

A changing digital landscape of extremism in the Nordic countries: Introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

Social media has changed the nature of extremism in the twenty-first century. This special issue of *Nordicom Review* focuses on online extremism in the Nordic countries and considers how online extremism and the associated practices, aesthetics, and communities are woven into Nordic cultures. Featuring a collection of empirical studies and theoretical reflections, the issue contributes to the fields of social media research and contemporary trends in extremism, including mainstreaming processes, hybrid threats, conspiracy theories, and a range of social media practices and phenomena, which enable shifts toward the extremes of the Nordic publics. The special issue includes six contributions, each tackling a case study anchored in national contexts and pinpointing a significant challenge in the field of extremism and social media research.

KEYWORDS: extremism, hybridisation, conspiracy theories, mainstreaming, social media

Introduction

Social media has changed the nature of extremism in the twenty-first century. Mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X are sites of extremist communication, but more importantly, they are fundamentally reshaping the way in which extremist narratives are created and shared and how users engage with these narratives. Through distinct practices afforded by the platforms, social media users can become active participants in the development of new types of extremism which exist in a mainstream space of discourse. At the same time, fringe platforms like Telegram are also pushing the boundaries of extreme discourse and challenging prevailing perceptions of the relationship between the mainstream and the extreme. Aesthetic practices and memetics from fringe imageboards such as 4Chan and 8kun travel into the mainstream and become trends in short video formats on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.

Recent years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in emerging forms of extremism on social media. Extremist content, ranging from hateful yet ironic and ambiguous memes over misinformation-based narratives to malicious conspiracy theories and hardcore extremist ideologies, circulates on mainstream social media platforms on a large scale (Bryant, 2020; Rothut et al., 2024). Everyday social media users can be exposed to radical and subversive content on the same platforms they use for the most common practices of catching up with the news and keeping in touch with their network.

On the one hand, mainstream actors such as influencers, journalists, celebrities, activists, and politicians use their social media visibility to platform ideas and opinions previously considered fringe (Baker, 2022). On the other hand, extremist narratives have become a matter of co-creation, as social media users accumulate ad hoc convictions, political opinions, personal grievances and inclinations, conspiracy beliefs, and ideology fragments to construct new narratives located outside the window of what is typically considered morally or politically acceptable (Johansen, 2025; Petersen & Johansen, 2025).

This type of amalgamated and crowdsourced extremism challenges established classifications of extremist phenomena and obfuscates the process of mapping their trajectories. In a fragmented digital media landscape, antagonism against the centre of society – that is, the political and institutional mainstream – may not necessarily originate from the most well-known extreme positions, for example, the far-right, the far-left, or militant Islamism. Today, extremist narratives also emerge from diffuse online communities which cut across ideological divides. For example, the far-right has been known to take inspiration from Islamist visual strategies for recruitment (Koch et al., 2024), and anti-authority groups often consist of various subgroups, ranging from the far-right to anti-vaxxers and the spirituality movement (Demuru, 2022; DSIS, 2024).

This type of hybrid extremism has recently caught the attention of security practitioners and law enforcement in the Nordic region (DSIS, 2024; SÄPO, 2023). Highlighting the ontological connection between extremism and

conspiracism (Cassam, 2021), the hybridisation trend is closely linked to the online proliferation and increased salience of conspiracy theories, which accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Brennen et al., 2020).

The pandemic illustrated the difficulty of determining exactly when someone crosses the lines between criticism (e.g., opposing government restrictions); inquisitiveness (e.g., exploring alternative narratives and treatments); misinformation (e.g., promoting drugs despite lacking evidence of its effectiveness); and conspiracy theories (e.g., “the plandemic” and bioweapon theories). This, combined with the perpetually ironic and ambiguous tone of online environments, challenges security practitioners and scholars alike to distinguish real threats from playful rhetoric.

Similarly, global phenomena travel across language barriers and find homes in Scandinavian culture through online platforms. One example is Active Clubs, far-right extremist groups that recruit and plan activities and activism on platforms like Telegram. Active Clubs operate from the belief that societal collapse is coming, and they train themselves to be ready for white supremacy once it does.

Another example is the global trend of The Com (online abbreviation for “The Community”), which is a decentralised network of young users engaging in various types of harm or self-harm to be filmed for a waiting audience. The Com presents a particular challenge, because while the network draws on aesthetics and references to Nazi ideology and far-right extremism, the motivation here seems to be less about ideology and more about the aesthetic practices and participatory elements of sharing violent content with others. As these extremist trends find root in the Nordic countries, it remains critical that we understand the digital conditions in which these cultures develop so that we can meet the challenge in policies, law enforcement, and prevention efforts.

