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Radical pluralism and free speech in online public spaces: the case of North Belgian extreme right discourses

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Radical Pluralism and Free Speech in Online Public Spaces: the Case of North-Belgian Extreme Right Discourses

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Abstract:

Progressive political movements and activists are not the only ones appropriating Web 2.0 as a way to construct independent public spaces and voice counter-hegemonic discourses. By looking at the other extreme of (post-)fascist movements, it will be shown that the internet also gives rise to anti-public spaces, voicing hatred and essentialist discourses. In this article, discourses of hate produced by North-Belgian (post-)fascist movements and activists will be analysed. Theoretically the analysis is informed by radical pluralism and the limits of freedom of speech in a strong democracy. The cases presented challenge the limits of freedom of speech and of radical pluralism and bring us to question whether being a racist is a democratic right, whether freedom of speech includes opinions and views that challenge basic democratic values.

Keywords:

Public Sphere, Freedom of Speech, Radical Democracy, Hate Speech

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You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn. (Buchan, 1916)

In this article a case study illustrating the way in which the internet serves as a platform for the incitement of racial hatred and discrimination against minorities is presented. More specifically, hate speech in North-Belgian blogs and an online forum will be analysed. This will be related to recent debates regarding the internet and public spaces, rationality versus passions, the distinction between antagonism and agonism (Mouffe, 1999) and freedom of speech. In this article the focus will be on 'communities of closure' (Couldry, 2002) or anti-publics, *'placing themselves at the political extremes […] challeng[ing] or question[ing] basic democratic values'* (Cammaerts, 2007: 73).

As critical scholars we often tend to focus on progressive emancipatory resistance movements first and foremost, and in doing so we underscore the extensive use of the internet (as well as other media) by non-progressive reactionary movements, be it the radical and dogmatic Catholic movement, the fundamentalist Muslim movement or the extreme right – post-fascist – movement. As Kahn and Kellner (2004: 94) quite rightly point out *'the internet is a contested terrain, used by Left, Right, and Center of both dominant cultures and subcultures in order to promote their own agendas and interests'*. A notable exception to this pre-dominant focus on progressive politics is Atton (2004/2006) who addresses the use of alternative (new) media by the extreme-right movement in the UK and the US. Downing et al. (2001: 89) also distinguish between democratic and repressive radical media, the latter having *'neither critical reflection nor any genuine increase in personal or collective freedom … on the radar screen'*.

Inevitably the hate-speech debate also brings into question ideological differences in relation to the how absolute freedom of speech is, the nature of democracy and how or to what extent a balance needs to be struck between different rights, including respect for and recognition of difference and the right not to be discriminated against.

2 An online public sphere or public spaces online

The rise of the internet as an interactive space, potentially global in reach, has led to an increasing number of scholars asserting the relevance or indeed irrelevance of the internet for the promotion of a democratic public sphere and for the facilitation of deliberation (Wilhelm, 2000; Gimmler, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Young, 2001; Poster, 2001; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Dean, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005). This has clearly re-invigorated debates regarding the public sphere and linked to that the potentials of the internet to foster a public sphere or public spaces beyond state and market that facilitate deliberation.

From a post-modern perspective, Villa (1992: 712) describes the public sphere as *'a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action'*. Deliberation is, however, very much entrenched in the Enlightment tradition rather then post-modernism. It points to a process of communication and dialogue, involving different 'equal' actors aimed at reaching a rational consensus. It is thus seen as a democratic process informed by rational argumentative debate, respect for difference and the ability to change views based on sound rational counter-arguments (Benhabib, 1996: 96).

The internet is by some perceived as an ideal (new) platform to realise genuine deliberation. Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 17) for instance assert that the internet *'makes manageable largescale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation'.* Contrary to this, much of empirical research on the relationship between the internet and deliberation (or public debate for that matter) tends to counter the rather optimistic claims that the internet stimulates and facilitates the emergence of an online public sphere. First and foremost, almost becoming a disclaimer, the digital divide remains problematic in relation to free access for all (Cammaerts, et al., 2003). True, penetration rates in the West – particularly of broadband – have soared in recent years, but this does not mean that all and everyone has easy and equal access to the internet or a computer, nor to capabilities in the way Sen conceives them (see Garnham, 2000).

Regarding the potentials of the internet in view of fostering democracy and facilitating public debate or dialogue, Norris (2001: 12) speaks of a democratic divide between *'those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the internet for civic engagement'*. This creates imbalances, whereby those that participate offline, also do so online. This leads Dahlberg (2001: 10) to conclude that participation in online public debates '*is, in fact, both quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by those already powerful offline (politically active, educated, white, males).'* More recently, King (2006: 26) confirmed that *'those people participating in political issues on the Internet were highly educated and already highly politically engaged persons'*.

