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A brief introduction to my PhD project

To place the research idea presented below in context, I will begin with a brief overview of the research I am conducting as part of my PhD. The overarching aim of this research is to understand and provide new insights into how Swedish far-right and adjacent discourses are constructed, mobilised, and circulated on online video platforms. In brief, far-right discourse in this study is understood as being characterised by populist rhetoric, ethno-nationalist views, anti-immigration attitudes, opposition to multiculturalism, the promotion of traditional gender roles, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments and rights, and a general anti-establishment stance directed at political and cultural elites (e.g., Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2015). Adjacent discourses, in this context, include those articulated by certain conservative actors and so-called 'freedom and truth activists' who emerged in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic and tend to embrace pseudoscientific beliefs and promote conspiracy theories (Pollack Sarnecki et al., 2023).

A particular focus of the research is on how far-right discourses disseminated on online video platforms tend to reach audiences beyond far-right circles as they spread into broader publics via exposure to 'everyday' users. This, in turn, can contribute to the normalisation of far-right ideas and rhetoric, thereby influencing society as a whole. My research will explore this from different perspectives by analysing both discursive and platform-specific aspects, including argumentation and language use, intertextuality and interactivity, modes of communication, and platform dynamics. Key themes of analysis include xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-transgender narratives, and the empirical data will primarily be collected from YouTube and TikTok. Since the individual studies will focus on different aspects, the specific research questions will be adapted accordingly. However, at this stage, three overarching research questions can be formulated:

1. How are Swedish far-right and adjacent discourses constructed, mobilised, and circulated on online video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok?
2. How do platform affordances and algorithmic logics (e.g., on TikTok and YouTube) shape the visibility and circulation of far-right and adjacent discourses?

3. In what ways do discursive strategies and platform-specific affordances interact to facilitate the dissemination and normalisation of far-right and adjacent discourses in broader public discourse?

To address these questions, the study will draw on a combination of methods, including argument analysis, critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, network analysis, and – where appropriate – computational text analysis.

The first study of my PhD project focuses on how anti-transgender discourse arguing for child protection is constructed and disseminated among far-right and adjacent Swedish YouTube channels. The research proposal outlined below will form the basis of the next empirical study. This is a work in progress, and both the theoretical and methodological frameworks are still under development. I see this as a great opportunity to test the research idea and explore some preliminary hypotheses. Any feedback and reflections on how to refine data collection, theoretical grounding, or analytical framworks are welcome.

Islamophobic Mashups:
Far-Right Video Activism on TikTok

Introduction

TikTok has in recent years established itself as a major player among social media platforms, especially for young people. Like other social platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and X, TikTok is increasingly attracting political actors and is today a key platform for both mainstream and far-right political actors to reach and influence youth (e.g., Ekman & Widholm, 2024; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). This study examines how anonymous Swedish accounts disseminate far-right narratives and rhetoric on TikTok. While online anonymity can encourage abusive or derogatory political expression (e.g., Maia & Rezende, 2016; Weimann & Masri, 2021), these accounts are of particular interest because they publish videos that remix and reframe clips from various sources, such as mainstream news, far-right alternative media, and YouTube influencers. Although remixing is a common TikTok feature (Kaye et al., 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021), the anonymous accounts analysed here strategically recontextualise and reframe clips for political purposes.

Examining this phenomenon provides valuable insights into the intersection of social media affordances and far-right discourse for two reasons. First, by remixing and curating clips from various sources, the anonymous accounts bridge mainstream content with extreme narratives, potentially creating 'radicalisation pathways' (Lewis, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Second, the videos published by the anonymous accounts may be understood as a contemporary form of political video activism, primarily historically associated with leftist movements and social change (Askanius, 2019; Hilderbrand, 2009). However, instead of targeting elites, this form of video activism targets immigrants and other minority groups and has the potential to reach a broader and more diverse audience than its leftist predecessors.

To analyse these dynamics, the study addresses these preliminary research questions: (RQ1) How are video clips from various sources strategically used in the construction of far-right discourse in the videos? (RQ2) What rhetorical and visual strategies are employed in the videos in the construction of far-right narratives and rhetoric? (RQ3) How are various modes (video, text overlays, music, and graphics) employed in the shaping of far-right discourse? (RQ4) How do the videos create bridges between mainstream media content and extreme narratives?

Addressing these questions allows for a deeper understanding of how far-right discourse is mobilised by the anonymous accounts and adapted to the specific affordances of TikTok. In doing so, the study contributes to research on digital far-right communication and offers new insights into how radical – and at times extreme – narratives are constructed, circulated, and potentially normalised on a youth-oriented digital platform in the Swedish context.

