Broadcast Ourselves: the politics, channels, genres and brands of Finnish anti-immigration movements on YouTube

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Introduction

This paper examines how the video-sharing platform Youtube was utilised by emergent networks of anti-immigration activists in Finland during the so-called 'refugee crisis' from the summer of 2015. Across Europe, the growing numbers of refugees resulted in the proliferation of anti-immigration and 'anti-Islam' networks, fronts and street movements across Europe. The formation and mobilization of these 'non-traditional' issue-based and memetic far-right movements (cf. Castelli Gattinara, 2018) cannot be understood without accounting for the generativity of connective media networks and dynamics (cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Kavada, 2015). While communicative action is not the sole or even main factor in movement development, the existing studies emphasize the functionalist utility of the Internet in information dissemination, presencing, and recruitment (Hale, 2012; Juris, 2012), and in the development of 'like-minded' communities and geographically dispersed ideological formations (Back, 2000). The digital media ecosystem of interconnected participative platforms amplifies and extends these possibilities, as it allows nascent movements to suggest a scale of activity and public presence beyond their material resources or active memberships (Titley, 2018); to 'launder' informational sources and artefacts through the search architecture and informational dynamics of the internet (Klein, 2013).

YouTube, the world's largest online video platform, started in 2005, is now the second most popular site in the world. The platform has advertised itself as the space for grassroot creativity and amateur content and has mostly been theorized through this lens (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Burgess & Green, 2009). However, it has slowly grown to encompass more commercial, professionalized content as well and showcased the professionalization of the individual content producers. While recent research has begun to chart the networking and communicative value of Twitter and Facebook to the 'far-right' (Conway, 2016), the

importance of YouTube as a space of integration between movement media, cross-platform media ventures and political entrepreneurs has only recently begun to receive sustained attention (e.g., Ekman, 2014). YouTube provides a platform that can be integrated into, and increasingly shapes, forms of 'semi-permanent' media initiatives that potentially thrive both within self-confirming right-oriented networks, and through wider circulation in media culture. We argue, that in the framework of a 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013), YouTube as a space of platform, media, generic and political hybridity demands more attention. As Zeynep Tufekci (2018) puts it, "It seems as if you are never 'hard core' enough for YouTube's recommendation algorithm. It promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes. Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century."

This study focuses on the YouTube channels established by two most active Finnish anti-immigration movements, here acronymized as M1 and M2, and key figures within them. By combining network analysis with a qualitative analysis of video material, we examine how YouTube was utilised by these emergent movements to address and potentially mobilise publics while seeking to insert themselves into the news cycle built up around the 'refugee question'. We analyse the media genres, modes of address and forms of media production featured in the videos. We complement this with an analysis of channel identities and brands in order to evaluate the ways in which YouTube provides a networked communication environment encompassing the established far-right, nascent movements, and individual political entrepreneurs.

Data and Method

The data was extracted from the YouTube API using the YTDT toolset (Rieder, 2017), which allows for querying the YouTube database for videos matching a certain keyword as well as information and metadata related to those videos. For this study, we queried two lists of first 100 videos using movement names as search terms, and a networks for related videos for these seed videos as suggested by the YouTube algorithm. This generated a dataset of 4530 videos in total. These networks were combined using the video ID's to draw a network of the Finnish anti-immigration movements on YouTube; if a video is shown in the related videos list for a given video seed, a connection is formed between the two videos. The network analysis software Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) was used to visualize the video

networks and a modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) was run to detect subcommunities.

Qualitative analysis proceeded in two phases. First, we selected seven major network communities (those that cover at least 5% of the network nodes) for qualitative analysis. From each subcommunity the top 15 videos with the highest degree value were selected for qualitative analysis. Next, all three authors watched a separate set of the videos, each focusing on selected subcommunites. While watching the videos, we wrote down our observations in four different dimensions: branding practices, production values, intertextuality and genres. The aim was not to go generate a classification of the data nor to chart out the frequency of each genre, but rather to investigate the broadcasting practices with an interpretative approach.