Unclear but present danger

One of the most illustrative cases of the hybridisation trend is the QAnon movement and its derived variations throughout many Western societies. Originating in the US on the niche imageboard 4Chan around 2017, QAnon’s conspiratorial worldview has since spread to other national contexts across Europe, including the Nordic countries. This trend of Americanisation illustrates how conspiratorial narratives not only travel far and wide; they are adapted to fit specific national contexts (Rasmussen, 2024). In turn, the highly mediated diffusion of the movement happened through a mix of high-intensity mainstream news reporting and the vernacular cultures of online platforms, based on memes and affect-oriented engagement. QAnon was originally based on a vivid conspiracy theory about satanic worship and corruption in the US government and played a key role in the violent attack on the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021.

Importantly, the majority of participants in the attack had no prior record of extremist behaviour, nor did the majority belong to any organised extremist groups (Jones & Comerford, 2023). This lack of apparent ideological rallying point beyond a deep mistrust of government – and of clear coordination efforts

between its participants – is in large part what constitutes the distinct challenge for law enforcement and intelligence services, which are now forced to deal with particular threats of “mixed, unstable, and unclear” character in their counterterrorism efforts (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023).

Remembering the old US Supreme Court doctrine of “clear and present danger”, which served to determine under which circumstances free speech could be limited, the current situation of vagueness and incoherence appears to create an unclear but nonetheless very present danger in the digital media culture of many Western societies. Yet, the unclarity only makes it more difficult to determine when and how to regulate online speech.

The surge in misinformation and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19, sometimes referred to as the “infodemic”, have accelerated fact-checking practices and the development of new forms of content moderation (Brennen et al., 2020). Consequently, some platforms focus on *reducing* the visibility of “risky, misleading, or salacious content”, which *nearly* violate their rules (Gillespie, 2022: 1). This type of content, which importantly includes unclear and hybridised content, is often termed “borderline”. As pointed out by Gillespie (2022), the method of reducing rather than removing borderline content may be an effective way for platforms to avoid accusations of censorship, since the content is never actually taken down.

However, by casting a shadow over a large body of content, shadowbanning techniques only increase the need to further elucidate various forms of “dark participation” online (Quandt, 2018). While some platforms have responded to the proliferation of hybrid forms of extremism by reducing its visibility, this does not mean that audiences cease to be exposed to it. Audiences appear to find borderline content through other routes than the main search engine or recommendations, and extremist content creators are quick to find new ways to embed and spread their messages. Emojis come to symbolise certain ideological positions, for example, the juice box emoji is often used in antisemitic discussions as a substitute for its homophone “jews”. Elsewhere, images, memes, and phrases carry with them meanings that allow them to elude content moderation while spreading hateful ideologies to those “in the know”. Thus, despite efforts to implement more creative moderation techniques and incentive systems, such as shadowbanning or demonetisation, there is a need for more effective social media regulation and content moderation policies.

Although the unorganised and amalgamated extremism that characterises movements like QAnon is more difficult to detect and monitor from the perspective of ideological categorisation or violent methods, it is clear that social media make up a crucial dimension of this growing phenomenon. Not only is social media facilitating extremist expression; they are conditioning and shaping contemporary extremism per se. Some social media users become co-creators of extremist narratives; extremism has become interactive and participatory. Extreme messages are embedded in ordinary social media practices on at least two different levels: a genre-level and a curation-level (Petersen & Johansen, 2025).

The extremism in your feed

First, via aesthetic adaptability of online formats and genres, extremist messages may become part of content forms which are not usually recognised as vehicles of hate. In this way, extremist messages can look and sound different than they used to. Expressed through memetic references to popular culture – for example, the now well-established “red pill” reference to *The Matrix* – or through the soft and seemingly apolitical and highly aestheticised communication of health influencers (Demuru, 2022), extremist content often appears less hateful, less destructive, and, in essence, less extreme. Memetic ambiguity requires users to be particularly alert to contextual shifts, subtleness, and indirect messaging when decoding the meaning of potentially extreme content communicated through familiar media genres. In turn, this raises questions regarding the where and when of extremism: Should extremist terms and phrases still be considered extreme when posted in apolitical contexts on mainstream platforms by users who may not recognise the ambiguity or extreme provenance? How may extremist connotations (dis)appear over time? (Johansen, 2025; see also Hagen & de Zeeuw, 2023; Rothut et al., 2024)

