The Neo-Fascist Discourse and its Normalisation Through Mediation

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Abstract

In this article, I set out to deconstruct the main nodal points of the neo-fascist discourse, using a multi-cultural political discourse analysis of Trump and Modi. Subsequently, mechanisms of the normalisation of the neo- fascist discourse will be discussed. I will argue that mediation plays a pivotal role in this process, which implicates both traditional as well as social media. Central to the normalisation of neo-fascism is a politics of provocation and a deep-rooted cultivation of victimhood. Whereas media and neo fascist politics often operate in an antagonistic relationship, neo-fascists create drama, emotion and consternation, which works well in the context of the current business model of media. Likewise, social media also profit from the self-mediation practices of neo-fascism. Using radical democratic theory and normative media and communication theory, I argue that journalists and social media companies have a moral duty to combat neo-fascism and its normalisation.

Keywords: Fascism, Ethics, Normative Theory, Mediation, Radical Democracy

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. [...] we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument.

(Popper, 1945 [2011]: 581)

Introduction

Neo-fascism[1] is a contemporary political phenomenon, rooted in an unsavoury past, which combines ultra-nationalism with nativism and celebrates racial hierarchy, as well as the desirability of inequality and privilege. It furthermore propagates an anti-intellectualism denouncing facts and expert knowledge, whilst persistently propagating blatant lies. Neo-fascism also cultivates victimhood vis-à-vis those that dare to critique them, and an anti-enlightenment agenda which actively undermines democratic institutions and values by using democracy against democracy (Cammaerts, 2018a; Stanley, 2018).

In the epigraph, published at the end of the second World War, Karl Popper articulated what he called the *Paradox of Tolerance*. The recent worldwide rise of neo-fascism, as well as the prevalence of persistent strategic lying and 'denouncing all argument' in political discourse, makes Popper's paradox resonate again, unfortunately. Mark Twain is proclaimed to have said at some point that 'history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme'. Indeed, fascism as it presents itself today is a much different beast from what it was in the 1930s and 1940s, which is why direct historical comparisons never quite work, but at the same time there are many continuities and vigilance is always necessary. Especially as contemporary fascism has managed to transform that which was deemed to be unacceptable and politically repugnant only a short time ago into the new 'common sense'. It is paradoxically fascist ideology, practices and discourse that have been most successful at achieving the cultural revolution Antonio Gramsci talked about, turning fringe counter-hegemony into hegemony. They managed to 'transform the morally extraordinary into the ordinary' and to make people 'tolerate what was once intolerable by making it seem as if this is the way things have always been' (Stanley, 2018: 220).

Through a political and multi-cultural discourse analysis of contemporary rightwing politics in two of the largest democracies in the world, the Unites States and India, I aim to demonstrate

that rightwing politics has moved firmly in the direction of fascist and extreme right ideology, shifting more and more from a democratic agonistic adversary into an anti-democratic antagonistic enemy. I will furthermore argue that the *mediation opportunity structure* (Cammaerts, 2012) plays a central role in this mainstreaming and normalisation of neo-fascist discourses and solutions to contemporary societal problems. All this has serious consequences for democracy and for those that feel morally compelled to defend an open, participatory and inclusive democracy which not only protects freedoms, but also strives towards equality for all and respect for universal human rights. By mobilising theories of radical democracy and normative media and communication theory, I will argue that social media companies and journalists alike should seriously reflect on their normative and democratic duties in these dire and dangerous political times. In doing so, I align myself with a long-standing anti-fascist legacy (Traverso, 2004). As such this article has, unavoidably and necessarily, a political and polemic character, because in the face of fascism, neutrality and nuance amounts to complicity in its normalisation.

Method and Case Selection

Just as there are various conceptualisations of what constitutes discourse and what discourse does, a wide variety of competing and partially overlapping discourse analytical methods is available to us (cf. Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Gee and Handford, 2012). This is, however, not the space to discuss the differences and tensions between these various approaches. In this article, a political discourse analysis is used, building on the work of Derrida (1978), as well as Laclau and Mouffe (1985). This was deemed to be conceptually productive in order to deconstruct the neo-fascist discourse because they situate identity, differentiation, equivalences and naturalisation or hegemony quite central within the analysis of political discourse. This approach also posits, just as Orwell did, that meaning making is dynamic and ontologically instable and malleable, which will prove to be highly relevant in the context of analysing neo-fascist discourse. Besides this neo-Gramscian approach, the discourse historical approach of Wodak (2015) is equally useful, especially as it pertains to the analysis of fascism, racism and extreme right ideology. This approach also allows us to consider a wide variety of genres of discourse into the corpus. Finally, also very pertinent to the study of the fascist discourse, and above all its spread beyond Western societies, is a multi-culturalist perspective on discourse,

acknowledging both the convergences and divergences in the various manifestations of contemporary neo-fascism across the world (Shi-xu, 2012).

