Uncivility, racism, and populism

Discourses and interactive practices in anti- & post-democratic communication

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Introduction

This Special Issue of *Nordicom Review* discusses interactive practices of articulating and communicating uncivility in the context of recent wider anti- and post-democratic change. We consider that change as a cross-national phenomenon that has been taking place in the Nordic countries, Europe, and indeed elsewhere since the late 1990s and early 2000s, and one that has significantly accelerated with the global rise of the "anxious politics" (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015) of right-wing populism and the far-right (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2019) in recent decades. While our collection joins an ongoing and growing body of research on both un- and incivility – which we describe and to some extent disentangle conceptually in detail below – it carries a few pronounced aims which characterise its contribution to the wider research on mediated and political communication in the context of a crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of nativism and far-right populism.

First, *the current collection of articles explores in-depth and makes explicit the inherent connection between uncivility, racism, and populism*. As we show in a number of contributions, these three phenomena draw a significant level of legitimacy from one another despite being somewhat different in nature. While uncivility remains an increasingly prevalent form of articulation in public discourse and communication and in the wider political action, racism – standing here as a synonym of wider politics of exclusion – remains one of the key ideologies brought to the mainstream on the back of such uncivil, exclusionary discourse and practice. Indeed, both uncivility and racism have been very significantly enabled and reinstated in the public mindset due to the recently prevalent populist-political thinking and actions which yield fertile ground for their articulation and acceptance – and their long-term *normalisation* – in the wider society. We hence recognise that uncivility and racism could – and have – become commonplace only in the wider context of the recently omnipresent anti- and

Krzyżanowski, M., Ekman, M., Nilsson, P.-E., Gardell, M., & Christensen, C. (2021). Introduction: Uncivility, racism, and populism: Discourses and interactive practices in anti- & post-democratic communication. *Nordicom Review*, *42*(S1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0003

post-democratic actions more widely defined as populism – albeit not without an obviously inflationary understanding of the term (see Moffitt, 2020; Revelli, 2019) – along with its wider calls for exclusionary nationalism and other aspects of (right-wing) nativism as the central ideological tenets. Therefore, we contend that the articulations of uncivility, racism, and (more widely) populism draw on a very similar set of strategies and genres. These, to be sure, are not treated here solely as specific formats of political action or ideological positioning but also, or perhaps predominantly, as discursive strategies and actions relying on similar trajectories of mediated and political communication in their calls for exclusively formed visions of society and community (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009).

Secondly, *our Special Issue aims to explicitly show that although the connection between uncivility, racism, and populism has often been seen as confined to the radical strands of the public sphere and political spectrum, it now stretches across a much wider continuum that includes areas traditionally viewed as mainstream*. We explicate how the uncivility, racism, and populism connection operates within radical spaces and genres – especially those deployed by radical groups for whom exclusionary ideologies are central (see below); but, by the same token, we also highlight how the ongoing normalisation of the politics of exclusion enables uncivil, racist, and populist discourse to be recontextualised into – as well as anchored within – the mediated and political spaces of the mainstream that at least nominally were once viewed as largely civil in nature. As we show, in those nominally civil spaces of mediation and political action, we now frequently deal with so-called "borderline discourse" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017). The latter, while remaining seemingly civil in nature (via, e.g., rational argumentation, various forms of democratic legitimation, etc.) effectively puts forward the profoundly anti-democratic views and ideologies which, inter alia, solidify calls for discrimination and exclusion as the apparently "new" visions of politics and society. This process is, to be sure, hugely propelled by social and digital media which, though often used in combination with their traditional counterparts, may create interstitial spaces of mediation and re-mediation of racism (Titley, 2014).