In addition to pointing to issues of access and addressing the crucial question as to who participates in online public debates, many scholars challenge or at least question the potential of the internet to facilitate and enable (rational)

deliberation within an ideal speech situation. A recurrent observation is that much debate on the internet tends to take place between like-minded (male) participants situated in homogenic ideological frameworks and engaging in, what Davies (1999: 162) calls *'opinion reinforcement'* and Wilhelm (2000: 89) *'homophily'*. On the contrary, ideologically heterogeneous unmoderated spaces for debate, while being more open, are often confronted with flame-wars between (often anonymous) participants (Eum, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005: 70).

Finally, some authors also address the dangers of individualisation, alienation, isolation and fragmentation, which – according to them - are increased by ICTs (Postman, 1992; Gitlin, 1998). New media facilitate the catering to specific niche-markets, characterised by a pull-strategy, which promotes the segmentation of publics, *'disadvantag[ing] deliberation and the pursuit of common ground and undermin[ing] the politics of democratic participation'* (Barber, 2003: 45).

While many proponents of digital culture and technological advancement seem to argue that the internet has all the requirements to be a Habermassian public sphere, others – such as many authors cited above, argue the contrary or are more cautious in their assessment. This leads us to argue that the real question here is maybe not whether the internet constitutes a public sphere, but should relate to the inaptness of the normative Habermassian public sphere notion at a theoretical level to account for current political and social processes in highly mediatised and popular culture driven societies.

Countering the Habermassian public sphere and rational deliberation, Connolly (1991) and Mouffe (1999) advocate a radically pluralist and agonistic democracy. They argue for an agonistic conception of the political which recognises ideological differences, societal tensions and conflicts of interest — always present in every society, and in which 'others' are constructed as legitimate adversaries rather then enemies. Agonism refers to a struggle of conflicting idea's - *'a vibrant clash of democratic political positions'* (Mouffe, 2000: 16), but at the same time also to a common frame of democratic principles, respecting 'the other' in their otherness with *'a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy'* (Mouffe, 1999: 755). The aim of democracy, according to Mouffe (1999: 755), should then be *'to transform an "antagonism" into an "agonism"'*.

According to the conflictual approach in political theory, deliberative democracy eliminates or eradicates power and conflict from the political in a bid to achieve a rational consensus shared by all participants to the deliberative process.

> *I am particularly interested in the role of what I call "passions" in politics. For Habermas, this is exactly what the public sphere should not be; it is not the place where passions should be expressed. (…) Public spaces should be places for the expression of dissensus, for*

> *bringing to the floor what forces attempt to keep concealed.* (Mouffe quoted in: Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006: 973-4)

Clearly the internet can be seen as providing opportunities for constructing public spaces online, but just as the 'offline' public sphere is deemed problematic on many accounts, so is an online public sphere. By speaking of an 'online public sphere' a normative distinction is introduced between what is being considered good and real democratic discourses – rational, focussed on the common good, consensual, etc. and what is deemed non-political, titter-tatter in the margins or passionate individual expressions without much value, thereby '*homogeniz[ing] political engagement, neutraliz[ing] social space, and sanitiz[ing] popular cultures'* (Dean, 2001: 346-7). In doing so, much of what is happing online which might not seem rational or having an impact on politics, is being disregarded. It could be argued that this *'multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses'* (Mouffe, 1999: 757) is beneficial for a vibrant (online) civic culture (Dahlgren, 2005) and a strong democracy (Barber, 1984).

The diversity of content out there needs to be recognised for its political potentials and valued accordingly, without restricting or limiting the political in advance. One of the questions raised here, however, is to which extent this form of 'radical pluralism' is tenable when taken to its extremes. Ethics and normativity inevitably resurge when confronted with anti-publics; those using their right of freedom of speech to incite hatred and acting in essence with an antagonistic agenda towards democracy and its core values.

3. Freedom of speech: an essentially contested right

It could be argued that while freedom of speech is considered one of the cornerstones of a democracy, it is at the same time also one of the most contested rights. The recent Danish cartoons controversy depicting the prophet Muhammad, deemed to be blasphemous by Sunni Muslims, is a case in point (Sturges, 2006; Post, 2007). From a liberal and rather procedural perspective on democracy, freedom of speech and the press needs to be almost absolute, preventing state interference in determining which speech is acceptable and which not (Dworkin, 1994). However, in democratic societies embedded in the social responsibility tradition, freedom of speech is more carefully weighed against other rights and protections and considered relative rather then absolute (Lichtenberg, 1990).