TikTok and the logic of radicalisation

The presence of far-right actors on TikTok is concerning, as the platforms' affordances facilitate the spread of extremist content that is easy to consume and visually appealing, thus increasing engagement (e.g., Jaakkola & Sakki, 2025; Ozduzen et al., 2023). Ekman and Widholm (2024) argue that TikTok stands out not only for its visual aspect but also as a platform for expressing political messages through music, speech acts, semiotic resources, and content remixing. Ozduzen et al. (2023) argue that image-based platforms like TikTok amplify the spread of extremist content, as their visually appealing and easy-to-consume format generates increased engagement.

In addition to TikTok's multimodal and visually engaging format, a central factor in TikTok's rapid growth is its recommendation algorithm and the 'For You' page (FYP), which prioritises trending content over content posted by the users' existing connections (Weimann & Masri, 2021). According to TikTok (2020), FYP introduces the users to 'a stream of videos curated to your interests, making it easy to find content and creators you love'.

When it comes to radical and extreme political content, the recommendation algorithm has two key effects. First, a TikTok account can reach a broad audience without many followers, as any engaging video has viral potential (Hohner et al., 2024; Literat et al., 2023). Second, the algorithm prioritises content similar to what users have previously viewed or engaged with. As a result, users often encounter one-sided video content in the FYP, which may reinforce their beliefs (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). TikTok's prioritisation of engaging and trending content – including from less popular accounts – combined with its tendency to present one-sided content, thus creates conditions that may facilitate the spread of radicalisation, extremism, and hate content, which can, in turn, contribute to polarisation. (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023; Little & Richards, 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2021). Several scholars (e.g. Hohner et al., 2024; Weimann & Masri, 2021) argue that this is especially con-

cerning as TikTok's young audience is more naïve when it comes to malicious content and additionally not yet politically settled and therefore more vulnerable to radicalisation.

The dynamics of radicalisation on TikTok can be described as the platform providing 'radicalisation pathways'. The term is, for instance, used by Lewis (2018), who studied the 'Alternative Influence Network' (AIN) in the US, which promotes a range of political positions – from mainstream libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism. Lewis argues that the network provides radicalisation pathways for both the audience and creators behind the content. For the audience, this means that individuals who do not actively seek out radical content may nonetheless be exposed to it repeatedly, which increases the risk of them accepting and even embracing it. This is described as a stepwise process, starting with the dismantling of one's previous worldview and embracing alternative ones.

> For example, in one possible pathway, they may start by rejecting the mainstream media and 'PC culture'; then embrace anti-feminist ideas; then embrace scientific racism or the idea that racial oppression is not real; and then finally, the idea that Jewish people wield positions of influence and harbor malicious intents against white people. (Lewis, 2018, p. 35)

In the specific case of the AIN, this form of radicalisation particularly occurs when influencers with differing ideologies collaborate. A significant example is when libertarian or conservative influencers with mainstream audiences invite white nationalists onto their channels, thereby introducing alternative frameworks for understanding the world (Lewis, 2018). These content- and interactivity-related dynamics are further reinforced by social media platforms' recommendation algorithms, which contribute to the creation of radicalisation pathways by steering users towards more radical and extreme content. For instance, Ribeiro et al. (2020) argue that user radicalisation is taking place on YouTube as extreme content gains visibility by being associated with mainstream content. This process is further enabled by YouTube's recommendation algorithms suggesting users content similar to what they consumed in the past. Likewise, Alfanano et al. (2018) argue that YouTube recommendations may contribute to self-radicalisation.

From the perspective of radicalisation pathways, the anonymous TikTok accounts are relevant to study. The videos published by these accounts are based on video clips collected from various sources, including mainstream TV news, clips of established right-wing and far-right politicians, as well as extracts from videos published by far-right alternative media and extreme far-right channels on YouTube. This means that the content – at least on the surface – ranges from

what is considered mainstream to the extreme far-right, and the extreme content could be said to 'piggyback' (Ribeiro et al., 2020) on the mainstream content.

This can be illustrated by a user liking a video published by one of the anonymous accounts showing a clip from mainstream news with the Swedish Prime Minister talking about immigration issues. Later, the same user is exposed to another video from the same account in which a far-right actor is arguing that Islam should be banned in Sweden. While the content differs in terms of sources, an intertextual connection is created between them as the topics are connected. By mixing clips from various sources, the anonymous account thus creates an intertextual bridge between the mainstream and extremism.

