 2.0 refers to all those web-app or websites which are characterized by:

- User generated content (UCC). It is any form of content which is posted by users, it includes text, videos, images, and any form of “something” which can be communicated to other users. This aspect of Web 2.0 characterized the absence of hierarchy on social networks. Any person can produce content and share it with the other users, there are no special requirements to do such and in fact, this can create problems of misinformation which can be countered through fact-checking and other measures used by social media companies.
- Virtual community. It is a network of individuals which operate through on-line platforms. Virtual communities cross geographical and political boundaries, they create the sense of belonging and mutual attachment which are typical of real-life communities.

Social networking services, as also known as SNS, are part of the Web 2.0. People can use them to build social relationships with people that share real-life connections or backgrounds, but also interests. There are basically 5 types of Social Networks according to Ingrid Adames, author for the Search Engine Journal:

- Traditional Social Networks: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter. They were created to connect friends, families, brands, firms, and jobseekers in the case of LinkedIn. Facebook evolved and created Facebook Marketplace for shopping, but also Facebook Groups to connect more people living in the same district or people sharing the same interests.
- Media Sharing Networks: Instagram, Pinterest and Tik Tok. This type of social network is now multimedia, they can be used to share video, audio, and pictures. These social media are used for entertainment, but brands can use them to promote themselves through the help of influencers.
- Discussion Networks: Discord, Reddit, Quora. They are used as forum of discussions, people look for the discussion of their interests and they look for

answers, these types of social networks are very useful in connecting people with similar interests.

- **Social Blogging Networks:** Tumblr and Medium. They allow you to publish content for your audience, it is useful to build engagement and get people familiar with your business. They can also increase visibility, but they require more work if compared to the other types of social networks.
- **Review Networks:** Glassdoor, Trip Advisor, Google Business Profile. Brands and businesses use these platforms to manage their online reputation. Customers can express positive or negative reviews; the image of brands and businesses depends on their online reputation because positive reviews function as an incentive for future possible customers.

Social networks have developed in several phases throughout the beginning of 21st century. Nevertheless, they resulted in being an outcome of the process of globalization of communication, being at the same time able of influencing and boosting the process of globalization itself.

They have developed in different stages. According to the analysis made by Statista and TNW, published on “Our World in Data”, social networks began to develop in different steps.

In 1997, SixDegrees was launched. This social network allowed the creation of user profiles, each user could then add his/her friend to the list of friends or even invite people to join such platform. It was based on the concept of the so-called six degrees of separation, this idea was created by the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy, and it assumes that two people can be connected in a maximum of six steps. The American social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted several experiments about the “small-world- type of network”, the study suggested that human society is based in a small-world- type of network. Milgram’s studies but also the ones conducted by Duncan J. Watts and Steven Strogatz from Cornell University influenced the popular theory of the so-called six degrees of separation.

Then blogs like LiveJournal began to appear in 1999, people began to express themselves while interacting with other users that shared common interests.

In 2002, LinkedIn was founded as a networking site to connect professionals, job seekers and firms, by 2020 it had reached more than 675 million users. Nowadays LinkedIn continues to be used as one of the main social networks for searching for qualified candidates.

With the creation of Myspace there was a turning point, it marked the beginning of social media as we perceive them today. In 2006, two years after its creation, it reached 50 million users, which was a great result for that time but in 2008 it was overtaken by Facebook. The question now is “why” Facebook?

Facebook managed to surpass Myspace because the platform was more user-friendly, and it has been able to provide more tools and apps throughout the years. Another major cause of users switching from Myspace to Facebook is because MySpace began to be crowded of

advertising ads. It is paradoxically to realize that now social networks users do not pay attention anymore to the quantity of ads that now are presented on social networks, people just agree on the term of conditions in change of being connected.

Facebook has developed significantly. At the same time, from the '10s and 20s of the present centuries. New social networks like Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and Tik Tok have emerged and there are no doubts that they have contributed to the globalization of communication: 2.7 billion people uses Facebook, 2 billion people uses WhatsApp, 1.15 billion uses Instagram; Tik Tok and Twitter are two social network that, despite the number of users which is under the billion, have a key role in politics. Aside from WhatsApp, all the other social networks are often a boost for the freedom of expression. The debate on the freedom of speech that will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.2 Disinformation on social media

It is almost obvious that social networks functioned as a boost for the freedom of expression, they also guaranteed a direct communication between political leaders and their electorate, but it is important to understand why there was this shift from traditional communication to this web 2.0 communication. The process of digitalization and the transformation of the social media have contributed to a deep change in the way that people communicate their ideas, such transformation also have changed the ways in which not only political campaigns but also the political activities are conducted.

Online disinformation nowadays is one of the most serious challenges to democracy because it can slowly destroy it from the inside. It can also damage journalism and freedom of expression because it creates the need of detection of all those contents which can cause disinformation (Bezzaoui, Fegert, Weinhardt 2022). It is firstly important to define what disinformation is, it can be defined as a false information which is spread with the objective of deceiving people (Shu, Alatawi et al. 2020).

As it will be better explained later, people tend to read, select, and prefer online content with which they are familiar. They also prefer content that shows information they already agree with, why so?

Globalization, as Zygmunt Bauman would say, makes the society more fragile, so there is this continuous need for trust; people are not ready to review their ideas and their beliefs so one of the reasons that can explain the confirmation bias can be this. Disinformation is a powerful instrument that exploit the fear and the anger of people, and the algorithm of social media can contribute to the circulation of dangerous ideas. When clickbait articles and functional illiteracy are mixed-up together, the result can be extremely dangerous: when a certain post receives thousands and thousands of likes and shares, people are more prone to believe that its content is true.

The key point here is a matter of perception: the term “palingenetic ultranationalism” (Griffin 1991) consist in the perception of an endangered community that needs to be reborn through extraordinary efforts. In the post-truth age emotions play a key role in determining and spreading the sense of imperilment which is typical of the rhetoric and

narrative of far-right movements. Such definition will be further analysed in the next chapter.

2.3 Polarization on social media and the presence of echo-chambers

The main two evidence of the victory of populism in the western world are the Brexit Referendum and Trump's victory in US 2016 presidential election. One of the main assumptions of classic economics is that people are completely able to collect and analyse information correctly, on the other side psychology and political science have demonstrated that voters are not very competent in collecting and analysing information: they are poor informed about what are they voting for, and they are often not able to process the information correctly (Bartels, Carpini, Keeter). The born and subsequent developments of the new field of behavioural economics, on the other hand, have contrasted one of the main assumptions of standard economics, the one that economic agents are perfectly rational. The works of the psychologists Kahneman and Tversky have shown the existence of cognitive biases that make it difficult to people to make the rational and so, theoretically, the best choice possible.

Information come from different sources: daily social interaction, reading contents and interaction on social network. There is a large quantity of information divided in different categories and due to the heterogenous nature of information, they are difficult to be processed. The issue in particularly regards social media, information is constantly repackaged and repeated online (Levy, Razin 2020). Following a study on copyright on news media documents made by Cagè, only 32% of online content is original and media outlets hardly ever name the source of the copied message, the lack of source material is even more evident in direct social relations (online and offline) because no one checks the source of information that are passed and boomeranged from an individual to another.

The nature of echo-chambers is that idea and beliefs are amplified and reinforced due to repetition and communication inside a closed system. There is a huge presence of already existing views that do not encounter any opposition nor any particular different point of view, this can potentially lead to the confirmation bias (biases on social network will be analysed in section 2.7). How is this related to the phenomenon of political polarization? There are no doubts that the internet has contributed to the creation of a more pluralistic form of public debate but on the other hand it has increased the exposure to channels that support particular ideologies which are also influenced by such ideologies. In an extreme echo-chamber, when a person makes a claim and provide news and information, many like-minded people will then repeat and overhear the content, this may lead to a vicious cycle that bring most people to assume that the information or the news at the beginning is true (also if it is often an extreme variation of the story).

Like a real echo-chamber, where the sound that you produce come back at you, in online echo-chambers the content that someone produce is repeated and repeated again until it comes back to him/her. When the echo occurs, there is often a reinforcement of the system of individual beliefs, this will consequently lead to the development of self-confirmation

bias. Individuals participate in the processes of echo-chambers because of the sense of self-confidence that other individuals will be better accepted by the others.

The personalization of algorithms has also contributed to the development of political polarization online. In the era of traditional media, people were mostly readers who were able of selecting and picking the information that they prefer while in the era of digital media people are not only users but often, they are also producer of information due to their ability of commenting and sharing contents. In this new era people partially decide what content they want to receive, personalized algorithms organize and show contents basing their process on guessing what individual user's preferences are and what the user will likely prefer to see as next content, the result of this process is the creation of filter bubbles.

The term "filter bubble" have been created by the internet activist Eli Pariser and what basically cause is a state of intellectual isolation that is nevertheless the result of algorithm processes base on individual user's preferences and past click-history. In a situation of intellectual isolation, we become separated from all the information and the contents that do not reflect our typical activity, beliefs, and behaviour online: there is the creation of a "personal ecosystem of information" (Pariser).