The US First Amendment of the Constitution epitomises the absolutist perspective. It states that *'Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press'*. Embedded in a tradition of individualism and libertarianism, and a firm belief in the need for citizens to be protected from the state, the freedom to be able to say what on wants, when and how, is sacred. However, by protecting the content of all speech in such an absolute way, *'the action that the speech performs'* (Butler, 1997: 72) is not taken into consideration. As such, fairly rigid dichotomy is being constructed between the marketplace of ideas and social action. Furthermore, the First Amendment

discourse has become truly hegemonic – a dogmatic ideology in itself, which leads Schauer (1995: 13) to argue that there is *'little free thought about free thought, little free inquiry about free inquiry and little free speech about free speech'*.

Although freedom of speech is undeniably a highly valued right of any democracy, it does not take priority over all other rights and liberties at all times, not even in the US. Anti-defamation legislation, laws against obscenity, consumer and even copyright protection illustrate this clearly. Furthermore, in the 1950s and beyond the freedom of speech for US socialists and communists was seriously curtailed (Rosenfeld, 2001: 12). Concerning the relationship between freedom of speech and hate speech the issues are, however, much more complicated. While incitement to violence is outlawed, hate speech is protected by the First Amendment doctrine. In this regard, Matsuda (1993: 31-32) points out that *'people are free to think and say what they want, even the unthinkable. They can advocate the end of democracy',* and furthermore *'expressions of the ideas of racial inferiority or racial hatred are protected'*.

The claim by Schauer that there is very little free speech about the freedom of speech and Matsuda's argument that even the end of democracy can be called for, are not entirely convincing, even within the liberal paradigm and the procedural view of democracy. Popper's 'paradox of tolerance' is a good example of this. According to Popper (1965: 265) an open and tolerant society cannot survive if tolerance is unlimited:

> *'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.'*

The harm-principle, initially introduced by Mill, himself a strong advocate of free speech and liberalism also attests to the existence of debate within the liberal free speech tradition. The harm-principle stipulates the conditions under which among others free speech could be curtailed: *'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others'*. (Mill, 1978: 9). However, given his liberal background, 'doing harm to others' has to be seen here in an individualistic sense and does not extend to collective harm. Much of hate speech would be allowed, as it is argued that it does not provoke direct harm to another individual.

Opposed to an individualised and formalised conception of democracy and free speech - detached from action and conceiving 'the commons' as a marketplace of ideas, is the notion of democracy as a process, as 'a promise … the endless process of improvement and perfectability …' (Derrida, 1997: 5). Democracy is thus not merely a method for decision-making and electing ruling elites (Schumpeter, 1973), but embedded in everyday life and practices and concerned with values such as equality, protection against the market, freedom of speech and social responsibility, leading to a social contract

between the citizen and the state (Rousseau, 1977). This more positive emancipatory perception of the state has led to a more balanced and relativistic approach to freedom of speech. As such, in many countries a collective – rather then an individualistic – harm-principle prevails over the freedom of speech principle allowing for direct (legal) intervention when it concerns racism and discrimination. In addition to this, Feinberg's (1985) offence-principle is also often invoked by advocates of limits to free speech. Even within the tradition of radical democracy where a radical pluralism of idea's and voices is deemed beneficial for democracy, a hegemony of basic democratic values is considered crucial. Echoing Popper, but clearly from another political paradigm, Mouffe (2005: 120) argues that '*[a] democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries.*'.

As a result of this and contrary to the US, many European countries as well as countries such as Canada, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand have adopted quite stringent legislation to counter hate-speech and the incitement of racial and ethnic hatred. Some countries also voted legislation outlawing holocaust denial or revisionist discourses. In Germany parties with a fascist ideology can be forbidden.

Finally, the internet plays an increasingly intricate role in current debates regarding freedom of speech. The internet exposes the differences in conceptions of freedom of speech across the world as netizens in one location can access as well as upload content in another location. It has to be stressed though that the impact of the global internet and blogs on these national or regional cultural differences regarding what constitutes freedom of speech is both problematic and empowering at the same time. The internet potentially enables dissident and radical voices and discourses to bypass state control in countries with an autoritharian model of governance, dictatorships or one-party systems such as China and Birma. The increase in internet-filtering by these regimes attests to the potency of the internet in this regard[1]. Similarly, the internet also enables anti-publics to disseminate hate-speech. The focus here is on this other – darker – side of the coin.

4. Case-study: the use of blogs and forums by the North-Belgian post-fascist movement

4.1 Brief Context

The North-Belgian post-fascist movement is characterised by a carefully constructed balance between a strong focus on law and order, a populist anti-immigrant – mainly Islamophobic – agenda and a call for the break-up of Belgium (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Its main proponent is the party Vlaams Belang, formerly known as Vlaams Blok. In 2004 Vlaams Blok revamped itself to Vlaams Belang after a conviction by the Belgian Supreme Court on the basis of racism and discrimination (Hof van Beroep, 2004).

