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THE FAR RIGHT, REACTIONARY PLATFORMISATION AND PROGRESSIVE RESPONSES

Bharath Ganesh



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FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

Avenue des Arts 46
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

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ON ETERON

ETERON – INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Leokoriou 38-40
10553 Athens (Greece)
www.eteron.org
@eteronOrg

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https://fundacaorespublica.pt
@respublicafundacao

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The far right in Europe is thriving on social media platforms. This policy study argues that this is the product of two entangled dynamics: (1) **reactionary platformisation** or the structural transformation of digital public spheres, led by social media corporations, in a manner that systematically advantages the far right; and (2) far-right **metapolitics**, which refers to a strategy of cultural agitation that has mainstreamed far-right ideas and perspectives and developed a transnational, networked digital ecosystem.

This policy study argues that social media corporations have ultimately enabled the far right and systematically failed to limit its reach on their platforms. Today, this has led to the capture of social media platforms by reactionary billionaires, with Elon Musk being the epitome of this development. Social media corporations' policies, content moderation, algorithms and advertising systems have all contributed to the rise of the far right and created a rigged playing field that benefits anti-democratic actors. The far right has also been highly effective at adapting to this environment and has used digital technology to its advantage. The far right has been very effective at networking a variety of different types of actors, from influencers, alternative media, everyday users, subcultures and politicians to shape media agendas and make extreme ideas both more visible and acceptable in public debate.

Progressives have not developed an effective response to reactionary platformisation and far-right metapolitics. This policy study hopes to orient progressives towards a bold and aggressive agenda to fight back.

This policy study puts forth the following recommendations:

- Progressives should develop a **robust digital ecosystem** to rival the far right by following the 5D model discussed in Chapter 3: **deepen; disrupt; discipline; distribute; and develop**.

- Progressives must **expand the actors in their political networks** to include ideological entrepreneurs, engage alternative media, promote civil society, and perform progressive politics in platforms' subcultural styles and vernaculars.

- Progressives must develop **deep stories**; focus on **cultivating audiences** on social media platforms; and encourage **coordinated authentic behaviour** to amplify progressive candidates, ideas and perspectives. This strategy must be wider than commenting on policy proposals but instead engage in emotionally resonant narrations and performances on social media platforms.

- Progressives must be bold in using oppositional research to **discredit** the far right.

- Progressives should **mobilise anger, pride and hope** as productive emotions to tell stories and build their audiences. They should not be shy about using outrage against the far right.

- Progressives can engage in **transgressive cultural styles** to distance themselves from status-quo politics "as usual" and engage audiences through humour, irony and authenticity.

- Progressives should **seize the techlash**, capitalising on mounting frustration with technology companies and social media, framing US-based billionaires as an elite colonising the European public sphere, invading Europeans' privacy and eroding their digital rights.

Progressives have no time to lose. While digital campaigning may seem like only one part of a much bigger story or a distraction from the real, everyday issues that affect Europeans, the far right's effective development of a digital ecosystem and ability to normalise extremist narratives is a fundamental asset they use to win elections. Progressives may have a popular policy agenda, but without an effective strategy to counter the far right grounded in the development of a progressive digital ecosystem for engaging citizens, they stand little chance to fight back against the far right's ascent.

INTRODUCTION

Far-right movements, politicians and political parties appear to be thriving on digital platforms today. This policy study contends that the rise of the far right in the past decade is contingent on structural changes in political communication and social media platforms and effective long-term organising within and beyond traditional political spaces. The far right has succeeded in a digital communications environment that has been uniquely hospitable to its forms of agitation, organising and information exchange. This means any response to the far right must account for these structural features and develop counterstrategies that go beyond challenging the far right at an ideological level or attempting to outflank them on key issues such as immigration.