Second, as this type of subtle or even disguised extremism circulates side by side with various types of harmless content in a fast-paced and unregulated information landscape (Gillespie, 2022), it blends in with the rest of people’s social media feeds on the level of algorithmic curation. That is to say that users often scroll through their feeds in a thematic zigzag: First, they encounter pet videos and DIY tutorials, then an antisemitic meme, then back to some fitness advice, which leads to an anti-vaxx conspiracy theory and a controversial influencer’s endorsement of violence, and back again to another pet video. Extreme content occupies these pockets in mainstream social media culture not least because it effortlessly integrates with the everyday practices of social media users. Spreading conspiracy theories that build on the idea that an out-group threat must be eradicated through undemocratic means on social media can look and sound like a health influencer drinking her smoothie while walking barefoot in the grass on a sunny morning. It’s aesthetically calm and pleasing and the underlying violent ideology appears in bite-sized chunks, here and there, for the alert follower. How this digital environment shapes extremist beliefs in those exposed to such content still remains largely unexamined in extremism research.

Social media offers new ways of affective socialisation, regardless of the potential extremity of the content shared across communities. In fact, socialisation is often as important as the dedication to the (extreme) subject at hand (Ebner et al., 2024). In Facebook groups or in the comment sections below a YouTube video, everyday social media users come together in sharing their personal grievances, outrage, and mistrust of various institutions, elites, or marginalised groups. In essence, this type of engagement is no different from the non-extreme behaviour of fan communities (Driessen, 2026): People engage in “hate parties” and typically direct their extreme opinions at their peers and not necessarily the

subject of their hate (Rea et al., 2024). Interestingly, in-group love is as strong an emotion as hate in extreme communities on social media (Olson, 2020). This also points to a certain playfulness of contemporary social media extremism, supported by memetic media structure (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021) as well as the basic mode of conspiratorial engagement through gossip and playfulness (de Wildt & Aupers, 2024; Petersen, 2022).

The combination between aesthetic malleability and socialisation attracts new audiences, including segments who do not necessarily self-identify as extremists (or do so ironically). This happened during a recent case of coordinated harassment against a Danish television host, fuelled by baseless accusations of satanism and grooming of minors through children's entertainment on national television, where middle-aged women – an often underresearched and overlooked group in the context of extremism – claimed a distinct authority of motherhood (Frejborg & Pettersson, 2024) in their conspiratorial efforts to “protect the children” (see also Moskalenko et al., 2024). Emerging from the comment sections of conspiracy theory influencers, or “conspiracy entrepreneurs” (Harambam, 2020), a vitriolic campaign to destroy the television host's reputation and livelihood was put together by Facebook users contributing accusations and interpreting clues to support them (Petersen & Johansen, 2026). This type of “forensic play” (Petersen, 2022) is characteristic of extremist practices in the digital media culture and illustrates how this and other communities are inspired by movements like QAnon and enabled through distinct social media practices.

Nordic exceptionalism?

Considering the high levels of trust in (media) institutions in the Nordic societies (Newman et al., 2025), high levels of knowledge about our shared participatory culture (see Gulbrandsen & Just, 2025), relatively low crime rates (with Sweden as the notable exception, where gang-related violence has been on the rise) (Statista, 2025), and a generally strong “media welfare state” (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020), it is easy to hypothesise about a general Nordic exceptionalism in the domain of online extremism as well. Put differently, one might expect that social media extremism is less of a problem in the Nordic region.

In general, Nordic societies are recognised as relatively peaceful, homogenous, consensus-seeking, and highly digital, but the recent pandemic, geopolitical instability, and the polarising effects of “the dark side” of social media culture (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) have unsettled the categories by which Nordic public discourse may be understood. This, combined with an increasingly muddy communication flow of AI-generated content, including mis- and disinformation (Grahn et al., 2025), poses a challenge to prevailing perceptions of what qualifies as extreme in the Nordics and the extent to which conspiracy theories are perceived to impact Nordic public cultures.

Due in part to the relatively unregulated global reach of US-born social media with its universal logics, affordances, and practices conditioning people's engagement with information, several trends, which are addressed in this special

issue, stress how social media communication in the Nordic region is not less extreme than other regions. As noted, international (mainly US-based) conspiracy theories and polarised antagonistic narratives are imported and adapted to fit a Nordic context. At the same time, edgy Nordic influencers imitate their controversial international counterparts, and populist political parties capitalise on citizens' concerns, conspiratorial inclinations, and personal grievances.