The result of the filter bubble is the display of articles and posts that support our current political standing and our current opinions. This, altogether with the phenomenon of echo-chambers contributes to the process of political polarization and this can be an issue for modern democracies because one of the main necessities for democracy to exist is that people must be able to have a look on things from different and other's point of view. This is such because democracy is based on common discussion and common agreements, when a common agreement is not reached the rights of the minorities must be respected and guaranteed by the majority. The problem of having echo-chambers and filter bubbles in democracy is that democracy in itself must be based on a reliance of shared facts, there cannot be parallel and separated version of the same event or history. Reality is objective but the way through which we perceive reality is not, freedom of thought cannot justify the presence of alternative versions of historical events. Far right and extremist movements and political parties tend to instrumentalise events, a clear example can be the case of immigration and anti-immigration discourses in Italy. In the traditional media era, newspaper and newscast were the one responsible of diffusing information, news and data while in the era of social network everyone is capable of spreading news, especially on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and more recent also Instagram and Tik Tok. Politicians have transformed themselves into sort of "political influencers", they don't only post their daily life as part of State Institutions, they have managed to spread news firstly diffused by online newspapers and also to post their daily life outside the vests of politicians. The first aspect made possible to transform politicians into megaphones and this role has been used to create alarmism, stigmatize the political opponents, and get more consensus while the latter has transformed politicians from men and women of institutions to common people, to the so called uomo qualunque (following the Guglielmo Giannini). This simplification of the political image has certainly contributed to the rise of far-right

wing populism. Politicians belonging to that political area have decided to divest themselves of their authoritative and distinguished vests of men and women of institutions by using the two strategies above. The combo of the twos has contributed to the development of alarmism related to immigration matters because far-right politicians were the ones that continuously posted news about migrants coming in Ital through the Mediterranean route and at the same time they were the ones that continuously highlighted any type of crime committed by migrants.

The type of language used is a crucial matter in creating alarmism about certain issues. Terms like illegal aliens, invasion and highlighting only the crimes are all things which are able to model and transform the mind of voters. The creation of the imaginary endangered community that is suffering and struggling due to the apparent invasion is part of the development of the concept of palingenetic ultranationalism coined by Griffin. When politicians manage to create the xenophobic equation “criminality = immigrants” into the minds of citizen, in reality they manage to create the sense of social frustration which can be exploited for political purposes, reconnecting the analysis with the one of the Ur-Fascism of Umberto Eco, the creation of the common enemy and the presence of social frustration are two keys.

Alarmism can be considered as a catalyser of echo-chambers and so of political polarization, the collateral effect of such phenomenon is the subsequent development of hate and the risk that certain types racist/xenophobic attitudes become normalized. In other words, alarmism contributes to an increase in the radicalization process that will be further analysed in the next subsection.

2.4 The paradox of intolerance and social media, the issue of radicalization

Following Karl Popper thinking in its masterpiece named “The Open Society and Its Enemies”, the dynamics of digitalization led to an extreme development of freedom of expression. Such unlimited freedom of expression can bring the population to tolerate intolerant behaviours and declarations, which will end to damage the freedom of someone else.

Its work was published in 1945 but it seems to have become a prophecy because nowadays is more actual than ever. Far right movements often defend their homophobic, racist, and dangerous actions or declarations through the principle of freedom of expressions: they often attack the so-called politically-correctness because it doesn’t allow them to commit hate speech.

Popper, in its analysis, defended Plato’s apologia for “a benevolent despotism” presented in the passages from The Republic (562b-565e but also 564a), the Austrian philosopher declared that in order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must not be tolerated intolerance. This type of reasoning seems not to feet well inside the western liberal democracies, in fact the liberal philosopher John Rawls concluded in its masterpiece “A Theory of Justice” that a just society must tolerate the intolerant, otherwise the society would be intolerant and so, unjust.

Today, far right, and liberal-conservative people claim the right to freedom of speech on social media. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter developed several tools (mainly based on an algorithm) to analyse and eventually delete contents which can be considered harmful or inappropriate for other users. These algorithms, nevertheless, are only able to censor contents which blatantly violate the rules of the social network community.

If so, how can the grow of far-right populism be explained? In political science there is the common assumption that right-wing parties and left-wing parties move towards the centre to try to “capture” the majority of the electorate.

I do not agree with this postulate for two reasons. First, this electorate strategy works well in a society where there is strong political bipolarism and high trust in politics, representatives, and institutions (this is not the case of Italy for example). The second reason is less theoretical because it takes more into consideration the real political situation of a country like Italy. The Italian electorate is very frustrated towards politics for three reasons:

- Mani pulite: it was a nationwide judicial investigation into political corruption in Italy held in 1990s. This was the “Prime Mover” of the dissatisfaction of the electorate, it led to the dissolution of the majority of the parties of the so-called “First Republic”. It is important to remember the protests of people against Bettino Craxi outside the Raphael Hotel, citizens throwed coins to the leader of the PSI. From this moment on, Italian politics has always been considered something “dirty” ...this is due to the high level of political corruption and ties with the mafia.
- Economic crisis of 2008: Spain, Italy and Greece were the three European countries that suffered this economic crisis the most. The only solution possible was the regime of economic austerity, many populists and far-right movements used this as a pretext to increase the anger and the distrust towards the financial world and European Union in particular.
- Situation in the peripheries: European States have abandoned the citizen that live in the peripheries in many ways. The key issues are lack of public transport connection, multicultural environment, higher rates of criminality, poverty, and higher unemployment rate. These factors contributed to the grow of distrust and dissatisfaction towards politics and institutions on one side and to the development of far-right feelings because of the racist rhetoric that associate immigration to crimes like rape, drug dealing and to the degradation.

Nowadays far-right movement are way weaker due to the strengthening of democracy, but they stress the rhetoric of an endangered community that needs to reborn through extraordinary means, Griffin named this palingenetic ultranationalism. Nevertheless, this rhetoric is part of the propaganda of the populist right in many countries. This is part of the dynamic that Kaplan and Costa defined as “new tribalism”, the endangered community is bound together by the fears produced and shared in virtual networks.

After this introduction to the concept, it is important to define what is radicalization and why it is a relevant field to analyse if we want to analyse the phenomenon of online wight-

wing extremism. There are several definitions of radicalization. The first one is from a functional point of view, it consists in an intensified preparation for a hypothetical conflict between groups while from a descriptive point of view, radicalization can be defined to a change in beliefs and behaviour that ends up in justifying violence between groups and the struggle, or better sacrifice to defend the own group (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). In the definition itself, there is already an element of the Ur-Fascism by Umberto Eco, the life lived for the struggle is an element that is present in a radicalized and extremist group. Islamic extremist groups and networks that advocate for the Jihad are advocating for a continue struggle and also for the ultimate sacrifice, this element of the Quran has been taken and reinterpreted by radicalized fundamentalist to justify their terrorist actions against innocent civilians. At the same time, whenever there is an extremist group, indeed in this context of analysis the focus is on far-right extremists, the elements of the struggle and of the sacrifice are always present and this is a clear confirmation of the point stressed by Umberto Eco, indeed that several elements of fascism have continued to reproduce themselves throughout the course of history.

Another definition is the one given by R. Bott, the scholar completely agrees with the definition given by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, here radicalization is defined as the embracement of extremist beliefs that support violence as a method to achieve changes in society (Bott et al. 2009). The third definition affirms that conceptualized radicalization is both an individual and a group process in which people develop extremist ideology and beliefs (Borum 2011). The common denominator is that radicalization is a phenomenon that concern people and then groups of people so for the second reason it is very likely to find out that radicalization could spread itself on social media faster than it would have done in the real physical world because the presence of masses of people and a continuous and frenetic interaction among its users.

By focusing on the interpretation of radicalization as an act of violence, indeed terrorism, it is important to admit that believing in extremist ideas is not a necessary prerequisite for committing political violence because many episodes of political violence were caused by people without a strong commitment to extremist ideologies. The problem arises when the extremist ideology is characterised by violent ideas and feelings, in this specific case, it is more likely that political violence will occur. Scholars who focuses on the field of social movements also define radicalization in a similar way, it is considered a process of escalation from nonviolent to violent types of action that develops through complex interactions over time (Della Porta 2018).

Political violence is considered to be any act of violence committed for political purposes by state or non-state actors, there are many forms of political violence and the most relevant are murder, war, genocide and ethnic cleansing (Valentino 2014). The sociologist Jeff Goodwin also gave a precise definition of terrorism, by defining it as the strategic use of violence by a group of opposition against civilians, the main scope is to influence the audience, create fear and obtain eventual changes.

The paradox emerges because there is not a universal definition and identification of terrorism and in particular of domestic terrorism, each single country has its own standard to describe the phenomenon. If we take into consideration United States, the federal

government defines terrorism as the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, in support for political or social objectives. The issue arises when it is time to define the infamous episodes of mass shootings like the one at a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas or the one at the Three of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, can they be considered acts of domestic terrorism or just mere acts of violence? Actually, they cannot be considered episodes of domestic terrorism because in the US, in order to be convicted as terrorists, there is the need of being associated with a foreign organization defined as a terrorist one by the federal government. Another issue arises by the alarming data of the American Enterprise Institute, which found out that 29% of Americans agree on the fact that political violence is sometimes necessary to protect the United States of America (Cox 2011)

Radicalized and political polarized individuals and groups renounce to dialog, agreement and tolerance which are three of the pillars on which contemporary democracy is founded on. Violent extremism is a consequence of the process of radicalization and the concept itself refers to the political ideologies and methods that oppose to the fundamental values of society and the principles of democracy and universal human rights. What extremism advocates is racial, political, social, religious, and economic supremacy (Neuman 2010) and the main characteristic of extremism is the intolerance towards whatever is opposing or divergent (Martin 2011). There is literally a crusade against whatever is considered different and so wrong, right-wing extremists completely reject any form of progressivism in the field of civil rights and social justice: LGBTQI+ rights are wrong, homosexuality is wrong, abortion is wrong and immigration is considered dangerous because of the so-called risk of ethnic substitution.

This feeling of hatred contributes to the creation of a line of demarcation between the radicalized and the extremist community and the outside of such community. Then, in order to build a strong community, radicalized groups begin to identify what is alien and not belonging to the identity or the principles of the community as something which is extremely dangerous not only for the life of the community but also for the destiny of the people, of the nation as a whole. This obviously led to the further developments of xenophobic, homophobic, and more in general “hate-based” discourses and ideologies.

