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The Sources and Topics of Radical Right Media and the Rise of Hyperpartisan News

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Should We Stop Worrying and Learn to Love "Fake News"?

In the aftermath of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, a variety of actors started drawing attention to the role of "fake news" and "disinformation" in election campaigns. During a conference of European fact-checkers in October 2018, top EU officials claimed that "Europe is under attack" and that the Brexit Referendum result was the product of "fake news" (Funke & Mantzarlis, 2018). The *European Action Plan against Disinformation*, published in December 2018, comes as a response to such concerns and aims to protect EU's "democratic systems and public debates" (European Commission, 2018).

Yet, in-depth media studies have increasingly shown that the fears that Western citizens have been exposed to foreign disinformation, while enclosed within their own echo-chambers without a chance for encountering alternative views, have been exaggerated (Jamieson, Hall & Cappella, 2008). First, it has turned out that false news websites both in the EU and in the U.S. have much smaller reach and levels of engagement than established news media (Fletcher et al., 2018; Nyhan, 2019). Second, there is still no evidence that "fake news" have changed voting patterns (Nyhan, 2019). Finally, recent research has countered "the myth of partisan self-exposure" and the persistence of "echo chamber" effects, by showing first, that individuals interested in politics tend to avoid echo chambers (Dubois & Blank, 2018) and second, that mainstream political news sites comprise ideologically diverse audiences and share audiences with nearly all smaller, ideologically extreme outlets (Nelson & Webster, 2017).

While fake news and disinformation campaigns do exist and influence public debate, the excessive focus on such phenomena, especially when attributed exclusively to malicious foreign agents, has prevented many analysts from identifying domestic political developments instrumental for the result of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump (for a detailed political science analysis of the causes of the Brexit vote, see for example, Clarke et al., 2017). The current report claims that we should stop worrying mainly about fake news and disinformation and focus on the deeper and more complex problem of the rise of the radical right as part of an organized (and to a non-negligible extent) endogenous political movement.

"Fake News" and "Disinformation" – A Case of Conceptual Overstretching?

It has been recently noted that fake news should be treated as a "two-dimensional phenomenon": on the one hand, "the *fake news genre* (i.e. the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation)", and on the other hand, "the *fake news label* (i.e. the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media)" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

But even if we focus on the fake news *genre* only, there is no consensus among social scientists and media scholars on what it comprises and refers to exactly. Four main categories of usage have been outlined on the basis of levels of facticity and the author's immediate intention to deceive: "native advertising and propaganda", "manipulation, fabrication", "news satire", and "news parody" (see Fig. 1; Tandoc Jr, Wei Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Level of Facticity	Author's immediate intention to deceive	
	High	**Low**
High	Native advertising Propaganda	News satire
Low	Manipulation Fabrication	News Parody

Fig. 1: Categories of use of the term "fake news". Adapted from Tandoc Jr, Wei Lim and Ling 2018, p. 148.

To complicate things further, a content analysis of stories from 50 news sites in the U.S. that have been labelled "fake news" revealed that rather than being a genre of their own, fake news stories (i.e. the category from the table that comprises manipulation and fabrication) rarely consist of complete fabrications but rather combine "elements of traditional news with features that are exogenous to normative professional journalism: misinformation, sensationalism, clickbait, and bias" (Mourão & Robertson, 2019, p. 1). Rather than complete manipulation or fabrication, most fake news are rather an example of "genre blending" (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). The question then remains why the authors insist on keeping the term "fake news" at all to describe what is, in fact, most often hyperpartisan content.

The current project claims that we need to keep the concepts "fake news" and "disinformation" narrow to describe cases of "false information". The cases of political propaganda that remain, however, are too interesting to be left unexamined. But they should be explored precisely and explicitly as cases of political propaganda and hyperpartisan content. We should describe hyperpartisan content with the term "hyperpartisan news", not "fake news". The underlying belief is that we deal with a political problem above all, and not so much with a technical problem of accuracy.