The rise of the far right online is no doubt partly due to its effective organising in a public sphere that has been transformed by social media technologies. In a recent reflection on digital media and the public sphere, philosopher Jurgen Habermas argues that this transformation tends towards corporate control and propaganda, as well as tilting towards entertainment, emotion and personalisation.[1] This structural transformation has created digital public spheres that are highly vulnerable to propaganda and manipulation by the far right. This is the outcome of two converging trajectories. First, the rise of hyperpartisan and extremist information networks after 9/11 gave the far right fertile grounds for expanding its political visibility through the normalisation of Islamophobia and the emergence of networked racist politics. Second, the insistence of Silicon Valley companies on a naïve libertarianism and the reactionary ideologies of many investors and founders enabled almost two decades of hospitability to far-right ideology and hatred that has completely reshaped information flows, while regulators have been slow to respond and often themselves captured by these companies through ideological harmonies or lobbying efforts. The rise of social media and the authoritarian, illiberal impulses of social media corporations have created a public sphere that structurally disadvantages progressives.

This policy study provides the foundation for one part of a wider, comprehensive progressive response to the far right on digital platforms. The policy study develops a short-term strategy for progressives to be more effective at challenging the far right online on social media platforms, a communications sphere that is rigged against progressives. To formulate this strategy, it is necessary to understand the structural factors behind the far right's success on social media platforms. This success is based on two processes. First, the process of *reactionary platformisation*, which refers to the process by which social media corporations have, through their ideologies, policies and corporate power, created a communications environment that advantages the far right. Second, it unpacks the process of far-right *metapolitics*, which refers to the strategy of cultural and political agitation that has been successful for the far right on social media platforms. This foundation helps progressives understand the structural challenges that they face, but also how the far right has tactically brought together a set of key actors that span influencers, digital subcultures, intellectuals and ideological entrepreneurs to make far-right ideas palatable and even mainstream. The far right took advantage of the hospitable environment of social media to build an ecosystem of diversified actors that it continues to rely on for electoral success and agenda setting. Part 2 of the policy study then develops a strategic response for progressives. This response lays out a framework for thinking about a progressive digital ecosystem that can compete with far-right metapolitics in what the study introduces as the 5D model: deepen; disrupt; discipline; distribute; and develop. Thinking about an ecosystem of actors – not unlike the formal structures the far right has utilised – offers an original perspective that progressives can use

to contest the far right in the public sphere. Part 2 then moves on to cover rhetorical strategies for progressives to push through these ecosystems: emotional narratives incorporating anger, pride and hope; engaging in transgressive styles; and a concrete focus on seizing the techlash.

The ideas and strategies in this policy study are deliberately focused on the short-to-medium term. If platforms are fundamentally hospitable to the far right and reticent to act in defence of democracy, in the long term, it is imperative that progressives think about how to transform digital public spheres into a more democratic form. This could include sovereign development of technology, effective use of regulatory measures such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), and conceiving of transformative policy. All of these long-term strategies are beyond the scope of this policy study. To realise these goals, progressives must contest and win elections in the short term because the vast majority of Europeans are on these platforms now. Developing a strategy to fight back on a rigged playing field demands a short-term strategy oriented to the current exigencies of our platformised public sphere.

PART 1

THE FAR RIGHT AND SOCIAL MEDIA: REACTIONARY PLATFORMISATION AND METAPOLITICS

CHAPTER 1: REACTIONARY PLATFORMISATION AND THE FAR RIGHT

Social media promised global connection, innovation and even liberation in the 2000s and 2010s. Politicians, civil servants and governments treated social media corporations with extraordinary respect, employing a light touch on the industry until the late 2010s. Social media corporations were seen as credibly progressive, liberal institutions. History proved otherwise: not only is Silicon Valley the home of a radical form of reactionary ideology, after Donald Trump's second inauguration, these corporations dropped their performative centrism and showed that they are fully captured by reactionary ideology. Moreover, social media corporations have exercised their considerable power over the past decades to ensure that their platforms remain a hospitable place for the far right. This chapter lays out the processes by which social media corporations created structural advantages for the far right.

Introducing reactionary platformisation

Reactionary ideology is hard-coded into processes, algorithms and systems of social media and informs how companies run and govern their platforms. To understand this, the concept of platformisation is helpful; it is an academic term that refers to how the infrastructure and economic models of social media platforms are transforming how culture is produced, how economies function and how politicians communicate with people. Furthermore, it means that social media corporations are increasingly responsible for the governance of our fundamental rights and economies, giving them the power to shape the public sphere in alignment with their corporate values.[2] Platformisation has changed political campaigning, which has undergone substantial structural shifts, requiring new communications strategies, arenas in which to reach voters, new technologies and the emerging centrality of data.[3]

Social media corporations have created a playing field rigged in the far right's favour. This is partly economic, but it is also ideologically driven, in line with the libertarian insistence on absolute freedom of expression expressed by corporate executives.[4] It is crucial that progressives understand how the attention economy controlled and managed by social media corporations is designed to favour the far right, a process this policy study terms *reactionary platformisation*. *Reactionary platformisation* is defined herein as the creation of infrastructures, economic processes and content governance frameworks, and the advancement of ideologies of social media corporations that have reorganised digital publics in a manner that advances the visibility and acceptability of far-right actors and ideas. The remainder of this section discusses how reactionary platformisation emerged.