As implied, the recent surge of neo-fascist discourse, politics and action within mainstream rightwing politics is a global, but not necessarily universal, phenomenon. In order to study this, it was decided to focus on two of the largest democracies in the world, one situated in the East, and the other in the West. In the largest democracy in the world with more than 830 million voters, the Indian People's Party (BJP) has been in power since 2014. The strictly hierarchically structured Hindu-nationalist BJP is led by Narenda Modi, a charismatic but highly controversial leader, accused (amongst others) of inciting a racial pogrom of Muslims in 2002 in the state of Gujarat. The United States is the largest democracy of the Western world, with about 250 million people who hold the right to vote. In 2016, the Republican party choose Donald J. Trump as its presidential candidate which was the result of a broader and more long-term internal radicalisation of that party. Since then and the subsequent election of Trump, the Republican party as a whole has arguably hardened, sliding ever more to the extreme right. The corpus for analysis was constructed by sampling social media postings as well as political speeches and interviews of both leaders.

The Core Nodal Points of Neo-Fascist Discourse

Neo-fascism varies from one country to the next, from one part of the world to the other, in large part due to distinct political cultures, customs, and historical trajectories. This makes it particularly challenging to deconstruct contemporary articulations of neo-fascism in a comparative perspective. Nevertheless, a multi-cultural comparative analysis is important and is fruitful in exposing convergences, but also divergences. Building on Michael Billig's (1989) research on far-right ideology and myth-making, and Jason Stanley's (2018) analysis of the workings of fascist ideology, it is possible to discern a set of discursive nodal points which taken together (i.e. not in isolation), represent the signifying chain of neo-fascist discourse. In what follows, the following nodal points, 1) ultra-nationalism, religion and nativism; 2) hierarchy, inequality and superiority; 3) anti-intellectualism, lies and conspiracy theories and 4) anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic values, will be theorised and analysed, using the political discourse of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and US president Donald J. Trump as case studies.

Ultra-Nationalism, Religion and Nativism

One of the most important nodal points in fascist ideology is an ultra-nationalism combined with nativism, whereby the latter strives towards homogenisation and espouses the view 'that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group' (Mudde, 2007: 19). Both nationalism and xenophobic nativism construct clear boundaries between 'the self' and 'the other', between 'us' and 'them'. From a discourse theory perspective, the self is constructed in juxtaposition to its 'constitutive outside' (Derrida, 1978, p. 39-44). As such, a discursive chain of equivalence ties together the in-group through a logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 127). Nationalism, as well as religion, are powerful ways to construct such a strong chain of equivalence, which on the one hand erases internal differences but at the same time accentuates external differences and establishes insurmountable boundaries with various out-groups. Nativism, then, adds race to this 'us' versus 'them' juxtaposition and it thus also represents an active rejection of and resistance against pluralist, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies (Billig, 1989: 147). As Stanley (2018) explains in great detail, this is often coupled with a deep-rooted sense of nostalgia towards a mythical glorious past when the nation was supposedly more racially homogenous, patriarchal and heteronormative.

Trump embodies this with a wide range of ultra-nationalist discourses, pandering to white nativism. The slogan and corresponding meme 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) encapsulates a promise to 'bring back a past Eden, a Golden Age' (Lakoff, 2017: 602). Besides nationalism, religion is also central to the contemporary neo-fascist discourse, especially as it serves to strengthen the identity of 'the self' vis-à-vis a demonised and dehumanised 'other'. In 2017, Trump retweeted some incendiary anti-Islam messages from Jayda Fransen, the deputy leader of the UK fascist party *Britain First*. One of them read, 'VIDEO: Muslim migrant beat up Dutch boy on crutches' (@JayddaBF, 28/11/2017). The Dutch Prosecution Service, however, countered this claim by stating that the attacker was not an immigrant, but 'born and raised in the Netherlands' (@OMNoord_Holland, 29/11/2017) and neither was he a Muslim.

In Hindu nationalist India, religion and nationalism are joining hands even more firmly than in the US context. This is accompanied by an active rewriting of official history to fit Hindutva ideology, which advocates Hindu dominance and justifies policies to establish a pure Hindu nation and preserve the caste-system (Thapar, 2019). During the latest 2019 election campaign, Modi asked for the extreme right Hindutva ideologue Veer Savarkar to be awarded the highest

civilian award in India, highlighting that 'nationalism be kept the root of nation-building' (Modi, quoted in The Week, 2019: np). Following on from this, anyone who is critical of Modi, the BJP and the idea of Hindu supremacy is subsequently positioned as anti-national and denoted as a traitor.