Thirdly, *our Special Issue has a significant comparative value inasmuch as it juxtaposes cases and analyses from the Nordic countries with those from other parts of Europe or even from the supranational level of EU politics*. Through such comparisons, we want to agree with studies which show that various Nordic countries have often wrongly been perceived as exceptional or as less mired by right-wing exclusionary and discriminatory ideologies in the public domain (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). Accordingly, we show how, where, and to what extent both the radically nested and mainstream-located connections between uncivility, racism, and populism exist in the Nordic countries, while also pointing to how the tendencies therein differ or remain similar to those observed in contexts elsewhere in Europe. But we also show that in the Nordic contexts – indeed, just like elsewhere – those are not only specific contexts or spaces that dictate the presence of the in-depth connection between uncivility, racism, and populism. On the contrary, we elaborate that the said linkage becomes dependent on specific, discursive "affordances" related to specific, stigmatised themes and "moral panics" (Cohen, 1972; Krzyżanowski, 2018b, 2020b) – such as, for example, immigration – which traditionally become defaults to be used as reasons for expressions of uncivility, racism, and populism.

Heeding the above aims, this Special Issue explores uncivility as a continuum of evolving communicative practices which extend across the entire political spectrum. We do not treat uncivility as a strictly pre-defined mode of social and political behaviour specific to certain groups (e.g., extremists) or as located strictly at the specific poles of the sociopolitical and ideological spectrum. We also see the exploration of phenomena related to articulation and communication of uncivility as the crucial factor in understanding the current upsurge and trajectories of racism and right-wing populism in the Nordic Countries and wider Europe – all covered by our contributions – but also no different to further contexts such as the US, Latin America, and Australasia (Moffitt, 2016; Mondon, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). We particularly target the ongoing radicalisation of extreme and non-extreme modes of political action (e.g., via growing number of radical groups), but we also, as indicated above, explore the normalisation of the politics of exclusion in and by the political mainstream along with its endorsement of nationalism, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, or Euroscepticism. We view the above processes as interconnected through various interactions and communicative practices within and beyond the on- and offline public spheres as well as in the traditional political realm and organisations satellite to politics.

Contributions to this Special Issue address a variety of interactive and communicative practices of in- and uncivility. The collection comprises articles dealing with the analysis of uncivility in online/social media, traditional media, and other genres and channels of political communication – across both mainstream and non-mainstream, or alternative, spaces of articulation, mediation, and communication. The contributions draw on interdisciplinary approaches to concepts and models related to uncivility (including, e.g., civility & incivility, civic norms, normativity, politics & morality, racism & exclusion, and populism) against the background of systematic and empirical, nationally specific, and comparative examples of analysing uncivility in specific mediated and wider communicative practices.

From uncivility to racism and (right-wing) populism

Scholarly reflection on the notions of civility – and, per se, also un- and incivility – are not new, and many of the vital sociological classics have long been exploring the theoretical and conceptual, but also empirical, disparity existing between the two notions and the various trajectories of civil and uncivil political formation, organisation, and behaviour (see especially Elias, 1994; Shils, 1991, 1997). Particularly such notorious developments of the twentieth century as the rise of fascism and Nazism but also later, inter alia, McCarthyism in the US (Warner, 1966) – along with many other tragic occurrences across the globe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – have all caused renewed scholarly interest in the civility–uncivility conundrum. The key question raised in this context was probably that about the apparently recurrent slide from civil ideas to uncivil politics which appeared in various contexts and at different moments of history (Finchelstein, 2017). The additional issue here has also been how and why – despite the widely praised pronouncement of adherence to liberal and civil values in modern societies – such slides were recurrently afforded by the "normalising transgression" (Kallis, 2020) enacted around different ideological projects by various social and political actors.

There are two tendencies – probably best defined as a broader and a narrower one – which appeared to be recurrent in the ways that civility and uncivility have been conceptualised and approached. The first broader conception, in most cases used earlier, has (at least originally) perceived wider politics and any form of political action – and their communication – as necessarily founded on ideas and virtues of civility. The second narrower, and somewhat later, conception perceives just one strand or area of public discourse as civil (and its counterpart as, necessarily, uncivil). In other words, according to Harcourt (2012: 349):

> [In the first case,] civility meant the internal ordering of a *polis*, and in that sense, civility itself was just as "civil" as politics. [...] In its more common usage today, *civility* qualifies politics. It is a *kind* of politics, a *type* of political discourse that does not harm, injure, or offend fellow citizens [emphasis original].