This may increase users' susceptibility to radical and extreme ideas, particularly as the TikTok algorithm reinforces this process by suggesting videos similar to what users have engaged with in the past. As a result, the user who liked the Prime Minister video will not only be exposed to more content from the same account but also from similar ones. Taken together, this highlights how TikTok's recommendation logic – in combination with anonymous accounts and intertextual remix strategies – may play into the radicalisation of its young user base.

Meme culture and video activism

The anonymous accounts' use of existing video clips from various sources is part of a wider trend in which visuals have become an essential part of political communication, particularly on digital platforms (Lu & Steele, 2019; Phillips, 2018). Image-and-text-based memes have been used by both marginalised communities and far-right actors for political purposes (Lu & Steele, 2019; Phillips, 2018). Memes produced and disseminated by the so-called alt-right movement, for instance, played an important role in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election campaign (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In a Swedish context, prior to the 2024 European Parliament election, the Sweden Democrats party's communications department spread memes with disinformation and derogatory portrayals of other politicians through anonymous social media accounts (Bolin, 2024). These memes, unlike traditional image-and-text-based memes, often included both videos and music. According to Abidin and Kaye (2021), the introduction and success of TikTok has led to contemporary memes often being multimodal, thus aligning with the construction of the videos published by the anonymous accounts.

However, beyond being part of the far-right meme culture, the videos published by the anonymous accounts may also be understood as a contemporary form of video activism as well as political remix and mashup practices. This phenomenon has historically been primarily associated with Leftist movements and actions for social change (e.g., Chanan, 2012; Hilderbrand, 2009). According to Askanius (2019, p. 1), writing about contemporary forms of video activism in online environments, 'the practices of remixing and re-framing moving images for political purposes have […] been around since the invention of film'. In a similar vein, Chanan (2012) refers to mashup videos as based on reused material from multiple sources recombined in new ways and often employed as a form of political opposition. A common and simple form of mashup is the image-text-based meme, as the image and text together create new meanings for old pictures.

While the terms mashup and remix are often used interchangeably, Harrison and Navas (2018) argue there is a notable difference between the two. A defining characteristic of the mashup is that its elements operate together but remain discrete: 'Indeed, part of the success of the mashup has to do with the thrill of being able to identify these elements as they take on new meanings in the process of their combination' (Harrison & Navas, 2018, p. 197). When elements from different contexts are combined in a mashup, a 'third meaning' (Barthes, 1977) can emerge – one that is felt rather than fully explained.

Although mashup videos may differ in terms of form and content, they have five characteristics in common: (1) They appropriate mass media audiovisual source material without permission. (2) They comment on, deconstruct, or challenge media narratives, dominant myths, social norms, and traditional power structures. (3) They modify the messages of the original material and also reshape its visual or structural form. (4) They are intended for general audiences or do-it-yourself communities rather than the elite. (5) They rely on grassroots distribution methods – previously, VHS tape duplicating circles and underground screenings, today, often published on YouTube (McIntosh, 2012).

From these aspects, the videos published by the anonymous TikTok accounts can be defined as political mashup videos. Most often these videos are based on clips from mainstream TV news, of established right-wing and far-right politicians, or extracts from far-right alternative media and influencer's videos published on YouTube. These are taken out of their original context and used to promote far-right ideas and ideology by adding text overlays, graphic elements, and music. However, they significantly differ from historical Left movement video activism in

terms of political purpose. Instead of promoting social change and targeting the elites, the TikTok videos promote far-right narratives and target immigrants in general, Muslims, and LGBTQ+ people. This difference is crucial since it demonstrates how far-right actors adopt activist formats and styles previously used by social justice movements to make their exclusionary ideas appear as if they are part of a discourse that challenges dominant power structures – even though they ultimately aim to reaffirm traditional power hierarchies. This allows them to create an emotional impact and a sense of grassroots engagement, which blurs the boundaries between protest and propaganda.

Analytical framework

Since the videos analysed are multimodal by combining video clips, text overlays, graphical elements, and music, multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is employed. According to this approach, texts do not solely create meaning through language but also through visual attributes and components, encompassing elements like images, color, and layout (Machin, 2013). Furthermore, within MCDA all modes are framed as one field or domain and jointly treated 'as one connected cultural resource for (representation as) meaning-making by members of a social group at a particular moment' (Kress, 2010, p. 38). This implies that all modes employed in any text, or text-like entity, need to be described considering its unique material and historical characteristics, and there should also be a set of terms that can be applied universally across all modes for a comprehensive analysis (Kress, 2010). Analysing the videos, thus, requires examination on different levels, both of the different modes individually and as an integrated, coherent unit.