What both cases expose here is that a complex and above all conflictual relationship is being constructed between race, ethnicity, religion, class and the nation, expressed through a discourse of exclusion and inequality geared towards identity construction, but importantly historically, culturally and politically specific (Shi-xu, 2012: 649).

Hierarchy, Inequality and Superiority

The second cluster of nodal points of the neo-fascist discourse foregrounds the celebration of (racial) hierarchy and thus also the idea that inequality and privilege are not only inevitable, but desirable. As Saalfeld (1993: 181) argues, neo-fascism rests on 'a belief in the necessity and legitimacy of institutionalised social and political inequality, based on criteria such as nationality, race, ethnic group, gender, personal achievement and social background'.

By adhering to a Darwinian conception of nature which foregrounds competition and the survival of the strong and fit to the detriment of the weak, equality is deemed to be an unnatural state of affairs. As already illustrated above, religion also often serves as a proxy to establish racial superiority. One can think of how Judaism and more recently Islam are being targeted by fascists. All this serves as a justification for the privileged and superior status of the dominant 'native' in-group vis-à-vis various out-groups. Relevant in this regard is the prevalence of a *differentialist racism* at the heart of fascist ideology (Taguieff, 1993). It relates the in-group to the out-groups as intrinsically incompatible, thus stressing the ontological impossibility and above all undesirability of an equal multi-cultural society.

Trump's racist tweets, telling four non-white Congresswomen who are critical of him to 'go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came' (@realDonaldTrump, 14 July 2019), speaks to the idea that even if most of them are US-born citizens, they do not belong and most importantly will never belong; they are considered to be what the ancient Greeks would call allochthones – i.e. *not from here*. This is part of a broader discursive attempt to frame these female congresswomen of colour as un-American,

unpatriotic, and disrespectful. A few months after the 'go back home' tweet, Trump retweeted the false claim made by conservative comedian Terrence K Williams that Ilhan Omar, one of the four congress women he targeted, 'partied on the anniversary of 9/11' (@w_terrence, 16/09/2019). Such racist discourses have genuine material consequences and Omar reported a marked increase in death threats from people feeling emboldened by the persistent nods to the discourse of differential racism by US president Trump (McCarthy, 2019). The re-tweeting behaviour of Trump should be seen as part of a longstanding tradition in rightwing America of dog whistle politics, or 'coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites' (López, 2014: 12), but crucially whilst also claiming to be morally opposed to racism.

Modi and the BJP's anti-Muslim discourse and policies are well-documented (Banaji, 2018), and just like Trump, he also tends to resort to dog whistle politics. For example, after fierce protests against the new Citizenship Amendment Act in various part of India at the end of 2019, Modi specifically targeted protests in the North East of India, where large parts of the population are Muslim and protests turned violent. In his public speech, he noted in passing that 'Those who are creating violence can be identified by their clothes itself'[2]. A few months later, during and after the visit of Trump to India, he refused to condemn the gruesome anti-Muslim violence and the purge of Muslim Indians out of certain neighbourhoods of New Delhi (Ellis-Petersen, 2020). These events also speak to the idea that discourse is not merely symbolic, but has serious material consequences[3]. Inequality and poverty is also presented as inevitable by Modi, and religiously justified as the will of god. In this regard, Modi (2007) once wrote that manual scavenging, an activity pre-dominantly executed by the lowest Dalit cast in India, amounted to 'a spiritual experience' and he also frequently defends the institutional inequality and hierarchy inherent to the caste-system.

What these discursive examples show is that ideas of inequality, hierarchy, religion and racism in the two contexts under consideration are not essentialist nor inter-changeable. In line with this, religion and casts as cultural belongings can easily signify a proxy for biological belongings, as Hall (2017: 154) also pointed out when he stated that 'emphasis on cultural belonging does not silence the biological, and certainly does not eliminate the genetic-physical signifiers of racial difference and their discursive effects'.

Anti-intellectualism, Lies and Conspiracy Theories

The third cluster of nodal points of contemporary fascism consists of anti-intellectualism, a high propensity of blatant lying and the promotion of conspiracy theories. Anti-intellectualism – or what Ruth Wodak (2015: 22) calls the 'arrogance of ignorance' – can amongst others be seen in the rejection of objective facts and the delegitimization of science, experts and expertise. Facts are denied by countering them with 'alternative facts', as Trump's Counsellor Kellyanne Conway put it, which is reminiscent of Guy Debord's (1967 [1981]) topsy-turvy *Society of the Spectacle* in which 'the true' has truly become 'a moment of the false'. We could in this regard also argue that neo-fascist newspeak has taken post-structuralist critiques of absolute truth claims and legitimate knowledge construction to its ultimate extreme, rendering literally everything into empty signifiers, amounting to what some have called a post-truth or bullshit politics (Ball, 2017; Lakoff, 2017).