While the two tendencies of looking at civility – and, per se, also uncivility – have often been combined, significantly different trajectories of their exploration have become evident in recent years giving rise to, respectively, a US-American tradition of research on *in*civility, on the one hand, and more Europe-based research on *un*civility, on the other.

The first trend emerged in the US-based and predominantly US-oriented research in the 1990s and 2000s, mainly as a way of describing the then apparently new traits of political behaviour characterised, as many authors argued, by the ongoing decline of political correctness (Wilson, 1995) and the growing opposition, polarisation, and adversariness in public debates (Mason, 2018). These, it was often claimed, resulted in the advent of more general adversarial political and social attitudes and forms of behaviour which eventually started to have growing impact on voting preferences (Brooks & Geer, 2007). But, most importantly, they resulted in a more long-term political-cultural change wherein disagreements – often seen as inherent to the political process – came to be gradually replaced with the open "politics and communication of conflict" (Sydnor, 2019) that progressively made incivility or negativity into major traits of political and public discourse. Interestingly, scholars such as Soroka (2014) have shown in this context that incivility tends to be path-dependent in nature and that it often – indeed recurrently – comes into being in discourses on very specific political or economic issues.

However, a bulk of research on incivility initially still tended to assess it in a rather strictly normative manner, that is, as a set of violated norms seen vis-à-vis their "positive" counterpart of civility (Mutz, 2015). Hence, scholars mainly looked at why and how civility's key features – including "arguing, listening and the respect for the deliberative process" (Herbst, 2010: 13) – have come to be increasingly neglected, and why violating rather than obeying them started to bring more attention and often guaranteed political success. In this vein, many scholars also explored what exactly makes incivility a distinctive, new feature of public and political discourse – with some analyses arguing for the growth of impoliteness as the key indicator of uncivil behaviour (Theocharis et al., 2016) and others defining incivility from the point of view of its calls for various types of exclusion and intolerance (Rossini, 2019, 2020).

Some scholars – such as, very notably, Masullo Chen (2017) – pointed to the fact that such narrower conceptualising of (in)civility may be insufficient, and instead, a much more pronounced micro–macro take (see above) would be necessary to understand how narrower dynamics are related to wider factors underlying the growth of incivility in

contemporary political and public life. Hence, calls were made to link specific instances and loci of discursive or interactive adversarial behaviour and related types of uncivil language to the exploration of a wider context showing why "our society seems to have lost its sense of civility" (Masullo Chen, 2017: 8). Particularly, appeals were made to put uncivil language in the complex context of "outrage politics" and "outrage industry" (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) that developed in recent years on the back of growing offline – and, in particular, online – "mediation opportunity structures" (Cammaerts, 2012; Ekman, 2018; Uldam, 2013) for nationalism, nativism, and wider populism. All of these culminated in the American context with the 2016 election of Donald Trump as the US president (yet with many other significant events marking a similar change across the globe). Only with such a micro–macro look one would be able to see that "concerns we have in today's politics – our concern about a coarsening of political language, a demonization of one's opponents, or refusal to engage with opposing points of view – are only a small piece of the problem" (Boatright, 2019: 3).

The second trend of the European research on uncivility has developed somewhat parallel to the above American scholarship yet has, quite interestingly, taken a somewhat converse route. It started from the more macro-level considerations of civility and uncivility before only later looking at specific types of uncivil discourses and practices as those characterising contemporary forms of political participation, mobilisation, and wider political – or sometimes even post-political – action.