On one side, we are lucky because very extremists’ political groups are unlikely to be so relevant as to be part of national politics, on the other hand they are however able to merge themselves and influence the ideology and the policy development of parties that although present themselves as pro-democratic, have never detached themselves from the far-right galaxy. The strategy adopted by contemporary far-right is called metapolitics, which is the attempt to change the political discourse rather than obtaining political changes through conventional political practices and structures like participation and institution (Stern 2019). White supremacists try to spread their idea through recruitment of like-minded individuals, on social media this process is facilitated because of echo-chambers and polarization. Another way which is used to mainstream white supremacists’ ideas in the case of United States for example, is to try to integrate their views into Republican party policies and politicians, this obviously occurred during the Trump administration. This

phenomenon occurred more often in Europe rather than in the United States because the latter has a two-party system, which gives less opportunity for extreme and radical groups to form their own political parties.

Cas Mudde defines the far-right as something which is seen as hostile to liberal democracy, but the far-right democracy can be divided between the extreme right which rejects popular sovereignty and majority rule, and the radical right which accepts democracy in general but rejects some important principles of liberal democracy like civil rights (Mudde 2019).

A big question to which is important to answer is how people get radicalized.

Undoubtedly, there are so many different pathways that can be taken to engage into a violent political action. One of the most common factors of engagement in violent political actors is face-to-face socialization with a small group that is connected through a broader group through social networks and internet more in general, then there is ideology, especially if presented by a trusted source. Scholars have furthered described more complex paths of radicalization, these paths are defined as processes of assimilation in which people moves from the margin of extremist groups to the center, it is important to mention that such pathways models co-exists together.

The first one has been ideated by the psychologists Fatali Moghaddam and it is called staircase to terrorism: each stair represents an increased commitment to political violence but in each stair there is the simultaneous possibility of escalation and de-escalation (Moghaddam 2005). The second model has been created by the social psychologists McCauley and Moskalenko, it consisted in a multistep model and the imagine that they have created as a metaphor of their model was the one of a pyramid: from the base to the top, each level of the pyramid was associated with a decreasing number of people but an increase level of radicalization in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours. This model is helpful to distinguish terrorists from their base of sympathizers and supporters (McCauley, Moskalenko 2008).

The two models above describe radicalization as a linear process in which potential terrorists passes through each step of the staircase or of the pyramid, other scholars decided to use a different approach to describe the process of radicalization. The four-stage model of radicalization was created by the political scientist Quintan Wiktorowicz, and it involves four concepts: cognitive openness to new ideas, personal relations with activists, acceptance of legitimate authority in the activists' group and accepting violence as a rational choice. The question of radicalization that arises from this model is related to the understanding of the reasons and the methods that lead a person to develop increasingly extreme beliefs that justify violent action (Wiktorowitz 2004). McCauley and Moskalenko were also responsible of creating twelve different variations of their model.

It is relevant to mention the fact that these models are bottom-up models, and they are in contrast to top-down pathway models of radicalization, the latter are used by the Danish intelligence services and the New York Police Department. The top-down model presumes that a person which is inclined to certain radical ideas meets a radicalizer and this meeting leads to a change in the behaviour of that person. Once that the process begins, the victim

of radicalization begins to cut off social relationships with members that do not belong to the organization, this process is catalysed by the assistance of senior members in the process of radicalisation: this strategy is used to identify radicalizers and avoid that they could continue to influence younger and more fragile people. (Alimi, Bosi, Demetriou 2015). The difference between the bottom up model and the top down model is that the first put more emphasis and focus on the radicalized person by also trying to analyse the different steps toward radicalization while the latter put much focus on the radicalizer, the top down model is also able to describe how radicalizers get in contact with potentially radicalized people and such model itself, as mentioned above, can be used to avoid potential and dangerous processes of radicalization.

Another type of technique used to study and analyse the issue of radicalization is by using relational approaches. The relational perspective, first of all, affirms that it is impossible to separate the individual from the social and transactional contexts in which they live, society is complex and dynamics, it cannot be considered as an object of study which is static or fixed (Alimi, Bosi, Demetriou 2015). This evidence was also confirmed by a previous analysis on social movements made by Donatella della Porta, she concluded that most extremist militants in Italy and Germany did not join extremists organization by themselves but they were, instead, accompanied by a group of friends that certainly share some affinities with the extremist ideologies promoted by the organization itself (della Porta 1995).

Marc Sageman, a social psychologist, have formulated the so-called “bunch of guys theory, the focus of his theory was on the radicalization process that led young people to join the jihad. Following this model of explanation, a person is likely to become a jihadist if he or she is in a group of like-minded friends, this for two reasons: the whole group decide to join the extremist organization or because one of his or her friends did it. Once that there is the affiliation with the extremist group, in Sageman’s analysis the extremist group is the jihadist group, there is a pathway of progressive intensification of beliefs and so a progressive radicalization of the individual (Sageman 2008). Nevertheless, this model has been criticized because it does not explain why a particular group of friends will radicalise while other will not. Its main contribution was to de-emphasize the top-down theory mentioned above, for which there is a sort of radical imam that brainwash innocent youth through a network of contacts.

It must be said that all the theories mentioned above do not still explain the phenomenon of “lone wolves”, who are self-radicalized people that are not recruited or involved in any group. For political scientists like Lasse Lindekilde and Francis O’Connor, lone wolves are not totally isolated because they may have contacts with other activists or groups, this phenomenon have particularly increased with the development and growth of traditional social networks. The process of radicalization of lone wolves is much more complicated and discontinuous than the one of people that actively join or follow an extremist organization, lone wolves represent an example of partial or weak social embeddedness (Malthaner, Lindekilde 2017).

The general acceptance of these type of approaches led to an increase in the use of Social

Network Analysis(SNA) by organizations that tries to fight terrorism and stop the processes of radicalization online. This type of system allows to delineate terrorist networks by integrating online and offline data. Perhaps, this system implies the necessity of surveillance of people that have nothing to do with terrorism, the focus is often on marginalized and minority groups like Muslims not only in the western world more in general, but also in the marginalized peripheries of the western cities (Cainkar 2009).

Such approaches analysed above are able of understanding the connection between activists or militants, but they are still not able of explain why such individuals ends up in committing political violence. Other possible criticisms can be found in the fact that they are not able in identifying the variables that predict terrorism and political violence, they are rather able to identify a range of mediating factors like individual uncertainty, group and socio-political dynamics or personal grievances but none of these elements is a sufficient condition for violence. Other problems of such schematic models of radicalisation are that they focus only on the general principle and not on the full range of contingent and idiosyncratic factors by which individuals are influenced in moving from a position of non-violence to one of violence (Warwick, Clancy, Furl 2022)

Hafez and Mullins have instead developed a theory in which radicalization is considered like a puzzle and its pieces are networks, ideologies, grievances and environments. Each of the element in the list can vary and such variation can result in different consequences, depending on the individual (Hafez, Mullins 2015).

A more recent concept of radicalization comes from the sociologist Kevin McDonald, his attention was put on communication and affection theory, which are both theories that emphasize the role of individual in the process of radicalization. For him radicalization was not something done to other people, but rather something produced by activists, which is an attempt to make sense of themselves and their world (McDonald 2018). In other words, radicalisation is not a mere process of indoctrination of an individual by a “more generic” ideologically driven organization, it is a process in which a person takes on a particular way of feeling that “makes it possible to think certain things” (McDonald 2018). His analysis comes from a study made in young people’s jihadi social networks content, the evidence that have came out from the study is the existence of shared emotions and sensations inside a community, this also helps to find a common and shared sense of the word. People that join not only a jihadist organization, but also an extremist one, tend to divide the world and the reality itself into the dichotomies of innocent/ guilty and pure/impure, is this so much different from what members of far-right organizations and far-right politicians do? The construction of a strong identity is crucial to divide the inside from the outside and so the good from the evil, this constant attempt of finding a common enemy to fight is a particular characteristic of any extremist organization, the constant sense of imperilment is a constant presence in the rhetoric and in the process of construction of an extremist ideology.

2.5 The role of emotions in the process of radicalization

The role of words and emotions is also crucial in the construction of an extremist ideology and in the subsequent process of radicalization. The sociologist Julian McAllister Groves created a term called “vocabulary of emotions”, in which alt-right and anti-feminist communities strategically employs emotions in order to rationalize and legitimize their activism and ideology (McAllister Groves 1995) This is done by presenting their whiteness, maleness and their other privileged identities as in danger because they are oppressed and marginalized due to the growth of progressist ideologies that are born and developed to destroy many of the traditional precepts, which continues to exist only to justify social injustice and to keep the status quo. (Ganesh 2020).

At the same time, as mentioned with the practical historical examples at the beginning of the previous subchapter, radical right and populists’ movements and political parties uses emotions of the audience to legitimate their activism and ideology. This results in the creation of strong emotional responses that range from pure anxiety and fear to conspiracy and mass hysteria, to anger and rage, until the reach of nostalgia of the “good old days” (Betz 2020). Obviously, when we refer to nostalgia for the good old days, we are considering people and movements that sympathize for Fascist or Nazi ideologies. This sympathy is explained by the idea of the apparent sense of security and high morality, which was present at that time, indeed these sympathies for the two regimes mentioned above come out whenever there are immigration issues or political fights to get more civil rights, indeed immigration is often considered a security issue and civil rights like LGBTQI+ are considered part of the moral decay of our times.

Ernesto Laclau emphasized the role of emotion in right-wing populism by saying that it starts on the individual level. Populism is the result of a series of individuals’ demand that remain ignored within the established democratic framework. The political space for mobilization of radical-right populism emerges when individuals come to realize that they are not alone, and all the unsatisfied demands and grievances are part of a larger system of equivalent demands and grievances that is dismissed by the political establishment because they are considered unreasonable or politically incorrect. (Laclau 2005). The key point is to analyse how nationalism and radical-right feelings are connected with populism: according to the American sociologist Robert S. Jansen radical right populism is a political project that mobilize ordinary people by articulating an anti-establishment and nationalist rhetoric that valorise ordinary people (Jansen 2011). Radical right politicians and movements give value to the unheard fears and anxiety of ordinary people and by this, it gives a special value by them, this can be considered one of the main causes of the populist wave from 2016 on.