The analysis of the modes includes the interpretation of images and videos. This involves analysing how social actors are represented in the videos (Way, 2021), and distinguishing what the videos and images denote and connote – meaning what they document and what specific ideas and concepts they represent in a given cultural or political context (Lindgren & Krutrök, 2023). Regarding other modes, the analysis focuses on how text overlays (verbally) and graphics such as emojis (visually) function as strategic elements to frame the message and guide viewers toward the intended interpretation of the videos. Additionally, the strategic ideological or emotional use of music is analysed.

As noted above, different modes must be analysed both individually and in relation to each other. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) further argue that these modes should be analysed in an

integrated manner. This study adopts this holistic approach – not only because viewers experience the videos as unified compositions – but also because the interpretation of each mode is shaped by how it interacts with other modes within the video. In the context of this study, this is important as the persuasive and ideological function of the videos often relies on how video, text overlays, graphics, and music are strategically selected and combined to reinforce each other.

As a complement to MCDA, social network analysis (SNA) is used as an exploratory tool to map the relationships between accounts and the themes and sources represented in their video content. This allows for a systematic selection of themes and narratives for in-depth multimodal and discursive analysis. Additionally, it may reveal which accounts function as bridges between mainstream content and radical narratives, thereby highlighting the connections that facilitate the normalisation of far-right discourse. This will inform the in-depth analysis regarding which particular accounts to focus on. The coding of each video by theme and source forms the basis for constructing two-mode affiliation networks that are presented in the Empirical data section below.

Empirical data

The data for analysis consists of 139 videos collected from 14 Swedish anonymous TikTok accounts expressing far-right attitudes and rhetoric. The accounts were identified through hashtag searches such as '#invandring' (migration), '#återvandring' (repatriation), '#folkutbyte' (the great replacement), and '#sverigedemokraterna' (the Sweden Democrats). Additional accounts were discovered by snowball sampling, primarily based on follows, comments, and shares associated with the initial set. Each selected video has over 100,000 views on TikTok and was published between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2024 (see Table 1 below). Focusing on the most popular videos enables an analysis of how viral content is constructed both thematically and modally, offering insights into how far-right discourses are mobilised and disseminated on TikTok in Sweden.

TikTok account	Followers	Likes	Most watched	Collected videos
1. alternative_view01	1 135	53 200	274 600	2
2. cfonth	3 362	99 700	383 900	5
3. free.sweden	5 006	211 300	370 800	9
4. oppnaogonen4	4 474	104 300	732 000	5
5. oppnaogonen7	2 422	47 000	163 300	4
6. oppnaogonen9	1 870	30 100	360 100	2
7. oppnaogonen10	1 023	25 100	130 900	1
8. oppnaogonen12	6 730	271 400	995 800	14
9. oppnaogonen200	2 319	77 000	493 100	4
10. saving_sweden	22 200	762 400	821 600	47
11. sunt_fornuft	9 088	522 300	2 400 000	15
12. sure399	3 537	239 500	330 200	6
13. swedish_grace	7 108	201 500	661 200	12
14. swepolitics_	12 700	355 700	1 000 000	13
				Total number of videos: 139

Table 1. *The Swedish anonymous accounts on TikTok expressing far-right attitudes and rhetoric that the videos are collected from between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2024.*

Based on the names of the channels, six accounts using variations of 'oppnaogonen' (open your eyes) appear to be related, although they may also simply be inspired by one another. Notable taglines expressing the ideological orientation of the accounts include, for example: 'Lets Discover The Truth #SaveSweden' (alternative_view01), 'Stop the Islamisation of Sweden!' (free.sweden), 'More humor and common sense are needed in society' (several oppnaogonen accounts), and 'WARNING: Controversial! Feel free to follow' (saving_sweden).

As a basis for the SNA, each collected video was coded according to its primary theme and the source of the video clip. Thereafter, two analyses were conducted, forming 'two-mode' networks that map connections between two distinct sets of entities, in this case, the accounts and themes (see Figure 1 below), and accounts and sources (see Figure 2 below). Such data structures are known as 'affiliation networks', as they map the memberships and connections of actors within broader structures (Hanneman & Riddle, 2011). Thus, the networks illustrate how the accounts affiliate with different themes and sources.

Figure 1 shows the connections between the dominant themes in the videos and the TikTok accounts. These themes are: 'Anti-Islam/-Muslim', 'Anti-immigration', and 'Immigration and Crime'. Figure 2 demonstrates how the accounts are connected to the major identifiable sources: 'Mainstream media', 'Far-right alternative media', and 'Far-right influencer'. Although all ac-

counts engage with some or all of these themes and sources, their engagement varies. Moreover, the SNA reveals clusters, with some accounts being clearly associated with a specific theme and source, while others – such as 'saving_sweden', 'oppnaogonen12', and 'swedish_grace' – are associated with multiple themes. These accounts both facilitate discursive overlap between the three themes and function as intertextual bridges between mainstream media and far-right outlets.