With about 20% of the popular vote on a regional level and more then 30% in the biggest North-Belgian city Antwerp, Vlaams Belang is currently the second biggest party in the North of Belgium. The historical roots of Vlaams Belang go back to the collaboration of large parts of the Flemish nationalist movement with the German Nazi-regime during WW-II (Witte, et al, 1997). While less apparent now, this is nevertheless still relevant as this dark past and its current articulations regularly causes embarrassment to the party, which incidentally has never unequivocally broken with that dubious past and those that glorify it in the present.

Three events in 2006 are of particular interest here. In April of 2006, a local youngster was murdered in broad daylight in the hall of Brussels Central Station after he had refused to hand over his mp3-player. A month later Antwerp was left in shock after a brutal racist murder in the streets of Antwerp. A young man with an extreme right background killed a Caucasian baby and her black minder and wounded a Turkish woman. Again about a month later, a man died of a cerebral haemorrhage after a skirmish with some youngsters of Moroccan descent on a local bus in Antwerp.

12 April 2006	Murder Joe Van Holsbeek (Brussels)
12 May 2006	Murder Oulematou Niangadou and Luna Drowart (Antwerp)
24 June 2006	Death Guido Demoor (Antwerp)

These three events, while very distinct in one way, came to be seen in relation to one another, not merely because they happened in a short period of time, but also because of the public debate and outcry, as well as racist discourses they produced.

Since 1981 discrimination on the grounds of race, skin colour or national or ethnical descent is illegal in Belgium, as is the incitement of racial hatred and propagation of hate speech. In addition to this, in 1995 the Belgian Parliament outlawed holocaust denial or negationism. All this is policed by a vigilant watchdog – the Belgian Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (CGKR). In its capacity of watchdog, the CGKR also started-up a complaints website for racism on the internet called 'Cyberhate.be'. It receives on average some 30 complaints per month most of which fall into three main categories: 1) racism on discussion forums and chat sites (on sites that do not have a racist background), 2) racist websites (such as Stormfront, but also Blood & Honour for example) and 3) racist chain letters or PowerPoint presentations (Sofie D'Huster, e-mail interview, 21/05/2007). Racism on the internet is on the increase in Belgium, prompting some politicians both in the South and the North of the country to call for intervention by media organisations, the government and/or by Europe (De Standaard, 2008; Schelfhout en Van Den Driessche, 2008).

In what follows, examples of online extreme right discourses will be presented relating to the three events outlined above. These discourses were produced by individual bloggers or by contributors to an online forum of a US

organisation called Stormfront – the Dutch speaking part of this 'white nationalist community' forum is very active and militant.

4.2 Racist discourses in online public spaces

The discourses of hate relating to these three events are quite shocking. The examples below are of course self-selected and thus serve as an illustration of discursive transgressions and nothing more. The argument is easily made that these are marginalised voices and ideas that are present in each society and now find an outlet on the internet. Given the fragmentary nature of the 'World Wide' Web, you will not encounter such harsh and wounding language, unless you specifically look for it or are directed to it. Nevertheless, given the specific North-Belgian context where such ideas are at least implicitly supported and promoted by the second biggest political party, this poses a direct threat to democracy itself. As will be shown, free speech and the spirit of democracy is also being used against democracy itself and its basic values. The question thus becomes of an even more complex nature; can/should a democracy defend itself against such anti-democratic forces and discourses and if so, how, in what circumstances, to what extent?

4.2.1 Murder of Joe Van Holsbeek (12/04/2006)

Joe Van Holsbeek (17), was murdered by Polish kids in broad daylight in the hall of the very busy Brussels Central Station. He was stabbed several times after he refused to hand over his MP3-player. Witness reports, the police, as well as the mainstream media, implied that the perpetrators were youngsters of North-African descent and public opinion quickly followed suit, condemning the murder, but by extension also the large Moroccan community in Belgium. In the extreme-right forums and weblogs there was also no doubt what so ever that those responsible for the death of Joe were of North-African descent.