Radical right media such as the German *Epoch Times* or the Italian *Il Primato Nazionale* that have so far been blacklisted by fact checkers and mainstream journalists as "unserious" (Medium.com, 2015), "so-so" or "false" news producers (Locker, 2017), "pseudo-journalism/politics" (BUTAC, 2014), should be acknowledged for what they are, namely radical right media that form part of a larger radical right movement (Simpson & Druxes, 2015). The main problem with such media is not accuracy but their extreme bias (Entman, 2007).

To demonstrate this, I set up to prove that radical right media are both predominantly accurate and extremely biased when it comes to their selection of topics. Thus, the two main exploratory research questions of my project are:

1) *Do radical right media point to sources? What are the sources of radical right media?*
2) *What are the topics covered by radical right media?*

Methodology

I analysed websites from three European countries in Central, Southern and Western Europe (Germany, Italy and the UK) in order to have a cross-national perspective and explore online media from different media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). I chose the media on the basis of lists of fake news websites produced by fact-checkers in each of these countries. After identifying popular media from the lists (based on their Alexa ranking), I used the Alexa "audience overlap tool" to find sites that share a similar audience. I identified the following media to collect data from: the transnationally oriented *Voice of Europe*, the German *Epoch Times*, *Journalistenwatch*, *Politically Incorrect News*, the Italian *Il Primato Nazionale*, *Secolo d'Italia* and *VoxNews.info*, and the British *Westmonster*, *Order-Order* and *PoliticalUK*. I extended the list with a tenth website – *Politicalite* in the UK, as it appeared often among the sources of *Voice of Europe*.

At the next step, I scraped the title pages of these websites in the course of seven days – from the 3rd until the 9th of December, 2018 – and exported the data in Excel (I did three pilot scrapings of some of these media in July, August and October and pilot preliminary analyses in order to test the methodology). Then, I performed manual quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the data for three days of this period: the 3rd, 5th and 8th of December (Monday, Wednesday and Saturday). In the two cases, where the tool had not scraped data for one of the three days due to technical reasons, I analysed data from a subsequent day.

I constructed random samples including 30% of the titles for the three days and analysed the resulting articles. I read each article and noted down the sources quoted in the article if it reported on content that can be factually checked (for example, crime, statistics, statements by politicians). I coded "no source" wherever there was no source for statements that can be factually checked. Where the article was an opinion piece or an editorial, I wrote down the name of the media itself as the source.

When it comes to the topics, I did not predetermine particular topics but allowed the topics to emerge from the data in order to capture as much variety and nuance as possible. I compared the frequency of topics and sources for each media and visualized my findings in graphs.

Empirical Findings

When it comes to topics, there is a common trend in all media explored to focus on some of the core issues of the radical right party family (Mudde, 2007), namely immigration and crime. In my final summaries of data, I have categorized as "crime" news about crimes of both native citizens and immigrants. And I have categorized as "immigration" news about numbers of migrants and opposition to migration in general or the UN Migration Compact in particular.

To begin with, there are important differences between media even in the same country. Within Germany, the *Epoch Times* is the media covering the greatest variety of topics (possibly due to its access to materials of the German Press Agency). The fact that the media is owned by the Falun Gong Movement, outlawed in China, is reflected in the frequent appearance of news critical of the Chinese government.