One specific articulation of this denial of truth 'all together' can be found in the way fascist political forces have always developed, distributed and promoted a whole range of wild conspiracy theories, which befit their world-view and target their ideological and/or ethnic enemies. A conspiracy theory 'either misattributes dominance to individuals, or simplistically places blame for the ills of the world on individuals rather than on underlying, structural causes' (Fenster, 1999: 58). However, while the focus is often on individuals, for example George Soros today, the real target are not these individuals per se, but rather the ethno-religious or ideological groups they belong to, for example Freemasons, (cultural) Marxists, Jews, and more recently Muslims. The conspiracy theory operates at a rhetorical level and is argumentative; it is designed to disrupt common knowledge by providing a secret explanation to which only those 'in the know' have access to. As Billig (1988: 29) points out, 'in claiming to have discovered the hidden truth about the world, [the conspiracy theorist] is offering an argument against ordinary, non-conspiratorial interpretations of the world'.

A large part of Trump's political capital was built on actively promoting conspiracy theories, as well as those that pander them, for example Alex Jones of *Infowars*. Before his 2016 election, Trump became the most prominent spokesperson for the so-called *birthers*, who falsely claimed that Barak Obama was a Muslim, born in Kenya, and thus an illegitimate president (Sides *et al.*, 2018). The way in which Trump promotes conspiracy theories is often by insinuation, or by giving exposure and credibility to those that overtly pander them. For

example, after Obama released his birth certificate, Trump went on CNN and stated that 'a lot of people do not think it was an authentic certificate' (Interview CNN, 29 May 2012), whilst refusing to disclose who these people are. Besides feeding a variety of conspiracy theories, Trump is also a compulsive and some argue pathological liar. The Washington Post calculated that by January 2020, three years into his presidency, Trump had made more than 16.000 claims and statements that were either false or misleading (The Washington Post, 2020). This also speaks and relates to a broader overall disdain and rejection of expertise, intellectuals and scientific knowledge within the neo-fascist discourse. Trump and his administration have from the very beginning implemented an anti-science agenda, which expressed itself most clearly in the context of climate change and health policy. When asked by reporters for a reaction on the conclusion by the National Climate Assessment (NCA) report that the US economy would suffer considerably due to climate change, Trump responded by saying: 'I don't believe it' (BBC, 2018).

Just like Trump, Modi also incessantly circulates lies and misleading statements. A telling example of a blatant lie, was Modi's claim that the railway accident in November 2016 near Pukhraya, leaving 150 people dead, was a 'conspiracy planned by people sitting across the border', implicating the Pakistani intelligence service ISI. Local police officials, however, denied these claims and stated that the accident was the result of broken tracks, rather than sabotage (Singh, 2017). Modi furthermore also frequently exhibits a deep-seated anti-intellectualism. When Amartya Sen critiqued his governments' economic policies, he reacted by stating that 'hard work is much more powerful than Harvard' (Modi, quoted in The Hindu, 2017: np). The persistent critique and in some instances persecution of Indian intellectuals and human rights activists, has also led to the mainstreaming of religiously inspired pseudo-scientific accounts renouncing the laws of physics as formulated by Newton and Einstein (BBC, 2019).

While strategic and persistent lying and an anti-science disposition can be observed across the two cases, conspiracy theories seem to be less prevalent within Asian (political) cultures compared to Western ones. It is not that Indian neo-fascist politics is devoid of conspiracy theories, they are not, but conspiracy theories are much less front and center than is the case in Western neo-fascist discourse and the Western psyche (see Aupers, 2012).

Anti-Enlightenment and Anti-Democratic Values

A final cluster of nodal points relates to the antagonistic relationship of fascism towards the ideals and values of the enlightenment. Enlightenment values include an emphasis on rational argument in public debate, promotion of democracy as the maximisation of civic participation, the acceptance of freedom *and* equality as central political principles, as well as the articulation of natural or inalienable rights as humans and a spirit of universal fraternity[4] (Israel, 2010). Given the nature of these values is not surprising that neo-fascist ideology firmly aligns with a longstanding anti-enlightenment tradition going against said values (Sternhell, 2010).