> *'I hope finally someone will take the problem serious, and realise that those North African thugs are not worth our care and concern.'* (BelgianWanderer, post on Stormfront, 20/04/2006[2])

> *'That the perpetrators are of (North) African descent isn't surprising, only the contrary would be.' (*Wehrwolf_VL, post on Stormfront, 17/04/2006, own translation[3])

One quite influential right-wing commentator and ideologue, Paul Belien, called upon whites to arm themselves. On a collective blog (www.brusselsjournal.com) Belien (2006 - own translation and emphasis added), an ex-journalist with strong links to Vlaams Belang, asked to *'give us weapons'*, because he claims:

> *'The predators have knives … From a very young age **they** have learned to kill warm-blooded animals during the yearly Sacrifice Feast. **We** become sick when seeing blood, but not **them**. **They** are trained, **they** are armed … The bastards who got everything in our society –*

*free education, childcare benefits, social security – are today killing **our** children for an mp3 player.'*

This posting shows how at a discursive level a clear distinction is being drawn between the identity of the self and 'the other', whereby 'we/our' is being construed as good and morally just while 'they/them' are being projected as evil, dangerous and even sub-human. The latter is illustrated by the use of predator, animals that kill and eat other animals. It concurs with the common perception that *'positive self-representation and negative other-presentation are fundamental argumentative strategies for legitimisation and persuasion by the political right'* (Charteris-Black, 2006: 566).

Figure 1: Screen-Shot of the blog 'The Brussels Journal'
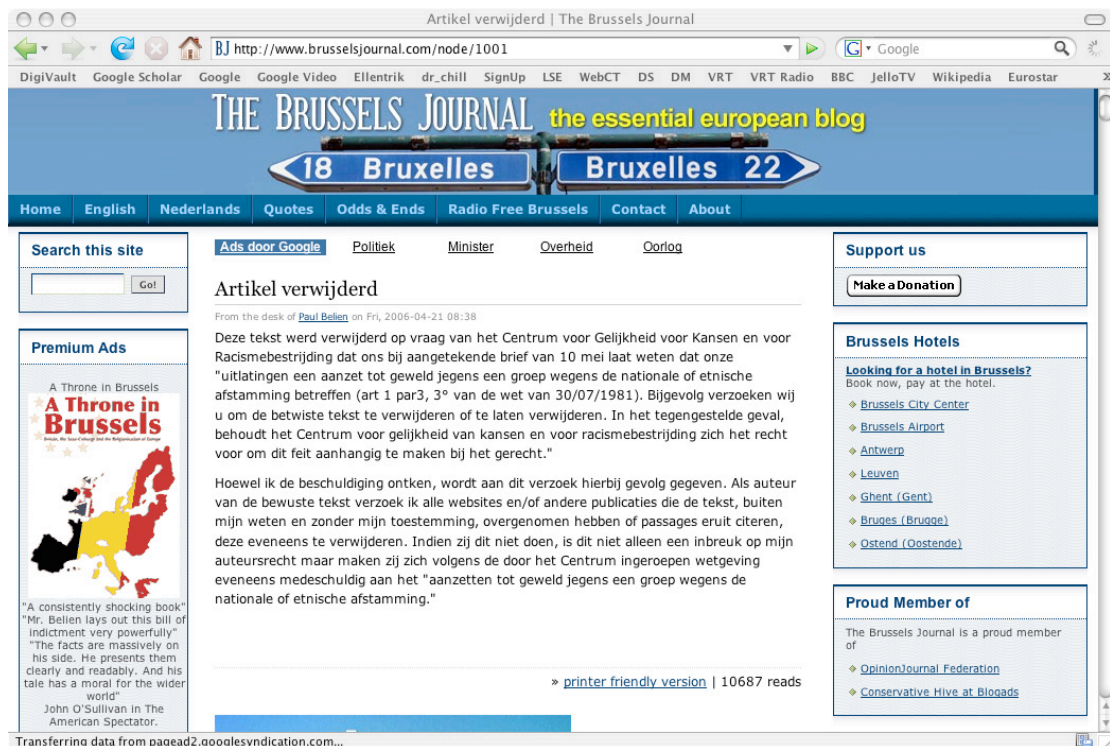
Source: http://www.brusselsjournal.com (Retrieved 10/11/2007)

After a complaint was filed against him through the CGKR for inciting racial hatred and an interview by the police, Belien removed the above quoted blog post. It now reads: *'This text was removed on demand of the CGKR … Although I deny the charges, I will comply to this request'* (Belien, 2006 - own translation)

Another concern being raised by many, including the Belgian Arch-Bishop and the prime minister was the indifference of people witnessing the murder, the fact that nobody intervened during the fight that preceded the fatal stabs and that those responsible were able to flee without anyone stopping them. On the Stormfront forum this sentiment was shared, leading to accusations of cowardice behaviour by 'the own race'.