On the other hand, *PI-News* and *Journalistenwatch* focus on a much narrower set of topics, dominated by immigration, crime, and critique of the left. The "event" category in *Journalistenwatch's* publications refers to publications that explicitly encourage readers to go to events such as protests or charity evenings. This is an important category as it clearly points to the political mobilization work done by some of these media. For an overview about the topics see Fig. 2, 3 and 4.
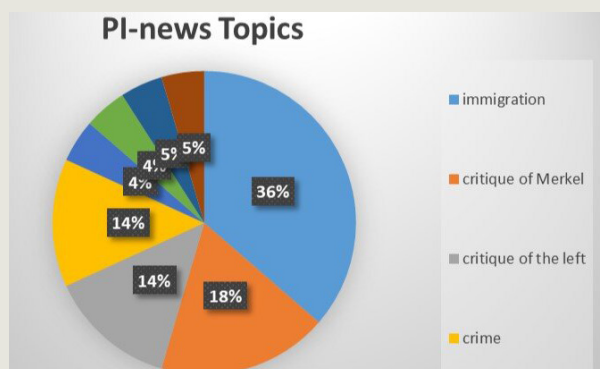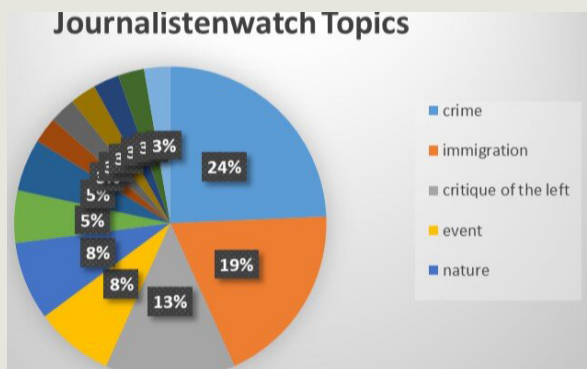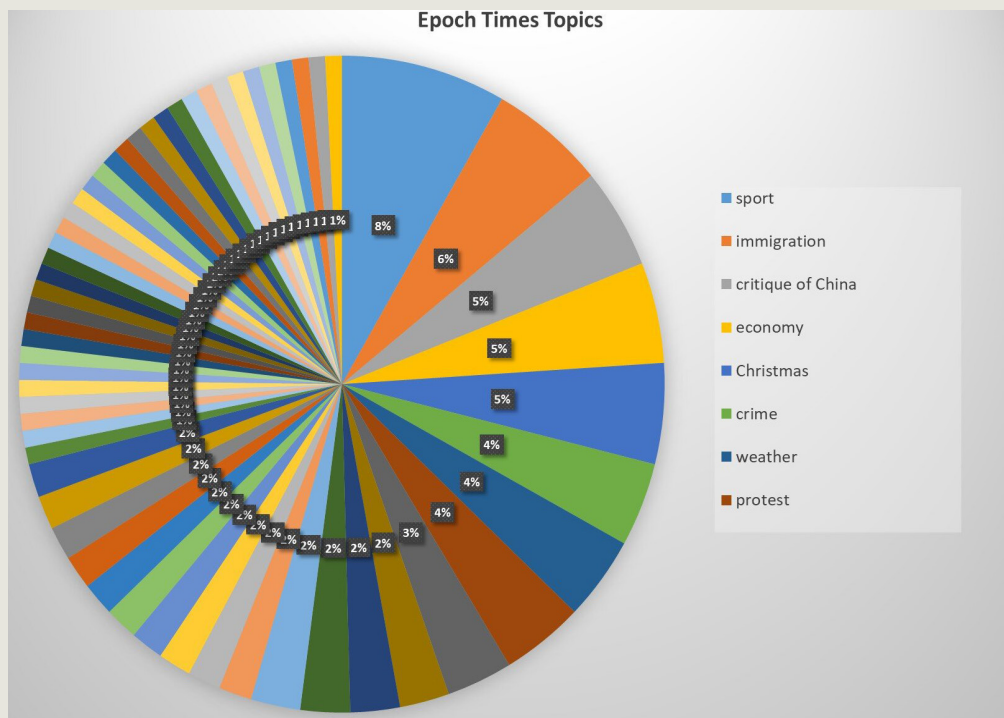
Fig. 2, 3, 4: Topics of *Epoch Times*, *Journalistenwatch* and *PI-news*. On each graph, the first four most frequent topics are presented. When several topics appear with the same frequency, they are all included. Topics that appear only once have not been included.