However, neo-fascist political actors are not always open and straightforward about their anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic worldviews. They tend to selectively cherry-pick from democratic and enlightenment values, for example, claiming freedom of speech to be a bigoted racist, using the ideal of liberty to deny 'non-natives' their democratic and human rights, or deploying feminist tropes against Muslims. Stanley (2018: 50) argues that '[f]ascists have always been well acquainted with this recipe for using democracy's liberties against itself', which was precisely what Popper warned against with his *paradox of tolerance*.

This quintessentially anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic position is exposed foremost when democratic values, principles or laws are impeding their actions. It is at that point that they reveal their true anti-democratic credentials. We could refer in this regard to the active delegitimization of an independent legislature and the undermining of the rule of law, reflected in an 'impatience with constitutional forms' and a rejection of 'the constraints of the law' to their will (Billig, 1989: 147).

Trump consistently delegitimises judges and judicial decision which uphold the human rights of refugees and immigrants. In August 2019, the US Department of Justice even filed a petition to decertify the National Association of Immigration Judges, a union that has been very vocal in its critique of Trump and DoJ's attempt to turn the immigration judges into immigration officers (Goldbaum, 2019). Trump also targets his attacks on the legal and congressional investigations into his own or his campaign's actions. In order to delegitimise the FBI's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 elections, Trump tweeted: 'This is the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history' (@realDonaldTrump, 18 May 2017). In fact. all the legal efforts to stop or contest Trump's anti-democratic actions are persistently

denoted by him as a 'witch hunt', a metaphor implying unfair persecution. Between the start of his presidency and December 2019, Trump tweeted almost 300 times 'witch hunt', referring both to the Russian interference investigation and the Ukraine impeachment trial (Markham-Cantor, 2019: np). This incessant repetition is a deliberate tactic, as it can potentially lead to a reiteration effect. And sure enough, a March 2019 poll conducted by Suffolk University found that half of Americans agreed with the statement that the FBI's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US elections amounted to a witch hunt (ibid).

Although India is often heralded as the world's largest democracy, Modi and his BJP government have in recent years hollowed out democracy in India to the extent that is has become a democracy in name only. The disdain of democratic principles and values is most visible in the way the Indian government and its security forces imposed federal rule in the Muslim-majority states of Jammu and Kashmir, disregarding basic human rights and squashing all dissent with impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Recently, Modi has also been advocating a one nation, one election policy, going against the federalist logic of Indian democracy and essentially promoting the centralisation of power in the hands of the central government, which is controlled by his own party, the BJP (Begg, 2019).

In the next section I will address the process through which neo-fascist discourse is being normalised, which as I will argue inevitably implicates media and communication.

The Normalisation of Neo-Fascism through Mediation

Scholars have identified a wide range of demand-side as well as (internal and external) supply-side explanations for the rise neo-fascist parties and the gradual normalisation of the neo-fascist discourse, as deconstructed above (cf. Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). Regarding demand-side explanations, we could refer to grievances relating to the disproportionally negative consequences of globalisation and neo-liberalism and linked to that the increased tensions relating to the emergence of de facto multi-cultural societies, concerns regarding democratic deficits of supra-national political institutions, as well as increased inequalities, insecurity and fear. Internal supply-side explanations include the charisma of a strong leader as well as the organisational strength and mobilising power of neo-fascist parties. Regarding external supply-side reasons, we could refer to the specific political and institutional context, for example

proportional versus majoritarian systems or a regionalist nationalism which can be pitted against a more distant federal state. Another important external supply-side explanation is, however, the extent to which neo-fascist parties and their leaders are able to exploit the mediation opportunity structure – or the dynamic 'interplay between agentic opportunities and structural constraints' at the level of frame production, self-mediation practices, managing mainstream media representations and achieving frame resonance and reception (Cammaerts, 2018b: 35). This implicates both social media – used by neo-fascist leaders to self-mediate and disintermediate, and traditional media – providing a platform to neo-fascist parties and leaders in order to amplify their self-mediations. Let me first address the use and role of social media and strategies of self-mediation and disintermediation in the propagandistic efforts of neo-fascist leaders and parties.

Social Media, Self- and Disintermediation

Social media platforms and the algorithms that sustain them, are the quintessential medium of the *new politics of visibility*, they are very apt at 'carefully managing […] visibility and self-presentation within the mediated arena of modern politics' (Thompson, 2005: 41). A telling example of this is how a variety of social media platforms have been pivotal in the personal branding efforts of Modi and the political communication strategy of his party, the BJP. He is one of, if not the, most popular political leader globally on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram (Economic Times, 2019). Likewise, Trump is also an avid and popular social media user, known for strategically using Twitter to facilitate the 'rise and mainstreaming of divisive and incendiary public discourse' (Ott, 2017: 66).