'Besides the cowardly politicians, we should also point to all those white cowards who are present in their ten thousands in Brussels-Central station every day, of whom nobody 'saw anything' or had the guts to intervene.' (Wehrwolf_VL, post on Stormfront, 17/04/2006 – own translation[4])**.**

In the forum, vile language towards the parents of Joe, who refused to get carried away by the essentialist mood in the media or online blogs and forums, could also be observed. One poster to the Stormfront forum accused them of treason to their own race and of abusing their son's death for political ends; *'These traitors consciously offer their son to the 'multicultus''* (Duchess, post on Stormfront 22/04/2006 – own translation[5]). Under impulse of a politician of Moroccan descent and the parents of Joe a so-called white (non-political) march was held. 80.000 people took to the streets in commemoration of Joe and against violence in society (De Morgen, 2006a).

Two weeks after the murder the police revealed that the perpetrators were not North African, but rather of Polish descent. The Federal police even issued a formal apology towards the North-African community in Belgium.

We regret it that the North-African community was immediately accused shortly after the murder, certainly as it now appears that the perpetrators are not from that community. (Audenaert, 2006 – own translation)

For some days after this announcement, a discussion was waged on the Stormfront forum doubting the authenticity of these claims. When it appeared that the Polish youngsters were gypsies, the rant on the forum continued.

4.2.2 Murder of Oulematou Niangadou and Luna Drowart (12/05/2006)

One month after the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke, a 19-year old Belgian with an extreme right family background shot down three people in the streets of Antwerp. Hans Van Temsche wounded a Turkish woman and subsequently killed a woman of African descent and the white baby she was minding, after which he was shot and arrested by the police. This very act sent shock waves through the Belgian society, not used to street shootings at all.

Guy Verhofstadt, the then Prime Minister, was quick to link these murders to the extreme right ideology that drives and is being promoted by Vlaams Belang. In a press release he stated: *'These dreadful, cowardly murders are a form of extreme racism. It has to be clear for everybody now to what the extreme right leads'* (Verhofstadt quoted in De Morgen, 2006b - own translation)*.* Not unsurprisingly these murders also caused, maybe for the very first time, real panic in the extreme-right movement.

Figure 2: Screen-Shot of the online forum 'Stormfront' – Dutch version

Source: http://www.stormfront.org (Retrieved 10/11/2007)

The first postings after this event on the Stormfront forum shared this pre-occupation of being associated with these racist murders. Specifically the mainstream media was being targeted for strategically linking these cruel murders to the extreme right ideology and having a left wing bias.

> *'If this is true, it is very bad. Undoubtedly the leftish press is ready to call Vlaams Belang co-responsible because of 'stigmatisation'.* (Stoerman, Posting on Stormfront, 11/05/2006 – own translation[6])

The discourses being produced on the Stormfront forum, as in other extreme right forums, were very controversial, wounding, insulting and disturbing even. Some of the postings I am reluctant to reproduce in this article, as they are deeply hurting and offensive. However, in order to make the case of transgressing discourses, I deem it necessary to include some of them here:

> *'Pfff, it doesn't keep me from sleeping, the only thing I don't understand is why he also shot a white child.'* (Watch Out, Posting on Stormfront, 11/05/2006)

'He could have at least taken out a few Jews as well. Antwerp is full of/stinks of Jews.' (Hidrich, Posting on Stormfront, 13/05/2006)

'On moments such as these I hope that that prime minister of ours is shot by someone with an extreme right ideology.' (NSDA-Pe, Posting on Stormfront, 12/05/2006)

These discourses of hate and even of violence are not only provocative, but transgress several boundaries way beyond what is acceptable in a democracy, at least within a European and Belgian context. Because of this, some of these were reproduced in the mainstream media, both in newspapers and on TV. However, despite the public outcry this provoked, there is/was little or nothing the authorities could do about it. In the newspaper Gazet Van Antwerpen (GvA), Boonen, from Cyberhate, was quoted as saying:

'The internet reality is very complex. Stormfront is a good example of that. … that site, also the Dutch version, is fully operated from the US. Stormfront Flanders is in other words protected by the freedom of speech as described in the first amendment.' (GvA, 2006)

This exposure in the mainstream media, the subsequent public outcry and the formal complaints to Cyberhate impacted on the debate in the forum. Some became scared and sought re-assurances from others in the forum that their identity wouldn't be revealed. Others bashed the media for its left-wing bias and lack of 'objectivity'. One forum participant directly addressed the lurkers that came to visit the forum after the media reports. And finally, some also resisted and disassociated themselves from such comments.