The recent European scholarship has certainly been spawned by the scholarship on so-called *uncivil society*, widely spotted throughout the 1990s and 2000s as, to some extent, a distinctively European phenomenon. It grew out of various forms of disappointment in the fact that political participation not only gives rise to civil society – as a culmination of ideals of bottom-up political mobilisation – but also results in what is seen as a "paradox of political participation" (Eder, 2014). The latter has mainly been seen as the often simultaneous rise of various uncivil movements which organise in order to promote anti-liberal rather than liberal or civil values while explicitly fostering nativist exclusionary ideas and ideologies (for earlier takes on similar processes, see, for example, Whitehead, 1997). The volume by Kopecký and Mudde (2003) has surely been one of the key works in this trend. Contextualised by the sociopolitical transformations in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the work spotted the ongoing development of various ways of organising but also the expression of so-called contentious politics that – while sharing many of the structural traits of civil society – clearly stood in favour of illiberal politics and ideas rather than the liberal-democratic order. But probably the main work which explains the structural logic as well as the discursive nature of uncivil society has been that by Carlo Ruzza (2009), who examined uncivil society movements and their relation to institutionalised right-wing politics in contemporary Italy. He saw uncivil society as primarily "groups which have a self-professed antidemocratic and exclusionary political identity" (Ruzza, 2009: 88) and 1) act against – rather than for – the benefit of liberal-democratic principles of an open society and 2) are, even if unofficially, often closely linked to political parties and groups rather than being voluntary bottom-up organisations that are effectively a "voice" of civil society. Ruzza therefore made it clear that the "non-modern or anti-modern conception of life" (2009: 91) held by uncivil society aligns closely with different right-wing ideologies, and that uncivil society is therefore highly dangerous to contemporary

European societies in which right-wing populism has spread as a "contagion" in recent years (Rydgren, 2003; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

To date, the works above has been among the key inspirations for more recent scholarship which, to some extent, brings together a wider European focus on uncivility – as a description of trends in political mobilisation – with the more US-specific focus on incivility – as a description of discursive-political behaviour. The vital work linking those trends in an empirically oriented fashion has been the study by Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017), which looked at how the online uncivil society discourse effectively normalises strong – including racist – discriminatory views against immigration. In their study, Krzyżanowski and Ledin introduced the widely followed concept of *borderline discourse,* which originated in uncivil online spaces and eventually became normalised as a wider discursive pattern of mainstream media and politics. That discourse – explored at length also in several contributions to this Special Issue – characteristically includes a combination of unmitigated radical statements with civil, quasi-academic, and politically correct language, all used in combination to "pre-legitimise" (Krzyżanowski, 2014) the effectively uncivil, radical, and extremist positions and ideologies and to make them look like rational and acceptable elements of increasingly exclusionary and nativist – and often outright racist – "new" common sense. Other works which also looked specifically at uncivil society discourse (see especially Ekman, 2018, 2019, for the analyses of radical-right organisations online) equally explored the relation between anti-refugee mobilisation, uncivil engagement, and social media networks. Of particular relevance is the work by Ekman (2019), who, analysing radical- and far-right uncivil society online, elaborated on its normalising effect with regard to so-called ambient racism (see also Sharma, 2018) which operates at both micro (interactive) and macro (wider-discursive) levels of online communication and spans from mundane statements to wider arguments which, once circulated online, eventually have a spill-over effect onto wider public spheres. The platform logic of online communication proves particularly useful for the spread of racist statements and contents online (see also Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Laaksonen et al., 2020) but also offline (including, e.g., the traditional media; Horsti & Nikunen, 2013).

While the research described above considers uncivil society and the radicalised strands of the on- and offline public sphere as a loci of uncivil and racist discourse in the wider context of right-wing populism, recent European scholarship has also been preoccupied with the wider uncivility and racism connection expressly within the context of the *normalisation* or *mainstreaming* of the radical-right (see Krzyżanowski, 2020a, for a theoretical and conceptual overview). In a number of works published in this trend to date, scholars have argued that while various instances of uncivil discourse – often used as a carrier of racism and other exclusionary and nativist ideologies favoured by the far right – tended to originate in alternative media or the uncivil society domain, they have been more than very eagerly picked up by mainstream political and media actors in recent years, thus catering to a wider spread of far-right ideologies and related discursive strategies. Some scholars working in this trend have often explored a rather unilateral "move to the right" (Wodak, 2015) in – particularly – the political discourse domain. But others have shown that normalisation of racism (Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2020b) takes place in a multidirectional way, often by means of a somewhat reciprocal process of "mainstreaming the far right" and "radicalising the mainstream" (Mondon &

Winter, 2020) in the wider sense. It has also been pointed out that, at a more micro level, this process is accompanied by way of continuous production of the aforementioned "borderline discourse" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017) in various contexts notwithstanding the media (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020).