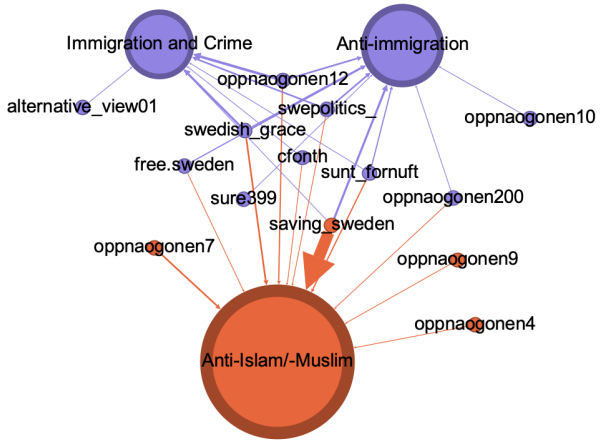

Figure 1. *Network visualisation of the three dominant themes in the TikTok videos. Larger nodes represent more frequent associations, and thicker edges indicate stronger account-theme connections. The clustering indicates that some accounts are associated with a certain theme, while others connect multiple themes and function as bridges between these.*

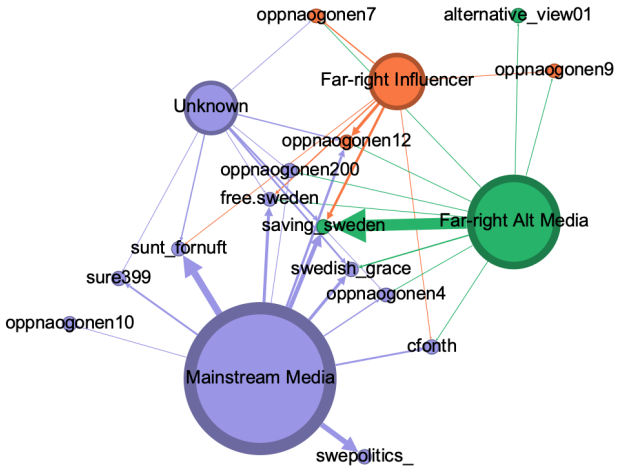

Figure 2. *Network visualisation of primary sources used by the anonymous TikTok accounts. Larger nodes indicate sources that appear more frequently in the videos, while thicker edges represent more frequent use of clips from a source. The clustering indicates that some accounts are associated with a certain source, while others connect multiple sources and function as bridges between these.*

Given the centrality of the 'Anti-Islam/-Muslim' theme in the discourse, this will form the primary focus of the in-depth multimodal and discursive analysis. Regarding the accounts, the focus will be on those connected to multiple sources to analyse how these may create radicali-

sation pathways by bridging mainstream content and radical narratives. Focusing particularly on this theme and these accounts provides a basis for exploring how far-right discourses are constructed, spread, and connected across sources and platforms – in line with the research questions.

Ethical issues and challenges

There are significant ethical issues and dilemmas related to the study, as it deals with potentially harmful and extremist online discourse. Even though the videos are sourced from public TikTok accounts, this does not necessarily mean they qualify as public data. However, following Elgesem (2015), who distinguishes between closed communities and public forums, I consider the videos public as they are intended for a broad audience without privacy expectations.

Protecting the privacy of individuals is crucial within Internet research ethics (Ess, 2015). Since the accounts are anonymous, the identity of the actors running them does not require protection, but some individuals appearing in the videos may need to be anonymised. This includes minor influencers and interviewees from mainstream media whose names will be removed and faces blurred. Far-right actors whose identities are already public will not be anonymised.

Studying and citing far-right TikTok videos may unintentionally amplify harmful rhetoric, increase exposure to far-right actors, and overemphasise their significance. In this specific case, the bridging between far-right narratives and mainstream media content may, for instance, be more of a coincidence than the result of a strategic decision. The study may, therefore, ascribe more strategic communication skills to the anonymous accounts than is actually the case. This potential overestimation should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. According to scholars (e.g., Askanius, 2019; Blee, 2003; Mondon & Winter, 2020), this represents an ethical dilemma within studies of far-right actors and discourses. This risk must be weighed against the benefit of understanding far-right narrative construction and dissemination strategies – a tension that requires ongoing critical reflection throughout my entire PhD project

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