Seeking reassurances

'Do you think [blocking Stromfront] is possible? I hope not. SF is as a second home to me. Would they arrest members of this forum?' (Farkasfarsang, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006)

Media Bashing

This despicable newspaper [GvA], publishing anything except OBJECTIVE news, has to be forbidden immediately, they publish incomplete postings and thus halve truths. The author of this piece [containing quotes from Stormfront], the leftish sewage rat, must be hung with his head in the toilet and flushed away. (14Berserkr88, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006)

Addressing Lurkers

Welcome dear occasional visitor, as you all can see the cowardly act of that one psychopath is being denounced unanimously. Sites as these have thus nothing to do with this whole affair. Of course the press would like you to believe otherwise and the left wants to exploit this event to realise their own agenda. By their bad policies and moral

decay they have created mentally deranged individuals such as this idiot. (Vlaamsche Leeuw, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006)

Resistance

'I'm sorry, but if the negative comments of some put us in a bad perspective, they are responsible for this themselves. If someone on this forum writes 'I had to admit that I slept well thinking about that dead niggerwoman and that crying Turkish woman' then he doesn't have to complain that it appears in the newspaper. How do you want us to be taken seriously if you write something like that?' (NoSugar, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006)

It is very apparent that many of the forum participants, as well as bloggers, claim it to be their given right in a democracy to say what they say. At several instances the essentialist and wounding discourses they produce are considered to be 'real' freedom of speech. This is juxtaposed to a fake semi-freedom of speech, one participant even referred to the Orwellian thought-police (thinkpol).

The fascist identity and ideology of the forum is, among others, exposed by this double standard: On the one hand freedom of speech in invoked to promote hate speech, but on the other hand those voices in the public space that disagree or counter their discourses, such as journalists in the mainstream media and politicians, need to be censored and/or eliminated.

4.2.3 Death Guido Demoor (24/06/2006)

Again a month later, an employee of the national railway company died after having aggressed a young guy of North-African descent in a local bus in Antwerp. The youngsters were noisy and arguing amongst themselves when Guido Demoor intervened, not only verbally, but also physically, grabbing one of the youngsters, upon which some in the group turned on him. Post-mortem examinations showed that Guido Demoor died of a cerebral haemorrhage induced by the skirmish. Humo, a weekly (progressive) magazine revealed, however, that Guido Demoor was an extreme right activist and that his house was decorated with Nazi paraphernalia (De Coninck, 2006). Witnesses also claimed the youngsters were provoked by Demoor's aggressive behaviour.

This incident again fired up conflictual debates regarding the multi-cultural society in North-Belgium. One blog in particular was particularly blunt in its immediate and passionate response to what had happened. Vrij van Zegel [Free of Stamp Duty] is a blog by Luc van Balberghe. He claims to provide *'a personal perspective on the news and asking questions the media don't (can't) ask anymore.'* (see: http://www.vrijvanzegel.net/), thereby positioning himself within the anti-media frame of the extreme right.

Figure 3: Screen-Shot of the blog 'Vrij Van Zegel'

Source: http://www.vrijvanzegel.net (Retrieved 10/11/2007)

When the news broke of Guido Demoor's unfortunate death, Van Balberghe posted a very emotional and long message on his blog. Below a short excerpt:

> *In Antwerp, every decent educated white person is about to burst of (for now) repressed anger. Anger, about **vermin** that thinks the city is theirs. Anger, about so much powerlessness because every well thinking human in this country has to keep shut and bow passively for the foreign **leeches***. (Van Balberghe, 2006a – own translation and emphasis added)

In the same post he also uses an allegory – equating foreigners with ants that need to be annihilated, not by using DDT (a chemical poison), but by burning them, effectively exterminating them. This disturbing reference to Nazi-Germany, as well as the words used in the quote above, again depict and essentialise a particular group in society as subhuman, legitimating its annihilation. It re-enforces the construction of a 'we' - the white population, defenseless, victimised, but righteous, civilised and of 'the other' as parasites, animals, legitimate to be eradicated. In a study of US anti-immigrant discourses, Santa Ana (1999: 192) identified 'IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS' as one of the most powerful and dominant metaphors being adopted. It is thus not uncommon to find such 'moral ordering' in racist discourses (Lakoff, 1996: 81).

A reader of the blog and prominent member of the youth section of Vlaams Belang, reacted to Van Balberghe's posting by stating: '*Marvelous these uncensored weblogs that slowly but surely destroy the authority and powerbase of the regime-press!*' (Evert Hardeman, reaction to post Van Balberghe, 2006a – own translation), re-enforcing the anti-media frame.

15

However, after newspaper articles (De Morgen, 2006c) and a complaint being filed through the CGKR[7], Van Balberghe edited his blog. He replaced the words 'vermin' and 'leeches' by 'youngsters' and removed the ants allegory all together. Some months later, he posted another contribution called 'Next year, a dictatorship?' in which he denied being a racist, attacked the government and depicted the CGKR as resembling the Gestapo.