The American sociologist Mabel Berenzin noted that emotions are “physical and expressive responses to the sense of destabilization” (Berenzin 2002). This sense of destabilization, as already stressed, comes not only from economic and social instability but also from the accumulation unheard and so unsatisfied demands and grievances. When the sense of destabilization and insecurity transform in a sense of anger, such emotion trigger some sort of action that can range from violent and denigrating comments online to political demonstrations and voting for a radical right-wing populist party. The ability of radical right-wing movements and politicians again, is to direct this social anger towards

certain topics, in order to gain advantage in the political scenario and so in the next political elections.

Decades ago, the working class was that political faction of society which mostly identified with the left but since the left have become elitist and incapable of satisfying the demands of the working class, there was a “right turn” at the political level because the radical right-wing present himself of being capable of at least hearing the problems of the working class, of the ordinary people. In age characterized by grand-scale social, economic, and cultural destabilization, the politics of nostalgia is used as a tool to counter such sense of destabilization by providing a sense of reassurance and comfort to people affected by economic and social crisis (Betz 2020).

2.6 The role of the Internet in Radicalization

Data from the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database shows that terrorist attacks increased from 1970 until 1992, then there has been a decrease for ten years and from 2004 on, there has been an increase again, with a very strong increase from 2014. The internet is not the cause of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism but this subchapter will stress the point that it can contribute to such phenomenon. It makes easier for like-minded people to communicate between each other (Daniels 1997) in fact, alongside with the developments of social networks in the past 10 years, disinformation researchers have confirmed that since 2016 there has been an increase in disinformation on social media from right-wing activists.

According to the scholars there are three groups of technical characteristics that facilitate the exposure to extremist ideas and the diffusion of extremist contents. The first one is composed by recommendation algorithms and collaboration, the one of YouTube has been widely criticized for promoting far-right content (Ribeiro et. al 2020) because the platform tends to recommend videos to users based on the previous searching history: once that the user is exposed to a potentially extremist content, YouTube will continue to show related videos and channels to the content at the beginning and this will end in a loophole. The philosopher Mark Alfano defined this process as technological seduction, such process is defined as the ability of a technical architecture to nudge the user towards certain choices and attitudes (Alfano, Carter, Chong 2018). For the reason mentioned above, YouTube has attempted to address this problem through constant modifications of the algorithm and this made difficult for computer scientists and computational social scientists to find a common agreement on the existence of a pipeline of radicalization, so the process by which people are exposed to increasingly more extreme and dangerous ideas. Rebecca Lewis have also demonstrated that mainstream conservative channels on YouTube tends to connect to far-right channels through collaboration and guest-appearance, this is done to normalize extremist viewpoints into the conservative area.

Even if a radicalization pipeline exists, there are no evidence that simply viewing an extremist content can cause people to radically change their beliefs, it is just presumed that extremist content leads to radicalization. Luke Munn have studied recommendation algorithms and he uses a pathway approach to radicalization to provide an alternative to the

alt-right concept of redpilling, this term come from the movie he Matrix, in which taking the red pill corresponds to a decisive moment of conversion and awakening because it is a single event that radically transform the individual (Munn 2019). The empirical validity behind this theory is given by developmental psychology and sociology because they both share the idea that at a certain point of the life of an individual there is a turning point event. Munn instead argues that it is not a matter of a single turning point but rather an exposure to media content for a long period of time, for him there are three stages of radicalization.

The first phase is called normalization stage and, in such stage, native internet media, especially gifs and memes, are used ironically to familiarize the user with extremist ideas while allowing them to maintain a certain degree of deniability. The acclimation stage explains how a user is habituated and desensitized to racist or misogynist concept, so there is the creation of a new degree of acceptability that moves further towards extremism. The last stage, the dehumanization one, lead the user to completely detach from the entire group of Others, they begin to be labelled negatively as invaders, cultural Marxists, and social justice warrior. Furthermore, informatics scholar like Ted Grover and Gloria Mark have found out, by analysing alt-right communities on Reddit, that there is a massive presence of the so-called behavioural markers of radicalization, these markers are used in forensic psychology to understand the degree of radicalization of individuals. Following their analysis, members of /r/altright Reddit communities showed a clear fixation on racial concepts and ideas, elevated levels of hate speech and hostile language and high levels of in-group/out-group identification markers. Nevertheless, the study does not show any causal link between racial hostility in online comments and commitment to political violence but nevertheless online community interaction over time can potentially contribute to an increase in the development and spread of extremist ideas (Grover, Mark 2019). Several books by the sociologist Jessie Daniels have shown the chronicle evolution of white supremacist media from simple and rudimental zines to websites and social networks, her works shows clear consistency in the rhetorical strategies and messaging of the far-right and also shows how social platforms contribute to the promotion of far-right memes and discourse. The lack of moderation (or the small presence of it) on social networks and the skilled use of disinformation by far-right activists are two causes of the spread and amplification of far-right content and ideologies (Daniels, the latter occurs due to the phenomenon of echo-chambers, already explained in subchapter 2.3. So, it is important to understand the key point of this analysis: social networks do not cause far-right extremism and political violence but the combination of the algorithms, features of social networks and disinformation strategies adopted by far-right extremists surely contributes to the spread of far-right ideologies and so far-right extremism itself.

2.7 The role of biases in the phenomenon of radicalization on social networks

Social media are platforms where many types of biases occur, I will take some of the most important into consideration:

- **Empathy Bias:** many far-right politicians overreport the news about immigrants committing crimes like theft, rapes, and murder. This type of behaviour alters the perception of reality because the supporters of that politician will conclude that all the immigrants commit crimes, also if the statistics and the numbers show a different reality. The fact is that the empathy bias push people to empathize more with members coming from the same community or country, the consequence is that whoever is outside that community is perceived as a threat. Far right movements and exponents use this type of bias to push its members and followers against the outsider of that community. This type of bias can give us a general idea about why people respond with vicious and racist comments when some news about an immigrant committing a crime is reported online.
- **Confirmation Bias:** it is the tendency to seek information that supports our initial opinions. This bias lead to polarization because each person will continue to read and get information that supports their political position and, as a matter of fact, one of the political positions which cause more polarization is immigration: people will hardly analyse precise data about it and they will tend to strength their opinion on the ground of the declarations made by politicians, which nowadays are content creator on social networks.
- **Racial Bias:** it is caused by prejudice, and it leads people to have racist thoughts. Three examples are the fact that protesters are usually defined as thugs, immigrants are often perceived as potential criminals and muslims as potential terrorists. These types of thoughts alter our perception and, again, far-right movements will exploit this bias to get consensus and support.

3. WHY DO WE SPEAK ABOUT FASCISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 A more precise definition among multiple definitions

Fascist developments today are less a result of far-right organizations' strategic actions, they are the result of new structures that change society's perception. As already mentioned in section 2, perception has a key role in mass communication on social media. Acker uses the term digital fascism to absorb illiberal or far-right online developments around the world. In this phenomenon, as explained in the previous chapter, is constituted of many other smaller phenomena which contributes to the rise of digital fascism, polarization, and radicalization indeed. The key point to understand is that the masses are the engines of this phenomenon (Acker 2018)- The fact is that there is no consensus over the definition of this term since the field of fascism studies is marked by big differences between Marxist and praxeological approaches.

A first definition to approach and analyse the phenomenon of digital fascism is the one given by Robert Griffin. As already stressed in section 2.2, it consists in the perception of an endangered community that needs to reborn through extraordinary means (Griffin 1991). Taking the point of view of the scholar, we can conclude that the elements of social media, algorithms, and eco-chambers indeed, mixed themselves together. They not only

favour the interests and the online activities of far-right actors, but they are also responsible for stimulating the perception of national imperilment. Such perception of imperilment is considered one of the main elements of the Ur-Fascism, defined by Umberto Eco as a sort of evergreen phenomenon, so a phenomenon which will never end, especially because of the features and the elements of social media. Digital fascism then, should not be understood as an organized phenomenon, indeed an attempt of re-constitution of the buried fascist party. It is more precise to define it as a constructed phenomenon which is alimented by the perceptions which are altered because of polarization, biases, radicalization, emotions, and political communication (Fielitz, Marcks 2019).

The most reliable definition is given by the American historian Robert Paxton, who is a great expert of fascism. In its book “The Anatomy of Fascism” he analysed three features of fascism: the first two deals with the pragmatism and nature of fascism while the third analyse its identity.

The far-right political behaviour characterised by the obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation and by the cult of purity. This feature is obviously known in the rhetoric of the “Arian race”, which was then took and re-adapted by modern neo-Nazi and neo-fascists group. A fitting example of this discourse is well-presented in the masterpiece movie directed by Tony Kanye, American History X, which deals with neo-Nazi groups in the US. This feature is less ideological than the one given by Griffin, but it is well-compatible with the concept of palingenetic ultranationalism.

Nationalism and xenophobic nativism are linked to the obsessive preoccupation of the community decline. There is a clear distinction between the inside and the outside of the community because the identity of a community is constructed in juxtaposition of what constitutes the outside (Derrida 1978). Cultural identity and religion are two important elements that contributes to the construction of nationalism: they create a homologated and homogeneous sense of identity inside a community, while at the same time they are capable of isolating the community from the out-group through the creation of “constructed” boundaries.

From this we must analyse two questions: the first one is how strategic actors can unleash the rationale explained above to prepare illiberal developments, the second deals with its functioning under digital conditions.