In Italy, radical right media also focus mainly on immigration, crime, and critique of the left, but also on the economy, and, in particular, the state of public finances (see Fig. 5, 6, 7). In addition, *Il Primato Nazionale* focuses on historical figures of the far right, a historical focus that is special for Italy.
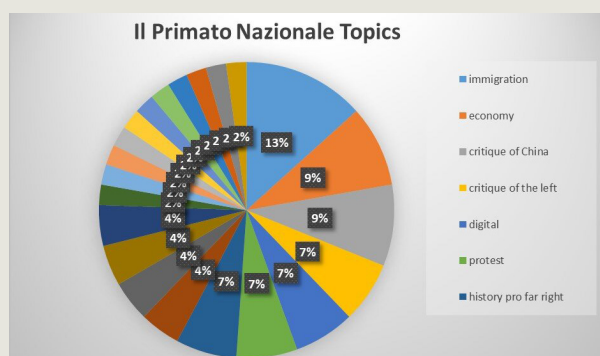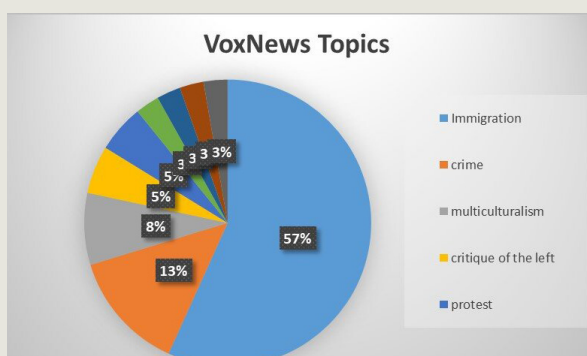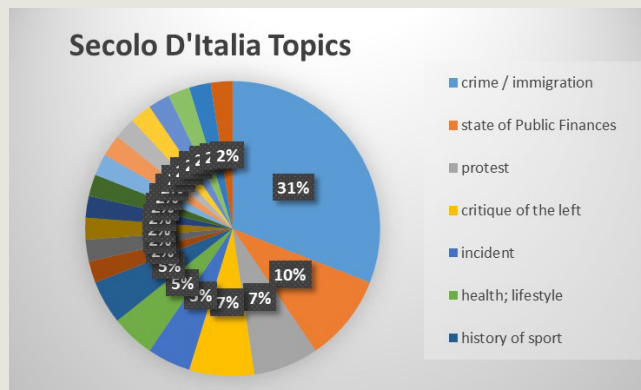
Fig. 5, 6, 7: Topics of *Vox News*, *Il Primato Nazionale* and *Secolo d'Italia*.

In comparison to mainstream media, the topics selected and covered by radical right media are few with crime and immigration being particularly prevalent. These are topics that concern significant parts of the European citizenry and provoke strong emotional responses, especially when framed in a scandalizing and partial way.

At the same time, the comparative analysis has allowed us to reveal important differences also among different national contexts. British radical right media (*Westmonster*, *Politicalite*, *Order-order*), for example, stand out as almost exclusively focused on Brexit – a topic that rarely appears in the continental radical right media (see Fig. 8, 9, 10).