But how are extremist narratives adapted to a Nordic context via social media? Are there particularly Nordic ways of being extreme, and what are the internal differences between the Nordic countries?

To approximate a response to these questions and improve scholarly understanding of social media extremism in the Nordic region, more research is needed. Therefore, this special issue focuses on mapping and interpreting changing extremist environments in the Nordic countries, with special focus on the interplay between different platforms both in and out of the mainstream and between online and offline mobilisation. The empirical studies featured in the issues – particularly of the dynamic, ambiguous, and unclear spaces of online extremism in the Nordic context – may help not only security practitioners and scholars but also a wider public audience to understand the emerging environments from which new extremist ideas and potential threats originate.

Overview of the special issue

The special issue comprises six articles, each addressing social media extremism from different Nordic perspectives. Methodologically and theoretically diverse, all articles feature empirical studies of (potentially) extreme social media phenomena on a variety of platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and X.

In the first article, “The alternative influence network (AIN) of far-right YouTubers in Sweden”, Tina Askanius, Jullietta Stoencheva, and Hernan Mondani map the connections between Swedish far-right actors on YouTube in the years around the Covid-19 pandemic. Through a mix of social network analysis and qualitative close readings, the authors investigate how far-right YouTubers strategically combine political activism with distinct influencer practices, focused around community engagement and commercial content production. Their study shows how YouTube enables a professionalisation of the extremist network by facilitating a fusion between political propaganda, monetisation schemes, and self-branding tactics. Ultimately, the authors claim, this leads to a mainstreaming of radical and extremist ideologies via an algorithmically curated flow of anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments, vaccine scepticism, demonisation of “woke gender ideology”, and a mistrust of democratic institutions. This fusion logic is emblematic of the hybridisation trend described above, and the study thus offers a timely insight into a growing phenomenon within contemporary extremism in the Nordics and beyond.

In the second article, “Antisemitism on mainstream social media after Hamas terror attack: A case study of online discourse and its impact on Jewish youth in

Sweden”, Pontus Rudberg and Isabella Pistone analyse the impact of extremist discourses on those targeted. As anti-democratic extremism has emerged in Sweden and internationally, new alliances and constellations have emerged. At the same time, social media contributes by facilitating the spread of hate symbols, memes, and conspiracy theories through viral, algorithmic structures, effectively placing extreme ideologies in mainstream users’ feed. Through interviews and a focus group with members of a Swedish Jewish Youth organisation and social media posts from X and Instagram, their study demonstrates how an increase in antisemitic hate following the Hamas terrorist attack in Israel on 7 October 2023 created withdrawal and self-censorship among the interviewees. Rudberg and Pistone’s study importantly emphasises the need for a societal and technological response to mitigate the harm of online hate speech. They present findings from interviews and a focus group with nine social media workers in the organisation and a total of 115 posts by the Jewish Youth organisation and 2,964 comments from X and Instagram. Among the findings, the study demonstrates how the character of the comments under the organisation’s posts underwent significant change following the 7 October attack. For example, comments referencing antisemitic conspiracy theories increased from 11 to 71 comments, while stereotypical representations of Jews went from 7 to 45. The article includes illustrations of antisemitic memes, so reader discretion is advised. As a consequence, the youth working with this platform experience feel increasingly unsafe – a feeling that expands to include offline interactions. Emphasising the consequences of online extremism seems crucial to understand the degree of harm these discourses create and underpins that societal efforts should not only focus on de-radicalisation, but also on management of harm for those targeted.

In the third article, “The spread of manosphere ideology to a Norwegian audience through ironic spectatorship: A qualitative analysis of influencer engagement with Andrew Tate”, Fredrik Langeland analyses Norwegian influencer Oscar Westerlin’s content that engages with ideas and symbols associated with manosphere influencer Andrew Tate. Through a qualitative analysis of ten YouTube and Instagram posts, Langeland argues that Westerlin operates as an “ironic spectator”, strategically bringing extreme content into Norwegian mainstream culture. Ironic spectators circulate extreme ideas and discourses without fully endorsing them. While never fully committing to any viewpoint, the ironic spectator effectively mainstreams these ideas by engaging with them from a space between acceptance and rejection. Through ironic spectatorship, these ideas are distributed to a broader audience through entertainment and may grow to gain legitimacy. The analysis demonstrates how Westerlin sometimes parodies Tate’s persona in his videos. These parodies are notably satirical and ironic, mimicking Tate’s laugh and mannerisms. In other instances, he interviews Tate followers with curiosity and enthusiasm, recycling his symbols and phrases to a Norwegian audience, thus functioning as third-party representations of Tate. In addition, Westerlin considers certain selected topics “political” and rejects taking a stand. In this way, Tate is not only mainstreamed to a broader audience,

his agenda is resituated in a Norwegian context, bringing it closer to audiences. The absence of a clear-cut endorsement still allows Westerlin to interact with extremist ideas as a source for mainstream entertainment.