3.2 How justifying illiberal politics with perceptions of imperilment: the case of Identitarianism, the Alt-Right and political communication

When people are afraid of something, they are ready to accept authoritarian measures because of such sense of fear. In fact, if we go back to Hobbes’ discourse about the so-called State of Nature, people have chosen to be under the authority of a hypothetic ruler/government because in the State of Nature everyone is afraid to be harmed by other individuals since violence is highly possible” when there is no authority. Through a social contract, people have renounced to complete freedom in order to be protected from violence.

Going back to modern discourse, according to Wodak and Bonikowski the “politics by fear” scheme is the one adopted by the far right. This strategy is also defined as anxious politics (Albertson and Gadarian 2015).

In fact, the workhorse of far-right politicians is to create fear for migrants and immigration, European far-right ideology can be summed-up under the “umbrella” of Identitarianism. This political ideology is based on the claim that western territories only belong to European ethnic groups and western countries. One of the main theories in support of this political ideology is the theory of Great Replacement (idealized by Renaud Camus, a white nationalist French writer). The term comes from France, with the founding of the Bloc Identitaire, many movements began to stem all over Europe and such movements are also capable of attracting younger generations of people. The target of identitarian politics is the preservation of culture and national identity, this implies a full rejection of multiculturalism and pluralism. Identitarians usually expose ideas which are characterized by being xenophobic but often, identitarian political leaders try to hide their xenophobic rhetoric in order to appear less extremists to attract more people. Nevertheless, the Identitarian Movement has been classified as a right-wing extremist group by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Azmanova, Dakwar 2019). One of the symbols used by Identitarians is the Greek letter “λ”, such symbol is used to build an anti-Muslim and more in general an anti-immigrant rhetoric: this is because ancient Spartans displayed such symbols on their shield during the Battle of Thermopylae against Persians. Such battle is of a significant importance because the conflict between the Greek and the Persians is seen as a defense of Europe against an invasion from the Middle-East. We can see this sense of fear in many aspects of the European political and social life: the anti-migration protests against refugees coming into Germany, the political discourses of Salvini and Meloni about the fact of an hypothetical invasion that is taking place (also if the numbers about refugees asylum show that they are wrong). Far-right populists are often against European Union, non-by-coincidence it is always pictured as an “evil stepmother” which wants to destroy national identities because it apparently promotes the presumed invasion of immigrants. Identitarianism then merge into far-right populism to establish its roots into the various political scenario, and it ends up in representing groups that perceived themselves as being marginalised by the European Union (Gray 2020)

This type of dialectics is in accordance with the features described by Griffin and Paxton. Another important characteristic about the political communication strategy of far-right politicians is that they present themselves as heroes that are ready to go against anyone and anything to achieve their political objectives, which are always presented as battles made in name of The Nation and of The People.

3.3 The concept of organization in far-right movements

Going back to the “Anatomy of Fascism” by Paxton the second feature of classical fascism is a mass-based party of nationalist militants which are organised through a strong hierarchical structure that was helpful for spreading propaganda, organise the practices and the political process.

Nowadays far-right organization in Europe are relatively small in structures, examples are: Golden Dawn in Greece, Casapound and Forza Nuova in Italy, SNS in Slovakia.

In the US the situation is very different because Far-Right extremists in the US have left organized groups to avoid social stigmatization, online forums gained an important role for far-right movements. Far-right supporter belong to no group, and they operate on the internet in order to diffuse their opinions anonymously and find popular support by people blinded by hate and frustration towards society and government (Potok 2014). Mark Potok has analysed the far-right populist rise in 2016 and in particular he analysed the concept of Alt-Right. Such term has been created by the far-right activist Richard Bertrand Spencer, who is the director of the far-right think tank named National Policy Institute. Spencer himself described the alt-right as a political ideology capable of merging three different ideologies together. The first one is the one of neo-reactionaries, who advocate for a libertarian government which supports and protect the traditional western civilization. The second ideology is the one that belongs to archeofuturists: they are those who advocates for a return to traditional value without excluding the importance of technological progress. The last ideology is the one of race realists, they are people who supports scientific racism and are completely against any idea related to egalitarianism and universalism. Other ideologies that ended under the “umbrella-term” of the Alt-Right are anarcho-capitalism, which advocates for absence of state-intervention and open markets instead of an organized state, and traditional Catholicism, which basically is Roman Catholicism before the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Despite Spencer described himself as the leader of the Alt-Right, a peculiar characteristic of these kind of neofascists movements is the absence of a true leader at the apex of a hypothetical leaders. Instead, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the structure of far-right movements is not hierarchical but rather horizontal and it is important to mention that there is neither coordination nor full agreement among its main leaders, because the Alt-Right is just like an umbrella which regroup many extremist ideologies which belongs to the “far-right galaxy”. One of the main disagreements inside the Alt-right is about Jews: the most extremist ideologies, closed to Neo-Nazi beliefs, consider Jews as responsible for undermining the white race while other alt-right leaders like Jared Taylor, editor of American Renaissance, include Jews inside the category of white people (Potok 2016)

This small practical introduction to the two main far-right extremist ideologies brings us to analyse the second question that arise from the discourse in section 3.1.

3.4 How to catalyse perceptions of imperilment through social media: strategies.

As already stressed several times above, digital platforms have become a principal place for exchange of ideas and for conflict. Social networks changed the way of how social interactions and collective action work. According to Margetts the cause of these changes was due to the fact of the enhancement of the network capabilities of actors, so the possibility for a faster communication and a better mobilization.

The fuel of fascist dynamics is the myth of menace, in classical fascism it was a party task

to unleash the perception of imperilment among the masses. Centuries of antisemitism discourses and beliefs led people to perceive Jewish people as dangerous, it would be hypocritical to deny the fact that there was popular support towards antisemitic policies adopted by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

In times of social media, the digital structure of the masses can produce new orders of perception prone to fascist so there is not the need of a fascist party as a driving force. The rhetoric and the language used are not directed by parties or organized groups, they are the product of dispersed digital sub-cultures that is characterized by the common belief of the myth of an endangered community that is forced to take radical action. The rise of the alt-right can be considered a continuation of the legacy of racism, at the same time it must be considered as an emerging media environment boosted by algorithms and echo-chambers (Daniels 2018)

The narrative of victimhood is crucial to understand the emotional boost of such emotions in case of mobilization. Going back to the empathy bias, populist-far right politicians encourage people to identify with the victims of crimes associated with migrants and muslims. In the story telling of such crimes, politicians offer highlight the nationality of the criminal: when this work in repetition, then people start to implicitly or explicitly consider that people from a certain religious group or nation are associated with crimes. If we want to mention an example of this is the rape and the murder of Desiree Mariottini in the district of San Lorenzo in Rome, in 2016 Giorgia Meloni made a declaration about the death of the young girl by focusing on the nationality of the criminals; this shifted the public attention and the public opinion from the issue of security of that district to the issue of having immigrants because there was the belief that they were responsible for the majority of the crimes committed.

These far-right discourse about the events is sketched to blur the difference between abstract structures and concrete events. Far-right parties tend to present themselves as the victims of political correctness, immigration conspiracies and other events that want to endanger the community...in this sense, by creating an alternative truth about reality they tend to create a counterculture. It seems like that the alt-right is just a manifestation of the average conservative white male who is anxious because of his declining in social power and social status (Daniels 2018). I do not completely agree with this vision because many conservative women have managed to become the political leader of many extremists group, Giorgia Meloni and Marie Le Pen are not only examples, because their progress in conservative leadership is the consequence of the populist wave of 2016, a year that have changed politics forever because the rise of populism and its most extremist forms. The fact of creating a counterculture, indeed, lead to a bipolarization of reality and this is a serious issue because, acknowledging of the fact that freedom of opinion is crucial, there cannot be two opposite versions of the same event. Media and politicians are responsible for bipolarization, and this can create a political and civic fracture inside society: the situation in US is a clear example and Donald Trump shall be considered responsible of

creating and spreading fake news that led to the construction of a different narrative of events.

Gaslighting is a technique which is also crucial to understand the role of digital fascism, it describes a manipulating practice that causes disorientation about one's sense of reality; this influence public opinion by emphasizing specific interpretations and by constructing the identity of a collective victimhood. This approach goes one step further because it affirms the idea that there is no truth but only post-truth emotions that can lead people to anchor to nationalistic and xenophobic worldviews that can instrumentalize the democratic role of social media. These worldviews are stimulated by fake news or alternative versions of reality that lead to misinformation of the public.

An example of the gaslighting approach is the rhetoric on immigration. Data are interpreted in a manipulative way and far-right politician rely on the low schooling of the poorer classes of society to misinform them. These politicians also rely on people's sense of feeling abandoned by the State due to natural or economic disasters; they don't blame immigrants for this, but people become frustrated when they see that their money are also allocated for asylum instead only for natural disaster. An example are the earthquakes that hit Marche in 2016 (people were angry for the fact that displaced people had to sleep in shelters while immigrants were staying in hotel), this type of reasoning has been took by the Italian populist right for propaganda purposes.

Social media doesn't have any journalistic or ethical standards for knowledge production...this obviously led to the spreading of the alternative perceptions mentioned above. Democratic political leaders are usually bound to these "ethical constraints" when they deal with information, populist-far right politicians instead have no mercy when it is time to "fight" for their political ambition, one of the most famous tools aside of the spreading of fake news is the use of the media pillory: the "enemies" of the political community are directly exposed on social media. Another advantage of social media is the anonymity of internet: a single subject can multiply him/herself with numerous fake accounts to support and spread a certain idea, the consequences are the impression that a certain popular post is uncontested. Fake accounts can also be used for the creation of "Social Media Trolls", they are fake users that simultaneously attack and cyberbully other users.

The next section, 3.3, will be dedicated to showing the role of the spreading of fake news about covid-19 pandemic and how their diffusion has contributed to an increase in the level of hate crimes against Asians and against Asian-Americans.