The analysis of media, many of which have been classified as "fake news" or "unserious" or "pseudo-journalism", has revealed much less evidence of false information than could be expected. The transnationally oriented *Voice of Europe* and all German websites analysed are careful about pointing their sources in articles that could be factually checked (see Fig. 11). Interestingly, the main news sources of *Epoch Times* are the *German Press Association* and *Agence France Press*.
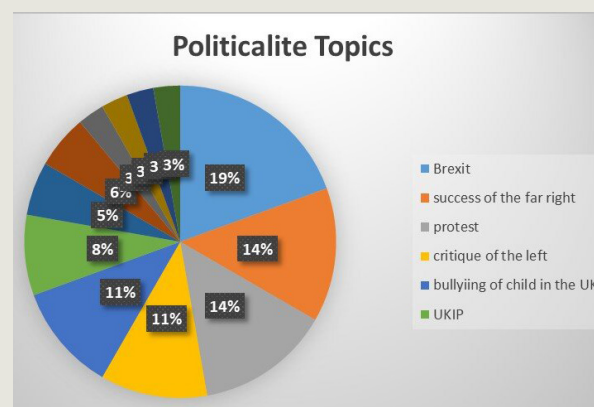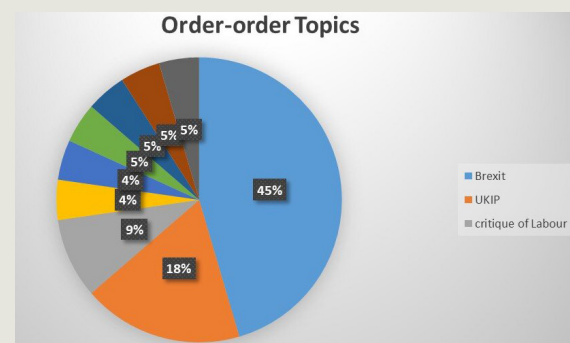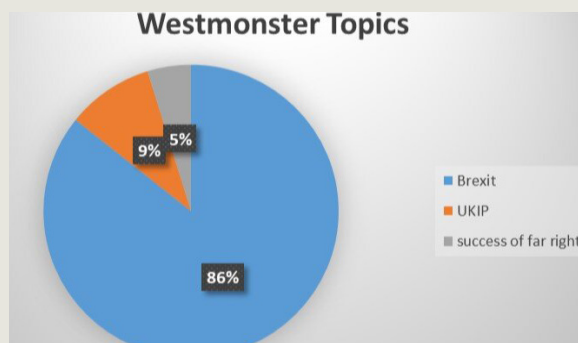

Fig. 8, 9, 10: Topics of *Westmonster, Order-order, Politicalite*.

When it comes to news on crime and immigration that are particularly prominent in my sample, *Voice of Europe* and the German websites tend to pick up crime stories from local media and amplify them. For example, the *Journalistenwatch* section "Angelas Tagebuch" (Angela's Diary) collects the crimes of the day in an "alternative press review" and draws heavily on press releases of the German police from Presseportal.de, a daughter site of the *German Press Agency*, or local newspapers as sources.

Radical right media tend to find in the local press crime stories that usually do not make it into the mainstream national media. The stories, especially when they are about crimes perpetrated by migrants, clearly serve the political agenda of radical right media and, consequently, receive disproportionately high coverage on their webpages. What is more, they are often presented in an emotionally-charged, scandalous click-bite language, different from the one found in the original source.

When it comes to sources, British "alternative" media of the radical right tend to use tweets of political figures as sources much more often than their continental media counterparts. This trend is especially pronounced in *Westmonster* and *Politicalite* publications.

In the Italian context, *Vox News.info* has created a fact-checking tool of its own that allows readers to trace the source of information in articles. *Il Primato Nazionale* (a publication of the neo-fascist organization Casa Pound) rarely points to sources. The edition counts on in-house journalists who publish both opinion pieces and more factual reports signed with their own names.

Finally, radical right media occasionally share each other's news across national borders to produce a greater output of content despite budget constraints. Thus, the transnationally oriented *Voice of Europe* and the UK *Politicalite* often republish each other's stories.