Naïve libertarianism

As illustrated in Figure 1, reactionary platformisation has emerged in three stages: the first stage characterised by libertarian ideologies of free-speech absolutism; a second stage of minimalist interventionism; and a third and final stage of reactionary capture. Islamophobia played a central role in the rise of reactionary platformisation. Catalysed by 9/11, blogs and social media tools were central to the growth of the "counter-jihad" and transnational anti-Muslim activism.[5] These new technologies allowed determined activists to circumvent editorial standards in mainstream

outlets and enabled them to engage with both far-right parties and street movements.[6] Platforms were permissive with the counter-jihad, and ultimately this became the foundation for the "alt-right" and Identitarians that form the central digital cultures of the far right in Europe and North America today.[7]

Overall, platforms' rules were substantially more restrictive than hate speech laws, but social media corporations were reticent to apply these rules to the counter-jihad and far right. During this time, hate speech – particularly directed at Muslims – was quite common and organised hate movements, such as the English Defence League and PEGIDA, flourished on social media with minimal intervention from the platforms themselves (despite the rules that could have stemmed their growth). At the same time, platforms took swift and decisive action against ISIS accounts,[8] but did not do so with the far right, as this was politically sensitive.[9] Social media platforms' reticence to act on the far right in this period was driven primarily by a naïve commitment to absolute free speech. Platforms did not police content based on legality or even their own rules; their reticence to act was driven by an abstract commitment to free expression, even when it was known the content was created by inauthentic spam accounts run by a Russian troll farm.[10]

Figure 1. Reactionary platformisation timeline.



Minimal content governance and professionalisation

Platforms' naïve libertarianism did not last long after Brexit, Trump's 2016 victory and the mounting evidence that platforms were rife with hate speech. A shift in platform responses really began after the August 2017 "#UniteTheRight" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. At the rally, various alt-right, far-right and white-supremacist organisations prominent online were represented, and a counter protester was killed in a vehicular attack by a far-right supporter. Pressure mounted on social media corporations, and their platforms began to take more serious action, with Twitter, for example, the first to start a "purge" of far-right extremist accounts and Facebook

took action on "organised hate groups".[11] Instead of destabilising networks of the far right online, platforms singled out only the most extreme voices and acted on those, while leaving many decisively important actors online, taking the most minimal and conservative approach possible.

The Twitter "purge" took down the most explicit and extreme accounts associated with the alt-right, but left many others associated with a spuriously defined set of "less extreme" actors untouched.[12] Platforms often accepted the idea that some content is "awful but lawful", but it is important to remember that platform speech rules are much stricter, as they are private spaces; platforms were simply selective with how they used their authority.[13] This led to inconsistent moderation and enabled the far-right voices remaining on platforms to share allegations of "out-of-control" censorship by social media corporations. This distinction was also cemented through the US-based Anti-Defamation League's distinction of the "alt-right" and the "alt-light". Ultimately, such distinctions enabled platforms to avoid enforcing their own content rules that could have been politically controversial for them. Thus, in the years between 2017 and 2021, platforms began to take some action on the far right,[14] but these responses were relatively constrained.