3.3 Evidence: Anti-Asian Rhetoric during Covid-19 Pandemic

Following the analysis made by Croucher, Nguyen and Rahmani, after the outbreak of Covid-19, the level of hate crimes against Asian-Americans have reached 100 reports per day. Many of them have been exposed to racial slurs, workplace termination and physical violence (Croucher, Nguyen, Rahmani 2020). Media and government officials, especially

conservative one was responsible since, at the time of the Covid-19 outbreak, Trump's administration was in office.

First, the more users believe that a social media presents accurate information, the more a user tends to believe that Chinese people are not only a symbolic, but also a symbolic threat to The United States of America. Secondly, the result of their study shows how men scored higher levels of intergroup anxiety while women scored higher levels of perception of Chinese people as a symbolic and realistic threat. Thirdly, people that do not use social media daily tends to do not perceive Chinese people as a threat. (Croucher, Nguyen, Rahmani 2020).

Going back to 2017, one year after the beginning of Trump's US presidency, the Asian population became the target of racial discrimination and physical attacks (Lopez et al. 2017). During Trump's presidency, the level of hate against Chinese American grew alongside with the one towards Muslims. It is important to mention that when a far-right populist leader becomes president, he or she tends to have the support of the most extremist people because they perceive themselves as finally represented at national level. This increase in "far-right pride" can lead to an increase in far-right violent or at least xenophobic episodes. In fact, data have shown how far-right attacks registered a 43% increase in Europe, in the US the number of far-right attacks quadruplicated between 2016 and 2017 (Jones 2018). Jones' analysis has shown that right-wing extremists are increasingly using the internet and in particular social media for propaganda, training, organizing events and members recruitment. Other evidence are that far-right extremists have begun to travel overseas to increase and enlarge their network with other groups in Europe. In 2018, the RAM group (Rise Above Movement) have travelled to Germany, Italy, and Ukraine. RAM group and other far-right groups, according to the FBI, went to Ukraine to receive training from the Azov Battalion. As already have been stated above, such international connection allows far-right extremists to improve their tactics, their counter-intelligence techniques, and their extremist views.

The brief analysis above is important to explain the development that led to the topic of the section, so the anti-Asian rhetoric during Covid-19 outbreak. Social media plays a crucial role in the construction of public's perceptions, and it also influences the way of communication during a crisis (Schultz et. al, 2011). This has been demonstrated by the statistics provided by United Nations in 2020, which showed that 167 countries used national portals and social media to engage with people and provide vital information against Covid-19. At the same time, social media have contributed to the spread of racist hashtags like #KungFlu or slogans like "China kids stay home" (Mcguire 2020). A critique that can be directed towards the main social media companies like Facebook and Twitter is that they have not done enough to prevent such episodes like the one of the racial slogans against American Chinese people. It is not the first time that events like that occurs, and surely far-right actors didn't make their first appearance on social media "out of the blue". The main responsibility of Facebook and Twitter, but also of other social media companies like Reddit and Discord, is that they have never done anything to change their algorithms to prevent extremism. The only measures adopted, especially by non-governmental

organizations, were anti-hate campaigns but, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, once that fake or hate-related contents are spread online, the polarization and radicalization processes take off and it is very hard to stop such processes with naïve campaigns that tries to stop hate when it is already diffused like a terrible disease. Yet, it is a noble aim, but the technical mechanisms and the confirmation bias are hard to fight without adopting drastic measure to modify social media infrastructure because it is the infrastructure itself that surely contributes to the phenomena of polarization, radicalization and extremization on social media.

To better analyse the issue presented in this section, Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan and Stephan 2000) must be taken into consideration to explain prejudice and discrimination. They can be considered as the result of the sum of negative attitudes or beliefs that the inside of a group has towards the outside of the group (Allport 1954), indeed, to take an example of the outside, we can take the idea of an ethnic minority into consideration. Such theory analyse four types of attitudes that can explain and predict subsequent and negative attitudes toward minority groups, the key point is that a threat does not need to be real because the perception of a threat is enough to trigger the in-group (which is usually a dominant cultural group, indeed white Christians in the US) to have, express and so diffuse prejudice and hate towards a minority group.

Realistic threats regards concerns that the out-group can undermine the existence of the in-group. They emphasize threats towards real aspects of in-group life like welfare, political and economic power, but also material welfare (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Symbolic threats instead are threats potentially directed to in-group way of life, what I mean by way of life is linked to concepts like values, moral, standards and belief. These types of perceived threats can explain prejudice and perception of imperilment when there is the presence of cultural differences (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002).

Intergroup anxiety instead occurs when people perceive personal threat during social interactions. This occurs when the out-group is considered to have more advantages than the in-group, this perceived difference is responsible of causing rage, anger, and envy towards the minority. It is very important to stress that such intergroup anxiety can be exploited by populist politicians during electoral campaigns, when people are afraid of something, they can be easily manipulated, it is not important if the threat is real or only perceived. The paradoxical condition about stereotypes and prejudice directed towards the out-group usually are the consequence of the fact that the out-group does not meet social or behavioural expectations of the ingroup (Hamilton et al. 1990).

The study conducted by Croucher, Rahmani and Guyen have shown three evidence from the data analysed. The first is that sex plays a significant role in determining the presence of realistic threats or intergroup anxiety among white Americans: women feel more threatened by Chinese Americans than men while the latter have more intergroup anxiety, in fact this is an indicator of the fact that white American males feel more irritated, suspicious, anxious, and defensive when interacting with Chinese Americans. These negative attitudes can be considered one of the reasons that led to an increase in episodes of violence or xenophobia towards minorities in America, towards the Chinese American

community during Covid-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that during the virus' outbreak, similar episodes like the one that have occurred on American social media pages, have occurred also in Europe. Other secondary but no less important causes of such episodes during that dramatic moment of our lives can also be attributed to the absence of fact-checking. Such absence has catalysed the development of conspiracy theories, which were embraced mainly by extremist groups (often far-right ones) but also by common people without medical knowledge.

3.4 QAnon, far-right extremism and the attack to Capitol Hill in Washington DC

The QAnon conspiracy theory emerged in 2017 and from that moment on, its growth has become exponential in the US. The presence of individuals inside the movement who are radicalized to criminal acts, often connected with terrorism charges, is something that constitutes evidence of why QAnon constitutes a threat to public security because of the risk of domestic terrorism (Amarasingam, Argentino 2021). One of the main conspiracies supported by the movement is that Donald Trump, at the time of his presidency, was waging a secret war against an international conspiracy of satanic paedophiles, not by chance the majority of QAnon members are strongly republican and the democrats are considered to be part of this evil conspiracy. The QAnon conspiracy emerged on October 28, 2017, on 4chan's, which is a social network well known for the concentration of extremist and radicalized contents. The thread was called "Calm Before the Storm" and it appeared on a /pol/ section, which is the one dedicated to politically incorrectness. The anonymous user "Q" began to communicate cryptic messages about Donald Trump's secret battle against the "deep state. The message has been sent by an anonymous account named "Q" and it stated that Hillary Clinton would have been arrested during the morning of October 30, 2017. This was the first official post of Q, but the origin of the ideology and beliefs supported by the movements are somehow older than the episode mentioned above. In 2016 the Pizzagate conspiracy theory took place (Kang 2016), the email of John Podesta has been hacked during his activity as chair of Hilary Clinton's U.S. Presidential Campaign. Such conspiracy theory claimed that the email contained coded messages which could falsely demonstrate the involvement of high-ranking officials of the Democratic Party and U.S. restaurants in a network involved in satanic rituals, child sex and human trafficking. The theory claimed that the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria of Washington DC was one of the restaurants involved in this evil network. Such event then evolved when on December 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch entered in the pizzeria holding an AR-15 rifle to find evidence of child trafficking. He had not found any evidence and he subsequently surrendered to the police, then he was charged with several federal and local weapons violation and the court sentenced him to four years of prison (US Attorney's Office, District of Columbia, 2017). In 2018, according to an investigative report by NBC, new evidence emerged: the original Q post was boosted by Tracy Diaz (YouTube vlogger, and by Coleman Rogers and Paul Furber (two 4chan moderators which nicknames were respectively Pamphlet Anon and BaruchtheScribe). The two 4chan's moderators reached out Tracy Diaz and asked her to promote the first Q posts to make them go viral.

A particular characteristic of the QAnon supporters is that they consider their claims and theories as empirical, the community is guided by the maxim, “do your own research” (See 2019). This is clear evidence of the fact that QAnon is a highly polarized and radicalized movement, in which the confirmation bias has a crucial role. The movement also represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology which is rooted in a desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world, to enter in the promised golden age. This type of ideology is not only common to many anti-government movements but also to far-right extremist ones. Furthermore, the crucial apocalyptic event that will bring the good side of humanity into the golden age is called “The Storm”. In this battle Donald Trump will arrest Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama and other members of the Deep State and he will be the one that will lead the people into the golden age. This rhetoric is evidence of one of the elements of the Ur-Fascism by Umberto Eco, the one of traditionalism: the narrative of the final battle between the good and the evil is an element that comes from the Indo-European myth of the Bhagavad Gita. Such type of myth has been often used by far-right movements to explain the struggle that must be done to save the nation, the race, from everything that is considered corrupted or simply wrong.