Preliminary findings

The 4530 videos were produced by 1527 separate channels. However, the video distribution by channel is highly concentrated and resembles a power law: the three most active channels of the network produce 15,5% of the videos in the network. The largest community (13) is formed around live-broadcasted videos from various anti-immigration movements. Second largest community (2) also consists of demonstration coverage, various videos showing the activities from a four-month demonstration that took place at the Helsinki Railway Square, and re-framed news content. Cluster 7 contains fan coverage of Finnish far-right politicians on TV, and cluster 8 is formed around videos criticising the anti-immigration actors. The YouTube recommendation algorithm connects the critical videos in our crawl since they repeatedly use the names of the movements in the video titles. Three smallest ones (3, 0, 10) are formed around particular active channels, all of them among the top five most active channels in the dataset.
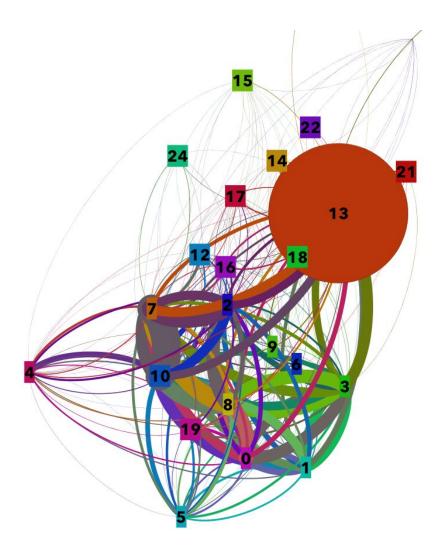
Figure 1. Clustered betwork of 4530 videos queried with the search terms from first 100 seeds each.

We used network analysis and clustering to identify central video communities in the network, and then engaged with a qualitative analysis of the most central videos within those communities. From this subset of videos we identified four main types of broadcasting modes: vlogging, live streaming, documentary, and re-publishing, and four main communication strategies: witnessing, re-framing, generating controversy, and branding. What corresponds to Mattias Ekman's (2014) findings, it seems clear that anti-immigration politics are adapted to specific characteristics and affordances of online video activism. However, it is evident that this is a form of activism that lives in parallel with traditional media in several ways: by adapting its formats, but also by circulating and repurposing its content. In the video activism production values are quite simple and technical level rather low, but communication strategies can be quite powerful.

Further, through our analysis of the broadcasting strategies we also noted an emerging strategy of branding celebrities among the anti-immigration actors. There are a handful of channels that are strongly constituted as branded broadcasting channels around active micro-celebrity figures. These include small-scale practices such as regularly posting witnessing content with the real name of the poster identified or vloggers, who publish their own political views on a regular intervals. Two central activists have taken the branding practice even further; they publish weekly live-streamed talk-shows with a fixed timing, branded series names, live-visitors and recurring themes.

The practices utilized by these actors are in line with previous literature discussing celebrities and micro-celebrities on YouTube (e.g., Tufecki, 2018; Abidin, 2015; Raun, 2018). Micro-celebrity refers not only to the state of being famous to a minor audience, but also to the behaviour of presenting oneself as a celebrity (Marwick, 2013). Most of the studies on online celebrities, however, work in the topical areas of fashion and lifestyle (cf. Hou, 2018; Berryman & Kavka, 2018) or sexuality (Raun, 2018), while our case is situated in the political realm. In this vein, Zeynep Tufekci (2018) coins the term networked microcelebrity activism to describe the ways in which individual actors within social movement begin to dominate the public attention and media appearances of that particular movement: "a networked microcelebrity activist is a politically motivated actor who successfully uses affordances of social media to engage in a presentation of his or her political and personal self to garner attention to a cause." (Tufekci, 2018, p. 857). This is precisely what takes place among the Finnish anti-immigration movement on YouTube; the mixing of political commentary with personal disclosure. This is a practice to which YouTube lends itself particularly well.

Our analysis suggests that while these movements are faltering both in terms of street mobilisation and media productivity, the 'brand channels' and figures that have emerged from them are of potential significance. It suggests that these actors are aware of how YouTube has come to constitute a transnationally generative space for the far-right//anti-immigration movement, and one in which the consolidation of media brands and personalities has become politically productive and financially rewarding. We argue that there is a need to integrate an 'internet celebrity' perspective (Abidin, 2018; Raun, 2018) to the study of mediated movements in order to understand the hybrid media-political forms emerging at the intersection of expansive repertoires and formations of right-wing protest, and the specific affordances of YouTube.

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