This minimal strategy of governance showed its limits in 2020. Foreign disinformation and propaganda campaigns became more endemic. With the pandemic, medical misinformation and conspiracy theories were frequently going viral. Furthermore, far-right terrorist attacks were increasingly frequent, and Donald Trump himself spearheaded an election conspiracy campaign that culminated in the 6 January Capitol Insurrection. It became untenable in the early 2020s for platforms to maintain a light touch on the far right, so things slowly began to change. In response to these challenges in the late 2010s and early 2020s, platforms developed in-house teams on countering violent extremism, civic integrity and disinformation.[15] As platforms began to professionalise what became known as trust and safety teams, they were able to take more regular and justified action on election manipulation, disinformation and far-right extremism.[16] Donald Trump's tweets during Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 that Meta saw as incitement to violence and the coordinated actions platforms took in response to the #StopTheSteal campaign showed genuine signs that trust and safety was leading beyond a minimalist paradigm towards a more complex and comprehensive framework.[17]

Reactionary capture

Ultimately, the trust and safety industry's moment of maturity was a product of a specific political conjuncture rather than a durable institutional commitment. Platforms' minimal governance of the far right begins to unravel decisively from 2022 onwards. The trust and safety industry was dealt two rapid shocks. First, the substantial increase in interest rates following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered major layoffs across the technology sector, with trust and safety workers hit particularly hard, as companies wagered that AI-based techniques would compensate for the thinned-down workforce.[18] Second, and more consequentially, Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in October 2022 cemented and accelerated this trajectory. Musk rapidly dismantled the platform's trust and safety team from 230 to approximately 20 staff; disbanded the content moderation council he had promised; ended free API access for researchers; and replaced fact-checking with Community Notes that mobilised a "free expression" approach, which left moderation functions to crowdsourcing, resulting in uneven and at times biased fact-checking.[19] Almost all policies that were relaxed addressed grievances of the far right, reducing COVID-19 guidelines, weakening harassment rules and dropping provisions on electoral disinformation, while new restrictions were introduced that reflected far-right moral priorities, such as strengthened "doxxing" rules, which were applied selectively against journalists and activists critical of Musk.[20] By late 2024, Musk was openly amplifying far-right content on his platform, reinstating previously banned white nationalist accounts, and directly intervening in European electoral politics through public endorsements of the AfD and Reform UK.

The ideological underpinnings of this shift are not accidental. What is now unfolding represents the political maturation of a reactionary tendency that was always latent in the libertarian, anti-regulatory culture of the technology industry.[21] The entanglement of Big Tech and the far right's political project is made explicit in the words of Joel Kaplan, long-time Meta executive. After Zuckerberg announced Meta's abandonment of fact-checking weeks before Trump's inauguration, Kaplan stated:

> *"We saw a lot of societal and political pressure all in the direction of more content moderation, more censorship, and we've got a real opportunity. We've got a new administration and a new president coming in who are big defenders of free expression, and that makes a difference. One of the things we've experienced is that when you have a US president administration that's pushing for censorship, it just makes it open season for other governments around the world that don't even have the protections of the First Amendment to really put pressure on US companies. We're going to work with President Trump to push back on that kind of thing around the world".*[22]

Kaplan is not describing a principled commitment to free expression; he is describing a political alignment between a US technology corporation, the Trump administration and a shared project of dismantling democratic governance of digital public spheres – particularly with the EU in its sights. Following Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2025, the EU and its DSA is a clear target.[23] Today, reactionary platformisation is embedded in US foreign policy and increasingly prevalent in the ideological trajectories of Meta and X.

Corporate power and reactionary platformisation

Having provided the general contours behind the emergence of reactionary platformisation, this section provides a brief overview of how social media corporations have, deliberately or not, allowed the far right to flourish on their platforms. This section makes the case that corporate power – the power to govern speech on platforms, design algorithms, manage advertising markets, engage in lobbying and self-regulation, and counter foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) – is a key vector for the rise of the far right. Through content moderation, algorithms, advertising, lobbying and multistakeholder institutions, and (not) responding to foreign information manipulation, platforms have systematically provided structural benefits for the far right.

Content moderation

Content moderation refers to platforms' practices of flagging, reviewing and enforcing rules on user-generated content.[24] Even at their very inception, platforms had established various rules on their platforms, usually named "community guidelines". In early years, flagging violations to these rules were "crowdsourced", but over time corporations exerted more control by expanding content moderation teams (usually hired as poorly compensated contractors) and later through automation and AI.[25] Platforms had substantial latitude to make content decisions and have generally provided cover for the far right on the grounds that it represented legitimate political speech, even when it clearly violated community guidelines.[26] As Twitter employees noted, enforcing their rules with full consistency meant that many US Republican politicians would be affected.[27] Systematic audits of platform content show minimal attention to the far right, focusing only on the most extreme content and recommending ineffective counter-narratives rather than enforcing rules, indicating what investigators and auditors have identified as clear double standards.[28] Content moderation has always been a matter of platforms' discretion and the record is relatively clear that they have erred on the side of exempting the far right from rules violations rather than enforcing their own community guidelines in order to avoid controversy.