The QAnon movements is particularly characterized by a series of beliefs that merge the most various conspiracy theory with Christian beliefs coming from the Old Testament. The set of beliefs associated with Christian nationalism seem to be associated with political violence from far-right extremists and from QAnon (Armaly, Buckley, Enders 2021). Christian nationalism is defined as a set of beliefs and ideals that merge American and Christian positions, such ideology became present in the far-right populism of the Republican Party, which embrace far-right populism as the main ideology of the party (Whitehead et. al 2018). This change in the political direction of the GOP can be undoubtedly attributed to the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President. More in the specific, Christian nationalism is likely to be conditioned by other individual characteristics like perceived victimhood, reinforcement of racial and religious identity and immersion in conspiratorial sources. Its beliefs demonstrate extremists’ obsession for the apparent future threats to Christian heritage (Gorski 2019). The perceived threats are related to the possible dangers attributed to rapid changes in demography, law, and politics. When I speak about Christian nationalism, I do not mean a high level of attendance of religious services, it is a set of beliefs strictly related to fanatic feelings. Christian nationalism is the result of a conservative process of radicalization, in which political audience rediscover some sort of cultural roots that must be revived to fight the moral and cultural decline of our times. It is important to specify that Christian nationalism as always been a normal historical feature of the political landscape of the United States, but it always has been a minority position (Soper, Fetzer 2018) if compared to what sociologist Robert Bellah has defined as American civil religion, which is a quasi-religious faith in the US with sacred symbols drawn from their national history. For many scholars like Baker, Gorski but also Whitehead, Trumpism in a reactionary and secularized version of white Christian nationalism and it is something which goes beyond electoral contexts. Evidence have shown that Trumpism often tolerates racism or at least it has ambiguous positions on it, other evidence is the strong opposition towards migrants, Islam, and LGBTQ+

community. Christian nationalism has also been linked to tolerance of police violence against African Americans (Perry et al. 2019) and opposition to gun control regulations.

QAnon can be considered the first conspiracy theory to have fully embraced the participatory nature of the contemporary internet. The core texts of the movement are a set of 3000 brief messages posted mainly on 4chan and 8chan platform and such messages are anonymous, chaotic, and ephemeral. Supporters of such theory do not want to simply read passively the internet narratives by looking at provided answers, they want to write and do active research. Q's devotees are part of a complex digital ecosystem where they are sort of researchers competing to interpret Q's declaration and tie them to breaking events in the news (Zuckerman 2019).

Such technique revealed to be successful because of the presence of thousands of episodes of QAnon podcasts and videos with more than a hundred thousand of views on YouTube. In the QAnon anonymous team, the whole conspiracy is like an improvisational game where players compete to obtain a viral interpretation inside the community. Evidence shows that QAnon's participatory advocacy is growing and that news media and participatory social media have become intertwined. The broadcast model of media is based on a group of professionals who select a precise number of narratives to amplify and then deliver such narratives to the audience, instead today this model has been replaced by one in which the audience fully participate by sharing and remixing the information founded. In this new digital ecosystem are discovery engines like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, which rely on users' feedbacks to determine what stories support or not.

The field of Civic Media understands participation as a key of civic participation. Much of this participation is a positive development for making marginalised issues more visible and in fact it has been used to increase the visibility of Black Lives Matter or #metoo movement. Another aspect of this new participatory model is that now non-professional can immediately report what is happening inside their community, so this system facilitates the emergence of narratives which have been subjugated because of racism, sexism, and classism but at the same time it lacks a control structure that can prevent dangerous and extremist contents from going viral. This system also allows the presence of multiple versions of the same story, sometimes such visions are in complete opposition to each other, and this clash of realities is defined by Ethan Zuckerman as "the Unreal". The main point of the scholar is that what is real to us can be unreal to someone else. This point also raises an important epistemological and phenomenological question: can we share a common reality, or will we be forever separated by our perceptions and interpretations of reality? In the post-truth age, there is not an absolute truth anymore. The presence of echo-chambers, biases and radicalization is capable of creating different versions and interpretations of the same phenomenon; this is why fact-checking and digital education became crucial to counter the dangers that can emerge from the phenomena listed above. QAnon movement supports that reality is based on consensus but such consensus reality is fraudulent, there is a darker but truer reality hidden beneath the surface and not all the people are enough brave or ready to accept it. This concept is taken from the famous scene of Matrix, where Reeves's character must choose between a red pill and a blue pill. The

red pill reveals the terrifying nature of reality while the blue one continues to make you stay in a state of “happy delusion”, where you continue to look at reality as it looks, without discovering the “real reality”. Nowadays is more difficult to report news because reporters must advocate for their perspective above competing perspectives, such process creates doubt and hence, distrust in journalism. Propaganda is a great example of unreality because it is an instrumental type of unreality created by the State to make people believe in the untrue. Then people become not capable of thinking with their own mind, this situation make them susceptible to extreme conspiracy theory that present themselves as red pills ready to make you discover the horrifying reality that governs our world. The product of the unreality is doubt and such doubt can push people to embrace extremist beliefs, the attackers of Capitol Hill’s attacks have been fomented by Donald Trump. Surely, we can affirm that extremists become dangerous when their doubts and feelings like rage and political disenchantment are instrumentalized and exploited by political leaders. In fact, those who benefits from the stasis caused by imposed doubts are those who already in a position of power, in this sense the product of unreality and doubt is a conservative force that can be exploited by conservative and more precise far-right leaders.

4. HOW TO EFFECTIVELY FIGHT FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM ONLINE: STRIKING THE HYDRA’S HEART

If compared to Salafi-Jihadist terrorism and extremism, right-wing extremism is a less understood phenomenon and people tends to perceive it less as an issue due to the overreporting and emphasis on the former. From 2010 to 2019, “only” 20 percent of extremist-related killings were caused by jihadist extremism, while almost 80% of extremist-related killings were caused by someone who was affiliated with right wing extremism (Statista Research 2020). The cause of such altered perception can be found in the fact that right-wing extremism tends to be more accepted in North America because its views often merge with the most conservative ideas brought up by the Republican’s Party. The FBI have declared in front of the Congress that they were dealing with 850 domestic terrorism investigations and a significant majority of these investigations were related to white supremacist extremists (Shortell 2019).

In Europe the situation is slightly different because the percentage of RWE (right-wing extremism)-related killings are lower than the ones in the US. Extremist attacks in Europe are often related to hate crime offences rather than actually terrorism offences (Liang and Cross 2020). Despite this, the number of arrests for RWE has risen each year since 2016, non by coincidence such year is the watershed for the rise of populism and especially far-right populism. Former German Interior Minister Seehofer defined right-wing terrorism as the biggest challenge to democracy in the country. Another important evidence is given by the 2019 Global Terrorism Index, which highlighted that far-right terrorism incidents have increased by 320% if compared to 2014 (Institute for Economics & Peace 2019).

One of the issues that will be presented in this chapter is that RWEs attacks are mostly committed by lone wolf extremists and such type of attacks are the harder to prevent because of their unpredictability. Media presentations of terrorist acts can furthermore have a powerful influence on pushing new possible attackers to radicalize and commits such

type of terrorist attacks, this is defined as behaviour contagion or copycat action by social psychologists: this occurs when an individual take his beliefs from events present by the mass media, obviously this is a relevant issue because it allows self-radicalization without central control. Evidence of such mechanism are the tragic events of Christchurch attacks, where the shooter followed a specific pattern composed of a pre-planned online manifesto and a Facebook video livestream of the attacks. Brandon Trenton, the shooter, drew inspiration from the similar attack perpetrated 8 years before in Utoya (Norway), where Anders Breivik killed 77 people mostly from the youth of the Labour Party. He admitted being inspired also from the Charleston attacks of 2015 and Quebec attacks of 2016. Since 2011, one third of white supremacist attackers were inspired by others conducting similar copycat attacks. Then the Christchurch 2019 attacks have inspired other RWE attacks in California, El Paso, Texas and Halle, Germany, all attacks were committed in the same year. The similarity between the various attacks can be found in the fact that many of the attackers have announced their plans on 8chan or similar online forums and in the fact that the attackers livestreamed their attacks on major platforms like Facebook to maximize their impact. Indeed, aside from “just” killing people, the aim of terrorism is to induce terrorism, livestreaming the murder of innocents can have a severe psychological impact on people.

The process of right-wing radicalization is similar to Horgan’s theory of how child terrorists are socialized in six stages. The first stage (seduction) occurs when RWEs lure unsuspecting victims into their world, then victims are indoctrinated (schooling) and the ones who show to better react to the indoctrination are then selected (selection). (Specialization) instead occurs when radicalizers disperse information on how to plan and organize the attacks. The last phase(stationing) is determined by the location of the lone wolf due to the absence of coordination and central command, nevertheless the radicalizer can encourage to strike certain targets rather than others (Horgan 2016). Horgan have developed this theory to explain how ISIS could recruit children, nonetheless, is a strategy deliberately used also with fragile and isolated individuals, who are more likely to accept and “be converted” to extremists’ beliefs and ideologies. The difference between ISIS and RWEs lies in recognizing how they use the internet to achieve their goals, the two methods will be analysed in the next section.

4.1 Aggressive and Subversive exposure

Aggressive exposure is a style that ISIS has used in its online activity, this brought cyber-jihad to another level. This strategy consists of controlling the entire media sphere that ISIS exists in, ensuring the shutdown of any countervailing or dissident voice, which is not conform to its propaganda. On the other hand, RWE uses this method as well, by storming and promoting their radical beliefs without interruption on online forums like Stormfront, 8chan or 4chan, which are very likely to be vehicle of transmission of the “far-right virus”. This technique allowed the indoctrination and radicalization of those holding beliefs about white-supremacism and anti-democratic ideals but at the same time it is less effective at targeting people who don’t hold such beliefs, in fact this storm-likely technique can end up in pushing new people away from radical views. Since this technique is only effective

when it comes to attract individuals that have already took the pathway to radicalization, RWE had to use a different method of engagement, the so-called subversive exposure.

Subversive exposure consists in the use of disinformation, deception, and normalization of extremist right-wing beliefs to indoctrinate and hence attract ignorant and vulnerable people into right-wing groups, without them knowing that such group is an extremist group. A technique used is delivering memes to create inside jokes related to supremacist and extremists' ideas. Such memes are often about how global warming is a leftist plot, how Donald Trump is the saviour of the US or how the world would be a better place if Hitler's project of the Holocaust had been completed. These memes are not meant to turn someone into an RWE. They are meant to getting people into a process of slow radicalization, in this process victims are not automatically aware of the process taking place. The poison is administered slowly, drop by drop, getting the individual tolerant to it, this is indeed a metaphor to explain the normalization of extremist beliefs (Cai and Landon 2019).