By the same token, scholars have also continued to show that uncivility and racism might persist to connect within the discourses that traditionally have been used as vehicles for their normalisation and appropriation. Titley (2019, 2020a, 2020b) has, for example, shown in his works that "free speech" continues to be one such central shell for the uncivility–racism combination and that its seemingly value-neutral role is indeed often desired in the radical- and far-right use of the concept, helping in denying accusations of racism and radicalism. Similarly, Cammaerts (2020) has argued how the connection which is central here persists across arguments on religion, nativism, (white) supremacy, and in conspiracy theories – all considered by the author as the "nodal points" of neo-fascism hugely propelled by the current wave of radical-right and right-wing populism across the globe.

Outline of the Special Issue

Many of the key traits and voices in the research and scholarship described above echo very clearly across the contributions to our Special Issue. This is not only through the fact that our contributors address the focal uncivility–racism–populism connection as such in different formats – and do so while recognising its differentiated, context-specific character in different national contexts and beyond. They also look across different spaces, discourses, and genres of communication in which the said connection is enacted and discursively articulated, whilst effectively solidifying and normalising extreme- and far-right thinking as part and parcel of right-wing populist politics and far-right ideologies. Hence, while our collection links many of the currents and trends in contemporary research, it also wishes to develop them further, while also explicating discourse and tendencies in the Nordic countries and indeed, the wider Europe.

Opening the Special Issue – as well as a set of articles devoted specifically to the in/un-civility–racism–populism connections in the Nordic countries – Tina Askanius provides an excellent case study of the media narratives of the neo-Nazi organisation Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and situates this particular movement within the broader landscape of violent extremism in Sweden today. In her article, "'I just want to be the friendly face of national socialism': The turn to civility in the cultural expressions of neo-Nazism in Sweden", Askanius draws on a qualitative content analysis informed by narrative inquiry, and examines various cultural expressions of neo-Nazi ideology in NRM's extensive repertoire of online media. The study brings to centre stage the role of popular culture and entertainment in the construction of a meaningful narrative of community and belonging built around neo-Nazism in Sweden today. The analysis demonstrates how NRM, with their efforts to boost the culture and entertainment end of their media repertoire, seeks to add to the ordinariness of neo-Nazi discourse by effectively normalising it through banalisation and defusing its underlying ideologies. Further, the analysis of the convergence between different genres, styles, and content into new borderline discourses illustrates how contemporary extreme-right movements complicate the traditional binaries with which scholars operate, such as fascist–liberal, totalitarian–democratic, and mainstream–extremist. Askanius hence turns to the cul-

tural expressions of neo-Nazi propaganda in order to understand how NRM seeks to construct palpable and distinctly Nordic narratives around national socialism suitable for contemporary audiences. She argues that this surge in cultural content – and with it a shift towards "softer" aesthetics, form, and style – is part of a broader project of normalisation at the heart of NRM's media strategies and those of contemporary far-right populist parties and ultranationalist movements more generally.