Algorithms

Algorithms, which shape how content circulates and what content or groups are recommended to

users, are also an important feature of reactionary platformisation. Academic research demonstrates that algorithms recommend far-right extremism and hate speech on user feeds and "for you" pages.[29] Platforms have been aware of how their content recommendation algorithms serve extremism and avoided action. On Facebook, internal research highlighted that 64% of extremist group joins were due to the platform's group recommendation system, a finding that executives buried.[30] Reports by two non-profit organisations found that Facebook's "Related Pages" served recommendations of far-right pages that existed on its platform to users of white-supremacist pages.[31] Bloomberg News reported that executives prioritised engagement metrics over taking down far-right content, conspiracy theories and disinformation. Executives at Facebook and YouTube let their algorithms continue to serve extremist content to keep users engaged.[32] A recent study of TikTok found evidence of an algorithmically driven negative feedback loop "wherein users became more dependent on radical content", suggesting that "machine learning algorithms of the platform have become tools for social profiling, identifying racial tensions cues that create and deepen radicalization".[33] Executive inaction and refusal to limit algorithmic recommendations, even after being aware of the problem, have substantially enabled the growth of the far right.

Advertising

Advertising is another key arena of corporate power supporting the far right. Audits have found that advertising content may be subject to less scrutiny and content controls than other posts.[34] Research into social media advertising is quite challenging in terms of data availability and much has focused on Meta platforms.[35] A study of US advertising on Facebook found that advertising to ideologically harmonious users was cheaper for advertisers than trying to reach ideologically non-aligned users, limiting the spread of diverse views to audiences because Facebook's algorithm makes reaching users with different beliefs more expensive.[36] A study on the 2019 European Parliament elections found that in Italy and Spain far-right parties paid the least for advertisement impressions (placements on user devices) and that populist parties (including far-left, Eurosceptic and far-right parties) obtained 40% of all impressions with only 21% of the spend.[37] The advertising systems in social media are skewed to allow the far right to reach like-minded audiences cheaply, making it more expensive for ideologically unaligned parties to communicate to these constituencies.

Corporate power in multistakeholder governance

In the past decade, increased scrutiny of social media platforms has led to the development of multistakeholder fora for "platform governance", a term scholars use to refer to arrangements in which platforms, governments, civil society organisations and other actors collaborate to produce voluntary standards and technical procedures for managing harmful content online, focusing on industry-led self-regulation.[38] Two examples are the Christchurch Call foundation and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). The latter has a shared database of terrorist content that major platforms use to moderate content.[39] Alongside these initiatives, there is also an ecosystem of "counter-extremism" actors that develop strategic communication approaches designed to redirect or inoculate audiences against extremist narratives.[40] These self-regulatory initiatives are structurally limited to how they deal with the far right, focusing on counter-narratives and redirecting users rather than rules enforcement, paying minimal attention to platforms' structural features that support the far right. In GIFCT's case, it only addresses white supremacist and far-right content in an ad-hoc manner while incorporating jihadist and Islamist terrorism by default in its shared moderation systems.[41] The shift in the political economy of Silicon Valley, culminating in Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter/X, Meta's rollback of fact-checking and the broader alignment of major technology corporations with the Trump administration, has dismantled the limited progress made through multistakeholder governance. The trust and safety industry, the trusted flagger networks, and the content moderation teams that

were the operational backbone of these initiatives have been dramatically reduced. Without statutory regulation like the DSA, little improvement can be expected, though scholars find that platforms have answered this with a focus on legal compliance that replaces the more holistic focus the trust and safety industry had developed.[42]

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)