In fact, Van Balberghe, as many others in the extreme right movement do, turns the tables on their ideological enemies by constructing them discursively as fascists, as a genuine threat to 'real' democracy, claiming their democratic right to be a racist. *'[They] are a danger for democracy, for a healthy society. They belong to a group that, in the US, would not have the freedom to curtail free speech.'* (Van Balberghe, 2006b – own translation)

This raises the question again as to what constitutes freedom of speech and how this should be balanced with other democratic rights. This is not merely an ethical discussion, but also a practical one. Where do we as a democracy draw the line between what is deemed acceptable and not, define how different rights are positioned vis-à-vis each other. And then, decide what can be done if these conventions are transgressed. Should something be done about it?

Conclusion

As has been shown by recent research into progressive movements, the internet allows dispersed activists to link-up and interact, superseding boundaries such as space and time, creating subaltern spaces of communication (della Porta and Tarrow, 2004; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Cammaerts, 2005). Likewise, for (post-)fascist, fundamentalist, and other 'repressive' movements the same applies. Radical, marginalised and atomised groups of people, often politically isolated, are able to link up through the internet in small communities of like-minded, such as could be witnessed in the Stormfront forum. Especially the comments of Farkasfarsang, calling the forum 'his second home', were pertinent in this regard.

However, in a context where a powerful extreme right actively propagates such racist ideologies, both implicitly and explicitly, this becomes another issue altogether. And it is here that the limits of a radical plurality of voices within a democracy expose themselves. It is therefore to some extent understandable that some Belgian politicians from left to right, from federalists to nationalists are calling for more pro-active government intervention regarding online hate speech, preferably at a European level of governance. Of course, given the deeply offensive and repulsive nature of many of the comments being made online and the context in which they were produced, it is difficult to remain neutral here; rational detachment is not an option. Such vitriolic discourses should make any democratic person angry, demanding that something be done about this. The question remains what that something then is. Whilst laws and regulation or even technical solutions might be able to

remove some of these discourses from the public space, therefore the ideas and ideology behind these discourses have not disappeared from the political.

It might be useful in this regard to briefly recount Butler's (1997) work on *'excitable speech'* in which she uses Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to argue that forbidding hate-speech all together through (state) censorship above all aids in proliferating these discourses further throughout society. This can also be related to what Mouffe calls the inherently conflictual nature of the political. Butler is not per se against limitations to the freedom of speech, but points to the need to be aware of the difficulties of combating hate speech through legal measures and the practical consequences of this. She refers to difficult questions such as: who defines what is hurtful, offensive, wounding or injurious speech and what is the context in which such language is being used? But whilst there might be an overall consensus that the discourses being discussed in this paper are totally unacceptable and do not belong in a democracy, not even from the perspective of a radical democracy or pluralism, the question of where and how we draw the line as a democracy between what is acceptable within a pluralist perspective and what is not? And how is this then implemented and enforced?

Internet filtering and monitoring remain technical and policy options when it comes to combating hate speech on the internet. However, active censorship in a democracy tends to backfires in several ways. In relation to this case study, it could be argued that democracy might lose out in two ways. First, anti-democratic forces are able to construct democratic parties and institutions as 'undemocratic' on a continuous basic, claiming that they suppress 'the true thoughts of the people', using in effect the formal rules of democracy to destroy democratic culture - arguing for a democratic right to be a racist. Second, how to guarantee that once a regime of content control online is in place, it will not be used to silence other voices that at some future moment in time are considered to be undesirable by a majority? And do we really want content on the internet controlled, monitored and filtered on a permanent basis?

This is, however, by no means a plea for complacency and/or ignorance, but to carefully think through the implications of intervention to exclude voices from public spaces of communication and interaction all together. Efforts to combat the incitement of hatred through democratic and legal ways should be encouraged, *'in order to to secure a minimum of civility'* (Rosenfeld, 2001: 63). Exposure in the mainstream media of those that produce such discourses and formal legal complaints by racism watchdogs are important and fairly effective tools for achieving that (except when anonymity is invoked). The embracement of censorship of online content by democratic societies in addition to this, would not only represent crossing the rubicon, but also focuses merely on removing some of the symptoms of racism, not the root causes of it.

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Notes:

[1] See OpenNet Initiative - URL: http://opennet.net/

[2] See URL: http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php/joe-van-holsbeeck-287572.html

[3] See URL: http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php/belgische-tiener-vermoord-om-mp3-285800p3.html

[4] See URL: http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php/belgische-tiener-vermoord-om-mp3-285800p3.html

[5] See URL: http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php/belgische-tiener-vermoord-om-mp3-285800p4.html

[6] This as well as other quotes in this part can be found on: http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=293314

[7] Sofie D'Huster (e-mail interview, 21/05/2007) states that a formal complaint has been transferred to the Federal Police on the basis of the Belgian anti-racism legistation (1981) for incitement to racism. The case is still pending.