In the fourth article, “‘Young Finn, you have already awakened, so arise!’ Mobilising keyboard warriors to combatants through Finnish active club Telegram channels”, Katri-Maaria Kyllönen tackles the emergence of right-wing extremist combat sports groups, known as Active Clubs, in Finland. She conducts a critical discourse analysis of 245 recruitment-oriented posts from the Finnish Active Clubs’ public Telegram channels and one podcast episode. Active Clubs understand Western society to be in race-driven social decline and prepare for white nationalism through physical training. On Telegram, they share white-supremacist and (neo)Nazi-inspired content aimed at drawing young men in. These subcultural activities come to function as a ritualised practice that fosters collective identity, solidarity, and transition from online to offline activism. Kyllönen demonstrates how recruitment relies more on emotions and rituals than on arguments. Narratives about societal decline invite strong negative emotions, but also positive emotions of “brotherhood and honour” in the online setting of Telegram, and support users’ transition from engaging curiously with combat training communities to offline activism and right-wing extremism in support of a self-labelled Nationalism 3.0.

In the fifth article, “Telegram as a multifaceted platform for antagonistic political passion: The Finnish alternative groups under the scope”, Salla Tuomola and Jakob Bæk Kristensen investigate the political engagement among Finnish anti-authorities and far-right groups on Telegram. The authors conduct a social network analysis to identify clusters of actors who antagonise mainstream culture in different ways: through anti-mainstream critique, protest mobilisation, Western medicine critique, and anti-democratic propaganda. By qualitatively analysing the dominant modes of engagement within these clusters, the authors find that the studied Telegram ecosystem navigates at an intersection of extremism and activism. The study illustrates how the suppression of certain political passions leads groups to alternative channels, which then evolve into antagonistic forms of engagement. Through Telegram, the more moderate antagonists are linked – via influential information hubs – to radical actors with overt far-right agendas. The authors also emphasise the previous point about the importance, or even precedence, of socialisation in extreme communities by discussing how the gathering of people with marginalised viewpoints on Telegram provide them with a collective identity, even if the ideological framework is not completely coherent.

In the final article, “Populist communication and extremist narratives as strategic messaging: A comparative analysis of Nordic political parties on Facebook”, Jakob Linaa Jensen and colleagues examine the relationship between populist communication and the use of extremist narratives in Nordic political parties’ 2024 European Parliament election campaign. By categorising a large sample of Facebook posts by parties and candidates in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, the authors find that populist communication was present across the

political spectrum, although it was significantly higher in Sweden. Extremist narratives, however, were rare and mostly promoted by fringe actors on the right. By analytically separating the two categories, yet simultaneously measuring both populist and extremist communication, the authors demonstrate how the two phenomena can intersect. As stressed by the authors, populist communication is not inherently extremist, but its binary concepts of the people versus elites may ease the adoption of extremist narratives, based on an existential distinction between an in-group and an out-group (Berger, 2018). Mirroring some of the findings from the other articles in this issue, this points to the blurred boundaries between (legitimate) outrage and critique, alternativeness, antagonism, and, ultimately, extremism in the contemporary digital environment.

Collectively, the six articles offer valuable insight about social media extremism in the Nordic region. In particular, the compilation illustrates the complexity of researching – and even defining and detecting – clear-cut extremism in an increasingly hybridised media landscape. Genres, formats, and aesthetics more broadly are important dimensions to consider when studying extremism, and the centrality of socialisation as a crucial factor driving extreme engagement is clearly stressed – from community management of Swedish far-right YouTubers and Norwegian influencers to Finnish Active Clubs and Telegram networks.

This special issue is meant as a conversation starter for those concerned with the state of democracy in a digitalised world. Our hope is that we can continue to pay attention to how extreme content travels via digital platforms, so that we can mitigate the threats this content poses to our public spaces and democratic security. A thriving democracy requires a public sphere that can be entered into without the threat of harassment or violence.

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