To sum up, the radical right media I analysed, in most cases, point to trustworthy sources, especially when it comes to information that can be factually checked. What defines these media is not so much the sharing of fake (false) news, but rather the fact that with few exceptions, they select and focus on a very narrow set of topics, with a clear bias visible in the topic selection. Thus, they should rather be described as hyperpartisan media, producing hyperpartisan news.
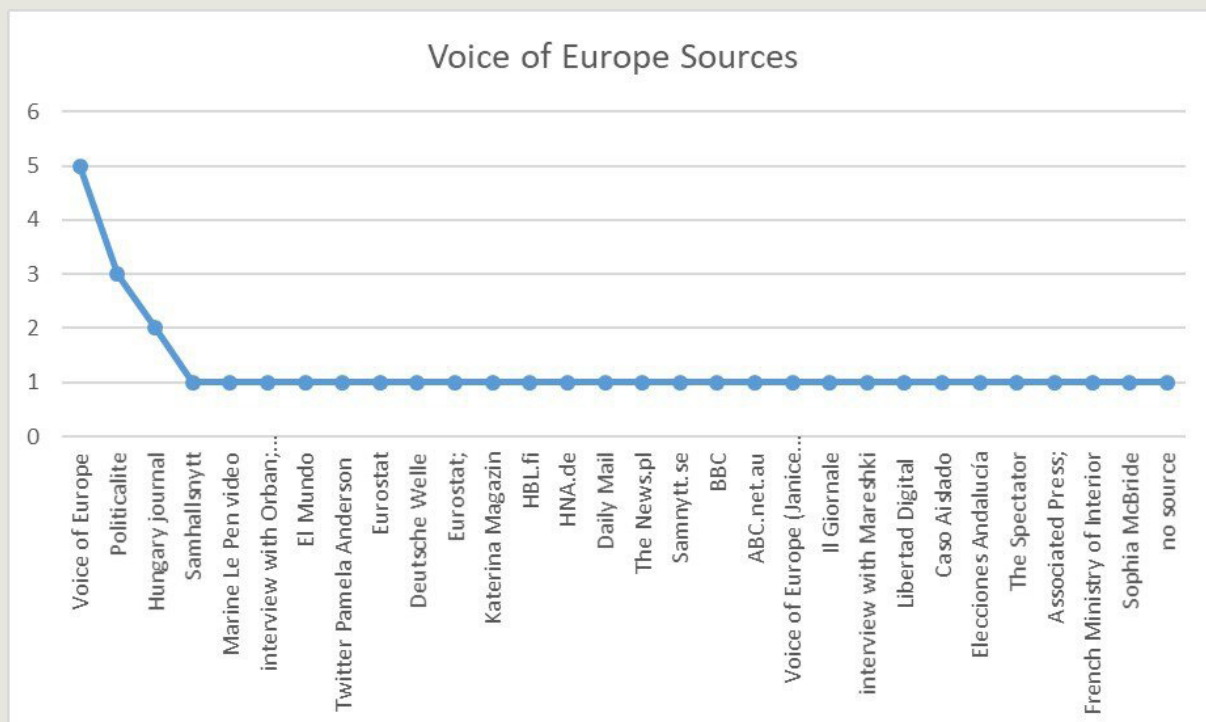

Fig. 11.: Sources of *Voice of Europe*.

Finally, many of these radical right media have co-opted traditional civil society practices and support petitions (most recently, against the Global Compact for Migration), organize crowdfunding and promote protest events. In short, these media serve as organization and mobilization channels of the radical right.

Conclusions and Results

The current report has argued that the excessive focus on fake news and disinformation might impede researchers from analysing the most crucial recent development on the European political scene – the rise of the radical right as an organized political movement (Mudde, 2007) and the role of radical right media for propaganda, mobilization and organization. The report shows that many of the most popular "fake news" sites are better described as "hyperpartisan" sites that point to trustworthy sources but are extremely biased: Especially when it comes to news selection, they focus on a small number of topics, dominated by immigration, crime and critique of the left.

In terms of tangible results of my research so far, I have published a blog post at the *LSE Media Policy Project Blog* on how algorithms to tackle fake news have affected independent media producers (Rone, 2018). I have also published a second analysis at the *LSE Media Policy Project Blog*, presenting the content of the current report.

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Table of Figures

Foto Titlepage: CAIS, Matthias Begenat
Figures 1-11: Excel-Screenshots by Julia Rone

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