Indeed, as many of the examples above demonstrate, central to generating social (as well as traditional) media resonance is what could be called a *politics of provocation* or what Wodak (2015: 19) describes as 'scandalisation', i.e. a strategy to 'intentionally provoke scandals by violating publicly accepted norms'. This breaking of supposed taboos, often denoted as so-called political correctness, is designed to create drama, moral indignation and controversy, which subsequently translates into more clicks, shares, comments, and opinion pieces, after which the neo-fascist provocateurs swiftly reposition themselves from the role of the perpetrator into the victim (Cammaerts, 2018a). This aligns with a long-standing cultivation of victimhood amongst neo-fascists vis-à-vis the 'liberal elite' and those that dare to criticise or

contest 'the will of people', as articulated and embodied by them (Stanley, 2018). It suffices to recall the persistent use of the 'witch hunt' trope by Trump in this regard.

It must be noted though that, unlike Trump, Modi and the BJP use a 'good cop, bad cop' strategy on social media and in public discourse. While Modi often presents a discourse of unity, harmony, and peace, and might resort to insinuating dog whistle politics, he leaves the explicit politics of hate and provocation to his government ministers, state level officials and senior party members. Research found that almost 80% of hate speech incidents in 2017 could be attributed to political leaders of the BJP, and this also became worse over time (Shabaz, 2018), but Modi himself does not often use hate speech or hyperbolic language as Trump frequently does, he presents himself more as a smiling cuddly harmless teddy bear rather than a macho alpha-bully.

Besides the affordance of self-mediation, social media also enables disintermediation or the potential to reduce the number of mediators between the party/leader and the electorate. Disintermediation in this context thus above all means the ability to remove (critical) journalists from their media strategies and privileging direct channels of communication with their followers and the broader electorate.

Social media and their opaque proprietary algorithms have, furthermore, the propensity to regulate how information circulates and who gets to see what (Beer, 2017). Neo-fascist operators and communication strategists are very apt at exploiting these social media algorithms and their affordances (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018). Their highly emotive, controversial, and often deliberately transgressive content, as discussed above, is highly likely to go viral due to its shock value, but also because both their sympathisers as well as their critics tend to share, circulate and engage with it in respectively positive and negative ways, which subsequently helps to circulate the neo-fascist discourse and becomes instrumental in further amplifying and normalising the neo-fascist discourse.

However, it is not just the number of clicks and emotive engagement that impacts on whether social media content resonates or not. Social media platforms also harbour a set of hidden affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). The whole business model of social media platforms is geared towards matching the digital footprint of our sociability with advertisers, including now it seems political actors who are willing and able to pay for it. In other words, it is not just

the collective that decides what gets amplified to whom, but also those that have enough financial capital to pay for access to those algorithms enabling them to reach targeted and segmented groups of social media users. To get a sense of the magnitude of this, between 19 January 2019 and 16 February 2020, the Trump campaign spent 26 million US$ on Facebook ads alone, representing about half of its media spending during that non-election period (Fisher and Swan, 2020). Likewise, during the 2019 national election campaign, Modi's BJP spent almost 3 million US$ on social media advertising, mainly through Google, Facebook and its affiliates (Chaturvedi, 2019).

Mainstream Media Resonance

Neo-fascist political leaders and parties are, however, also deeply dependent on traditional media and journalists 'to get their message across to potential adherents' (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017: 914). Unlike their easy access to and ample use of social media, their relationship with traditional mainstream media is much more fraught and contentious. Journalists are generally seen as an utter nuisance and positioned as an out-of-touch liberal elite, an enemy of 'the people', hiding the real truths from ordinary folk. As Trump put it in one of his many tweets lambasting the mainstream media: 'The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!' (@realDonaldTrump, 17 February, 2017).

At the same time, while many journalists might be highly critical of neo-fascist leaders such as Trump and Modi, mainstream media also feeds off the emotive spectacle, drama, and outrage which neo-fascists generate. This not only leads to the production of more content, but also audience engagement with that content, both driving the new business model of contemporary media (Nielsen, 2016: 65). This explains why in spite of stringent journalistic critiques and the anti-mainstream 'FAKE NEWS' media rhetoric of neo-fascist politicians and parties, many studies also point to the mainstream media's complicity in the recent rise of neo-fascism across the world (Mazzoleni, 2008; Ellinas, 2009; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2012; Forchtner *et al.*, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2013; Titley, 2019).