In their following article, "Recontextualising the news: How antisemitic discourses are constructed in extreme far-right alternative media", Birgitte Haanshus and Karolina Ihlbæk explore how extreme far-right alternative media sites use content from professional mainstream media to convey uncivil news with an antisemitic message. The article covers the vital aspect of normalisation processes – that is, it not only looks at the usual vectors of mainstreaming extreme discourses and positions *into* the mainstream, but treats them instead as reciprocal and remaining interactive. Haanshus and Ihlbæk present a critical discourse analysis of 231 news items published on the Norwegian radical website *Frihetskamp* between 2011–2018, focusing specifically on news items originating from established national and international news sources. They explore how news is recontextualised to portray both overt and covert antisemitic discourses and identify four expressly antisemitic, stereotypical representations that are reinforced through the selection and adjustment of news: Jews as powerful, as intolerant and anti-liberal, as exploiters of victimhood, and as inferior. These conspiratorial and exclusionary ideas – often visibly recontextualised from historical Nazi propaganda – are thus reproduced by linking them to contemporary societal and political contexts and the current news agenda. Haanshus and Ihlbæk argue that the kind of recontextualised, uncivil news as those in focus of their study are difficult to define as such in the wider, digital public sphere. This is due to the deployed logic of recontextualisation processes, whereby a news story originally published on what can be described as a civil arena (established media) is republished on an uncivil arena (far-right alternative media) and thus becomes ideologically repositioned. Consequently, seemingly civil news items are manipulated into uncivil news, that is, news published on uncivil arenas with the purpose of implicitly or explicitly conveying hateful discourses about particular groups in society.

In the following article within the Nordic contexts, "Who are you, the people? Constructing the people in *MV-lehti*'s refugee coverage", Salla Tuomola highlights that one of the cornerstones of right-wing populist websites is the challenge they pose to traditional, mainstream media as far as addressing and giving voice to the people. Focusing specifically on Finland, Tuomola looks at one of the best known of such websites, *MV-lehti*, which claims to exist to voice public interests and concerns. Tuomola investigates, therefore, how *MV-lehti* constructs the people in texts, especially in its refugee coverage. Drawing on various inspirations from critical discourse analysis of right-wing populist rhetoric, the study shows that, on *MV-lehti*, the people are chiefly constructed as a strongly politicised concept, thus reflecting ideas of ethnonationalism and anti-democratic values. The connection between uncivility, racism, and populism appears to be central therein. Tuomola shows that in the course of constructing the in-group (natives) as opposed to the out-group (refugees and more widely migrants), the central binary opposition is underpinned by racist arguments calling for systematic exclusion and subordination of the out-group, who are stigmatised with regard to cultural norms, values, traditions, and lifestyles, but also physical appearance and

ethnicity. Uncivility, at the same time, occurs in an expressly right-wing populist style of the discourse wherein attention to values and provocations with regard to challenging politeness and political correctness – as well as choosing simplicity over complexity – are all mobilised whilst eagerly discarding expert knowledge in favour or legitmising "first-hand experience".

Closing the set of articles devoted to the Nordic countries, Mattias Ekman and Michał Krzyżanowski undertake a critical discourse analysis of Swedish quality newspaper editorials. In their article, "A populist turn? News editorials and the recent discursive shift on immigration in Sweden", Ekman and Krzyżanowski focus on the evolving framing of immigration since the recent European "refugee crisis". Positioned within the ongoing discursive shifts in the Swedish public sphere and the growth of discursive uncivility in its mainstream arenas, the analysis highlights how xenophobic and racist discourses once propagated by the far- and radical-right gradually penetrate into the studied broadsheet media. Ekman and Krzyżanowski argue that both the examined editorials and the genre more widely have the tendency to normalise the once radical perceptions of immigration. This takes place by incorporating various discursive strategies embedded in wider argumentative frames of demographic consequences, Islam and Islamisation, or threat and integration. All of these enable the construction of claims against immigration, now apparently prevalent also in the examined strands of the Swedish "quality" press. As the analysis shows, by incorporating both micro and macro discursive elements associated with the far and populist right, the mainstream discourse of editorials normalises and legitimises them. This opens up increased manoeuvring room for far-right political actors, and for far-right politics at large, all of which thus become a prominent and legitimate voice. Ekman and Krzyżanowski show how this process pushes the boundaries of publicly acceptable language and ultimately defines Swedish public discourse on immigration within both the political and wider public spheres.