It is a mistaken to consider RWEs techniques of recruiting as something related only to adults. In the past few years, they have used groups like Turning Point USA, the American Identity Movement, and the Patriot Front to promote their extremist views at college level. According to the Anti-Defamation League, white supremacist material being circulated in the US grew by 120% in 2019, if compared to previous years. Other groups like Britain First, a far-right political party, have used deceptive strategy to gain fans. Many far-right political groups usually begin their politically rise by posting news about sex abuses or animal cruelty on their social network, this because no one sane would be in favour of these type of crimes so it is easy to gain popular support. A second step in this process is made when for example the problems mentioned above became associated to immigrants, in this case far-right political leaders would push their political audience to a "right-shift" through overreporting only those facts committed by foreign people. This will lead to the development of xenophobic and anti-immigration feelings because people will begin to mentally associate every fact relating sex abuses to immigrants, this strategy has been clearly used by Matteo Salvini (leader of Lega, now Deputy Minister) and Giorgia Meloni (leader of Fratelli d'Italia, now Prime Minister). This type of online political behaviour is able of creating electronic communities of hate, which ends in becoming echo-chambers built on foundation of false information, misleading statistics, and hate. Subversive exposure is a silent work, which exploit social networks algorithms to guide people to toxic ideas, misinformation flourishes online because users aggregate in communities of interests, which cause reinforcement and catalyse confirmation bias and polarisation (Del Vicario 2016). The sense of legitimacy which emerge from this process increase the separation of reality and western media normalize this type of practice in refusing to denounce right-wing extremism or warn against it, this due to the protection of the so-called freedom of thought and speech, which can end up in being illiberal when it allows extremist ideas to flourish. To conclude this section, it is crucial to understand that historical analysis used to demonstrate that self-radicalization via internet is unlikely to happen, instead contemporary research made from 2016 on demonstrated that the internet

and social media are responsible of increasing the opportunities for self-radicalization due to their structure and architecture.

4.2 Why current policy fails to combat right-wing extremism.

As already stressed enough in this paper, digital development and cyber power were able to influence and radically change politics. All aspects of our lives and the functioning of the political life of our societies has been shaped by hyper connected digitalisation (Cederberg 2015). Fighting terrorism physically is different from fighting it in the cyberspace, drones cannot be used in the cyberspace and there is not any space for some sort of military operations. Online extremists hardly ever organized themselves into groups or precise structures, they are leaderless and most of them act as lone wolves, so it is difficult to track them on the internet due to the lack of structure and lack of strong networks. As a consequence, physical neutralization operations are very ineffective in Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) operations against RWE, so the focus of such types of operations must therefore be on the internet rather than in the field. Following a report of 2018, US law enforcement and counterterrorism strategies have both ignored the rising danger of far-right extremism and this is one of the reason why this violent movement have grown in an environment of complete difference (Reitman 2018). Furthermore, there are no doubts about the evident correlation between the failure in US law enforcement in preventing right-wing terrorism and the failure in regulating weapons in the US, every attempt of regulation is not seen well by Alt-Right groups like the Boogaloo boys or even other far-right group. The second amendment seems to be something untouchable for most Americans and violence can be committed only when weapons are in the hands of violent people with violent beliefs. Non-by coincidence, data have shown how the lack of firearm regulations can facilitate violence, especially in a divided country like the US, where far-right extremists groups arm themselves because they are ready for a second American civil war which will sign the beginning of a white ethnostate.

To compensate this failure in RWE prevention, western governments have tried to respond against this phenomenon by mass-autoblocking of extremism content. The focus has been placed on restrictive measures like automated content removal, takedowns, content filtering or removing sites. A report made in 2013 by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue have shown that this type of approach is ineffective due to the speed with which new data is uploaded and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies (Briggs and Feve 2013). In May 2020 Facebook updated its Violence and Incitement policy to ban boogaloo and similar terms when used alongside images or statements glorifying armed violence, later in June they began to adjust algorithms in order to avoid recommendations related to boogaloo contents, groups and Facebook pages. However, the Boogaloo Boys began to adopt a series of homophones word aimed at finding alternatives to circumnavigate the algorithm and its blocking measures, these words were for example #boojahideen and #BigLuau.

Furthermore, an internal investigation at Facebook concluded that its algorithm was designed to drive people apart, in 2018 Facebook admitted that its algorithms exploit the human attraction to divisiveness. Such investigation also warned that Facebook would feed users with even more divisive content to increase user's attention and to increase their time spent on the platform. While Facebook experts had the desire to mitigate these internal problems, the company deliberately chosen not to (Horowitz and Seetharaman 2020). Moreover, blocking contents can increase problems, especially in a divided country like the US, where arguments on the free speech have gone beyond a reasonable level of discussion. It is important to understand that countervailing extremism operations are not totally ineffective in their nature, they are not the cure for destroying the roots of the issue of far-right extremism online.

4.3 POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Counter-narratives could be a successful tool in the fight against right-wing extremism. Under such umbrella-term we mean a wide range of activities with different aims and tactics that range from public diplomacy and government acts, to targeted campaign aimed at discredit the ideologies of violent extremists. The aims of counter-narrative strategy are to deconstruct and delegitimise extremist propaganda, this is done in two ways: by de-radicalising those who are already radicalized or by disrupting and interrupting the pathway towards radicalization. The latter is particularly successful to save vulnerable targets from the trap of extremism and it proved to be a successful tool to deal with right-wing extremism, the former method instead have been used in case of Salafi-jihadist extremism and it has also proven to be a successful tool.

It is not necessary for such targeted campaign to go viral. The number of right-wing extremists online is very small, perhaps is more concentrated on some social networks rather than others, nonetheless neutralizing their efforts of spreading their content online will have positive effect in the fight of right-wing extremism. Worldwide there are several targeted programs that use many types of strategies to fight RWE, they are: government intervention, activism, counter-narratives, offline interventions, products for de-radicalization and digital disruption. The United Kingdom has increase resources for the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, the domestic spy agency, and the police. Through these increase in founding, they were able of penetrating far-right networks, finding possible terrorists and developing plans to deradicalize users. Each program, if not implemented simultaneously with the others, it is able only to neutralize the symptoms, not the threat itself. Furthermore, the phenomenon of polarization and radicalization are one of the causes that facilitate right-wing extremism online. A study made in 1995, conducted by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, already warned of the potential risks of global interconnectivity: individuals became empowered to exclude material that does not conform to their existing views can reinforce their biases and insulate themselves from opposing point of views. Networks are formed because of interactions with like-minded individuals with similar values so they become less likely to trust important decisions

taken by politicians whose values differ from their own. This phenomenon is known as cyberbalkanization (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1995). On the other hand, counter-narratives programs have been criticized for their failure to work, one of the criticisms was made by the European Parliament in 2017, who concluded that the concept itself is rather underdeveloped and it is not grounded on empirical research. The metrics of such studies is undefined and so an impact analysis on the strategies aiming at fighting RWE is not fully articulated. The focus of these type of actions then is on neutralising the top ends of the scale, metaphorically speaking the Hydra's head, rather than focusing on undermining the methods that right-wing extremists use to act online (Liang 2019).

Digital disruption instead is a useful technique based on subversive exposure; the same method used by RWEs. By using the same technique, the visibility and influence given by these strategies can be the breakthrough needed in destroying right-wing networks on the internet. Furthermore, digital disruption strategies are less costly and less difficult if compared to processes of deradicalization of individuals and government interventions. They can use user-generated content and big data to make it harder to find extremist content online or even poke fun at the extremist content that already exists, to devalue it. Examples of this strategies can be memes or even fallacious statistics, both can be used to obscure the activity of RWEs, a great practical attempt of this strategy has been made by the hacktivist group Anonymous, who decided to upload altered copies of the Breivik's manifesto to prevent the copycat mechanisms to enter into force. By doing this, the Anonymous group avoided possible future acts of violence and extremism and it also completely obscured the manifesto from view. In general, these digital disruptions are effective in obscuring right-wing propaganda and the main three results obtained are: stopping vulnerable targets from radicalisation, interrupting the pathways to right-wing extremism, and discouraging RWE itself.

This method is still in the development phase, but it has a lot of potential due to its simplicity. Instagram has introduced a false information label which obscures posts that have not passed fact-checking stage, this is done through an algorithm which reduces human involvement and at the same time it reduces the amount of fake-news that can be published online, which are one of the roots of altered beliefs that lead to polarization and radicalization (Bell 2019). Furthermore, it also put emphasis on the key role that social media can have in combatting right-wing terrorism. The RAN (Radicalization Awareness Network) is a project created by the European Commission and it consists in a project of cooperation with private and public sector. At private level the aim it identifies and create crowdsourcing tools which can potentially disrupt RWE, at public level instead it aims at identifying how government knowledge and resources can shape these tools (European Commission 2020). The general result of this type of digital disruption is that replaces the pathways and nodes of RWE networks with nodes and pathways that lead to counter-narrative information instead. Another example of strategy to countervail RWE is the one given by Google Jigsaw, a technology incubator focused on understanding global challenges and technological solution to prevent extremism. It is based on the Redirect Method, which uses targeted advertising for users that use keywords associated with

violent extremism and redirect them to a dedicated YouTube library. This tactic proved to be successful in relation to ISIS and jihadist extremism.

Political extremism demonstrates to be one of the biggest challenges for the stability of our democracies, the causes are clear and social networks are responsible for catalysing the processes of polarization and radicalization. Governments and the agents of the private sector must cooperate to stop extremism and violent content online and offline, as statistics and data have shown far-right violence have increased in the past years. If the world wants to preserve democracy, there cannot be any space for violence and so far,-right extremism and the other types of extremism cannot be tolerated.

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