For example, given the celebrity status of contemporary politicians, journalists tend to use the social media accounts of neo-fascist leaders as primary source material to produce their media content, which in turn feeds the amplification of the neo-fascist discourse. Every provocative

tweet of Trump is world news the next day, endlessly being replicated and regurgitated. Besides this, and as shown in the analysis above, one of the main counter-tactics used by journalists against the neo-fascist politicians' tendency to persistently lie is to fact-check. However, many studies find that if the lie feeds already present misconceptions and pre-suppositions, fact-checking is not very effective and could even backfire (Nieminen and Rapeli, 2019). Furthermore, and speaking to our argument above of positive *and* negative amplification, George Lakoff (quoted in Rosenberg 2017: np) reminds us that 'if you negate a frame, you have to activate the frame, because you have to know what you're negating. If you use logic against something, you are strengthening it'.

As such, both social and news media are central and instrumental actors in facilitating and in many instances promoting and even financially profiting from neo-fascism all over the world. This raises some serious ethical questions, especially if we bring democratic and normative communication theory into the conversation.

The antagonism between neo-fascism and democracy and its normative implications for social and traditional media

Democracy is unavoidably conflictual as different ideas and visions about the common good, about how to organise society, about taxation and redistribution, and about whether to privilege equality over liberty or vice versa permanently clash with each other. At the same time, it is also the space where solutions, compromises and trade-offs have to be found and made. In radical democratic theory, this democratic war of position is denoted as *the political* whereas the solution-oriented aspect of democracy is termed *politics* (Mouffe, 2005). The dynamic interplay between the inherently conflictual nature of the political and the need to seek compromises or reach temporary cease-fires in ongoing conflicts is what defines democracy and enables change and renewal.

Chantal Mouffe (1999) distinguishes, however, between two distinct types of conflictual relationships – antagonistic and agonistic ones. Both are highly relevant to the topic and argument developed in this paper. Antagonism relates to a conflictual relationship whereby political actors do not accept each other's legitimacy to exist, they are enemies. Agonism, in contrast, requires opposing political actors to consider each other as adversaries that agree to

disagree. The importance of this distinction between antagonism and agonism was made apparent in a tweet from the Black American writer and activist Robert Jones Jr. a few years ago, when he wrote: 'We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist' (@SonofBaldwin, 18 August 2015).

The role of democracy, Mouffe argues, is precisely to turn antagonisms into agonisms. The question this raises, however, is to which extent neo-fascism can be engaged with in agonistic terms in a democracy? In my view, there exists an existential incompatibility between democracy and fascism and this also applies to its contemporary articulation. As Traverso (2004: 99) quite rightly and succinctly put it, 'it is impossible to be democratic […] without being at the same time anti-fascist'. This means that there are – and should be – limits to a radical pluralist democracy, as Mouffe (2005: 120) herself also acknowledged when she wrote, somewhat in line with Popper, that '[a] democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries'.

If we thus accept the premise that neo-fascism and democracy are incommensurate and heed Popper's warning of the paradox of intolerance, the logical implication is that democratic forces, including traditional and social media, have an ethical duty to protect democracy and democratic values against the destructive forces of neo-fascism, especially as '[t]he goal of fascist propaganda is not merely to mock and sneer at robust and complex public debate about policy; it is to eliminate its possibility' (Stanley, 2018: 75).

There is a long tradition of normative theory when it comes to the roles that media and communication have to play in a democracy and which would support a call to arms in the democratic fight-back against neo-fascism. A normative theory of the media is embedded in a 'philosophy of public communication that sees the mass media as having an essential part to play in larger social and cultural processes' (Christians *et al.*, 2009: 16). We could refer, amongst others, to the enlightenment antecedents of both the liberal as well as the social responsibility normative tradition, to the need to promote an inclusive and participatory society, to the expectations to facilitate an equitable and pluralistic public debate as well as to be the fourth estate and critically monitor the powers that be, to protect human rights, and to adhere to a set of deontological codes, which guarantees source protection, fact-based reporting, exposing abuses of power, etc. It has to be noted though that some of these values and

normative ideals are firmly Western and less prevalent in non-Western and more specifically Asian cultures, where a collaborative role of the media is emphasised more with an emphasis on harmony, cohesion and collectivism (Xiaoge, 2005).

Despite these differences, a set of normative traditions and norms emerge for journalists and the media to act and contest, when confronted with exclusions, racism, injustices, and violence, in line with human rights and democratic values. Journalists and media are thus approached as pivotal actors in 'the constitution of a democratic social order', as James Carey (1996: 9) put it. This position is most pronounced in the civic journalism tradition, which describes journalists as 'democracy's cultivators' (Rosen, 1999: 4), and considers them to have a moral duty to 'help public life go well' (Merritt, 1995: 113), which inevitable implies combatting neo-fascism and its normalisation.