Opening the next set of articles addressing international cases – which allow the further consideration of the above Nordic examples in a wider, comparative pan-European perspective – is Per-Erik Nilsson, in "'The new extreme right': Uncivility, irony, and displacement in the French 're-information sphere'". Departing from the premise that contemporary France is a prolific arena for post-fascist actors, parties, and movements, Nilsson highlights that self-proclaimed alternative news forums and publishing houses serve as forums for information and mobilisation, through various strategies, to resist an alleged onslaught by the enemies of the nation and its people: multiculturalism, feminism, political correctness, political corruption, and civilisational decay. In his article, Nilsson explores uncivility as a discursive logic within the French post-fascist media-ecology, with a focus on conspicuous usage of irony and discursive displacement. More specifically, Nilsson discusses how sardonic irony is employed as an uncivil discursive strategy to navigate the legal boundaries of free speech and how discursive displacement, coupled with irony, is used as an affective identificatory technique in post-fascist discourse. Concluding his study, Nilsson makes a vital call for not using uncivility and civility as normative analytical categories, but focusing instead on their emic usage in post-fascist social and political communication – online and offline. This is arguably the key to understanding how contemporary post-fascist discourse – in France as elsewhere – slips into the realm of liberal-democratic discourse and presents itself as a viable alternative among all the others in the political marketplace.

In the following article "Unpacking uncivil society: Incivility and intolerance in the 2018 Irish abortion referendum discussions on Twitter", Dayei Oh, Suzanne Elayan, Martin Sykora, and John Downey contend that in the era of rising populist sentiment, deep social and political polarisations, and a growing crisis of online harms, numerous scholars share concern about the impact of such uncivil populist forces on the health of liberal democracy. Oh and her colleagues argue, however, that one should first normatively distinguish between incivility and intolerance – as indeed has already been proposed in the in- and uncivility scholarship (see above) – as, the authors contend, the core problem of uncivil society is intolerance rather than incivility. To this aim, Oh and colleagues empirically analyse incivility and intolerance during the 2018 Irish abortion referendum and the related discussions on Twitter. They conduct a content analysis and qualitative textual analysis of 3,000 tweets posted between April and June 2018. The results show that despite selecting a highly emotive and polarised issue, incivility and intolerance do not dominate the Twittersphere. Furthermore, the gender and political position of users were found to be associated with use of incivility and intolerance, which also visibly increased as the referendum approached.

Last but certainly not least, in an article that provides a take on the supranational EU level, "The institutionalisation of populist political discourse and conservative uncivil society in the Europeran Union: From the margins to the mainstream?", Carlo Ruzza – one of the pioneers of research on uncivil society in Europe – analyses populist political discourse in European conservative uncivil society. Ruzza examines the ideational features of conservative civil society groups at the EU level and compares them to those of progressive groups. Through a frame analysis of the textual materials of these two types of organisations, Ruzza examines the reactions to the success of populist formations in several European member states as well as at the EU level. He shows the contrasts between progressive and conservative association discourses on key concepts, such as EU-regulated anti-discrimination policies, views on EU fundamental rights, and the overarching functions of civil society, its composition, and mechanisms of legitimation. In the analysis, Ruzza argues that the long-established EU ethos of fostering progressive civil society is undergoing a redefinition, which impacts EU strategies. He posits that in a changing political climate, EU institutions are less interested in some of the contributions progressive civil society offers, such as contributions to public deliberation, governance, and the legitimacy of the EU. Progressive civil society thus reacts to the threat of a loss of standing and attempts to retain its historical centrality, legitimacy, and access; in contrast, conservative civil society groups seek to establish themselves in a political environment that was previously off-limits to them. Ruzza contends that the best way to frame the contrast between rival images of civil society is through a movement–counter-movement dynamic. Therein, populist discourses and views compete with and contrast inclusionary anti-discrimination non-populist ones. Ruzza argues that political and discursive competition between these two camps characterises the current state of the field of civil society.

Funding

Research presented in this article, as well as the preparation of this Special Issue, was partially funded by Swedish Research Council grants – "Interactive Racism in Swedish Online Media, Press and Politics: Discourses on Immigration and Refugees at Times of

Crisis" (2016–05464) and "Immigration and the Normalisation of Racism: Discursive Shifts in Swedish Politics and Media 2010–22" (2019–03354).

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