The question of how traditional and social media companies have to protect democracy against the rise and normalisation of neo-fascism is ever more pressing, but there are no easy nor straightforward solutions here. Let me, however, attempt to provide some tentative suggestions in the conclusion.

Conclusion

As argued above, normative theory places upon traditional media actors a moral duty to protect democratic values and human rights rather than being an active pawn in the spread and normalization of a racist and nativist neo-fascist discourse. This is, however, easier said than done. First of all, the moral resistance against neo-fascism and their politics of provocation is integral to the neo-fascist communication strategy and feeds their inter-linked discourse of victimhood. It fits the stark polarisation they desire, pitting journalists against 'the people' thereby creating clear distinctions and boundaries which strengthen the neo-fascist collective identity and increase its support-base. In many ways, the threat of the 'democratic other', intent on impeding the neo-fascist agenda presented as the 'will of the people', functions as a potent rallying cry. In the context of the Trump presidency, Guardian Journalist Jonathan Freedland (2019: np) summarises the conundrum of those that want to protect democracy and counter neo-fascism; they

face a choice between doing what is morally right and what is politically smart. When you're dealing with an amoral bigot in the White House, those two things are not always the same.

This observation points to the need to reflect on whether and/or how to avoid taking the bait that is constantly being put out there by neo-fascists to produce an emotive response of moral indignation and consternation. This also suggests that we need to develop ways of raising critical awareness amongst audiences and citizens, through increasing media literacies to detect propaganda and fake news with a view of denaturalising the neo-fascist discourse. However, we cannot just lay the responsibility at the doorstep of citizens and individuals. We also need to question the business models and practices of today's media, both traditional and social, who feed off controversy, drama, and outrage, which tends to lead to more clicks, shares, engagement and content creation.

There are differences though between the position and actions of traditional media and news media. Whereas the latter tend to be – by and large – critical of neo-fascism, fact-checking neo-fascists' lies in line with their normative roles in a democracy, they still feed off and amplify the neo-fascist discourse. Social media companies, on the contrary, tend to position themselves as neutral conduits of public discourse, claiming to protect free-speech, whilst financially profiting from neo-fascist political actors and parties. What the concept of disintermediation thus masks, is the obvious observation that social media platforms themselves are the new mediators, but with much less accountability and denying the normative responsibilities that many traditional media and journalists tend to adhere to in a democracy. This should urgently change!

At the same time, the moral duty to combat neo-fascism in its contemporary articulation does not lie exclusively with the hybrid information and communication systems in our democracies, but as much with broader civil society and democratic politicians and parties, who together with traditional and new media actors need to work harder to deepen and strengthen democracy, but also importantly to address the demand-side which makes neo-fascist discourses and policies resonate with so many citizens across the world.

Finally, what the multi-cultural political discourse analysis developed in this article also demonstrates is that the various nodes of the neo-fascist discourse operate across both Western

and non-Western political cultures in similar as well as diverging manner. Whereas there are concurring patterns, represented by the various nodes, there are also marked divergences between the US and Indian context. These situate themselves, however, more at the level of tone, style and communication strategy, than substance. It is in this regard clear that the lack of support for democratic values, practices and human rights from political leaders of major democracies in both Western and non-Western contexts, is fuelling and justifying a rise of authoritarian rule globally. It has also emboldened and invigorated violent rightwing extremism in both contexts, which has become even more vile and hateful, issuing more and more death threats, and increasingly acting on those threats.

All this shows that the neo-fascist politics of provocation and the incessant racist and nativist discourse propagated by neo-fascist political actors is not without material consequences and that democratic societies urgently need to defend themselves more vigorously 'against the onslaught of the intolerant', as Popper (1945 [2011]: 581) put it.

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Notes:

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[1] Rather than using more sanitised denominations, such as: rightwing populism, new right, radical/extreme right or alt-right, I believe it is important to be crystal clear about what we are dealing with here in ideological terms and that is, as I will demonstrate, fascism (Stanley, 2018).

[2] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuNn7JoH4hg

[3] As briefly mentioned in the section on case selection, Modi was also deeply implicated in the initiation, incitement and subsequent condonement of the 2002 massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, as shown in the 2004 documentary *The Final Solution*.

[4] Whereas anti-slavery and anti-racism was certainly present amongst the so-called radical enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Spinoza, it has to be noted though that colonialism and racial inequality remained strong in Europe and universality of rights limited to white men, leading Mbembe (2010) to rightly critique the hypocrisy at the core of the enlightenment. This hypocrisy also makes that enlightenment values, and especially their claim to universality, are often more contested and problematised in non-Western than in Western contexts.