The far right's transnational digital ecosystem does not operate in isolation from state-level geopolitical actors, a point directly acknowledged in the DSA's reference to systemic risks and the emerging European Democracy Shield. Platforms were largely inactive in the face of this interference: Facebook, Twitter and Google disclosed to the US Senate in 2017 that Russian-linked accounts had purchased thousands of political advertisements and reached hundreds of millions of users,[43] information the platforms had possessed for months without acting on it.[44] They invented a term for this kind of manipulative activity: coordinated inauthentic behaviour. It is important to note that these Russian-led, Russian state-linked operations did not need to invent new narratives; they found a pre-existing far-right ecosystem producing content on migration, Islam, European identity and anti-gender mobilisation and amplified it.[45] The result is an information environment in which it is difficult to disentangle organic far-right content from state-amplified FIMI, as both reinforce each other.[46]

The USA also represents an emerging FIMI vector that progressives should monitor. Elon Musk's public backing of the far right in Europe and the return to X of many far-right actors suspended by Twitter is an example. US platforms are rolling back protections against the far right and the Trump administration seeks to undermine EU regulatory standards. The DSA is now under direct geopolitical pressure from the Trump administration. European progressives should insist that the DSA is not censorship; it is the enforcement of European fundamental rights in European digital public spheres. The DSA's risk assessment and algorithmic transparency requirements have the potential to expose and challenge the structural features of platform architecture that have made the far right's digital ecosystem so effective. This efficacy is dependent on the DSA's provisions being used to their full extent, including against the amplification of far-right content that contributes to the systemic risks the regulation was designed to address.

From content moderation to minimal responses to FIMI, social media corporations have frequently permitted, rather than challenged, the far right on their platforms. Social media corporations tend to be run by billionaires and investors that have affinities with reactionary ideology or are themselves fully invested in it. Two decades of platformisation have shown that social media corporations have made their platforms hospitable to the far right and have used their power to maintain a minimal response to hatred, extremism, conspiracy, disinformation and anti-democratic speech online. While many debates tend to focus on the efficacy of the far right online, the far right has benefitted from systematic and structural support provided by social media corporations through indirect ways. In the context of reactionary capture today, this structural support is explicit. However, that does not mean progressives can ignore the far right's effective use of platforms, which is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: METAPOLITICS AND THE FAR RIGHT'S DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

Despite the substantial structural advantages for the far right on social media, these alone do not explain its success online. The far right's digital efficacy is also due to a strategy of cultural agitation it refers to as *metapolitics*. Metapolitics can broadly be defined as a strategy of focusing on shaping cultural norms and perceptions to make far-right ideas seem like "common sense" before engaging in the political arena. Metapolitics has had two major effects: it has helped the far right launder its racist ideologies, but it has also created the foundation for a digital ecosystem that the far right has been able to sustain *between* elections. This has allowed the far right to capture attention on social media platforms' activity outside of traditional political spheres and build an active audience that can be activated during campaigns. The far right's digital ecosystem is multi-layered and complex, enabling transnational connectivity[47] and effective agenda setting and mainstreaming;[48] incorporates alternative media;[49] and makes politics a subcultural, participatory activity.[50] While the content of these developments is anti-democratic, the forms of cultural agitation developed by the far right for the social media age bear important lessons for progressives.

Historical and ideological context of metapolitics

In the aftermath of World War II, fascist movements across Europe faced a fundamental problem: open advocacy for racial hierarchy and authoritarian politics was no longer viable. The response of a generation of far-right intellectuals, organised primarily around the French *Nouvelle Droite* (ND, or "New Right"), was not to abandon their political vision but to pursue it by changing culture rather than through direct political action.[51] In developing this strategy, the far right took ideas about hegemony and common sense from the Italian Marxist and anti-fascist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who argued that dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion or control of political institutions and parliaments but also through shaping cultural norms and "common sense", those taken-for-granted assumptions through which people understand the world.[52] The goal was therefore not to win elections but to win the battle of ideas in civil society, media and culture to make far-right ideas appear natural, reasonable and uncontroversial before they ever entered the formal political arena. This is explicit in Andrew Breitbart's slogan, "politics is downstream from culture".[53] While metapolitics began as a relatively elite intellectual movement, it was not successful until it exploited the permissive speech environment of social media.

Central to this project was the concept of *ethnopluralism*. Rather than advocate openly for racial hierarchy, the ND developed a framework that argued for the preservation of cultural difference. All cultures, it claimed, are equal, but they can only survive if they remain territorially bounded and ethnically homogeneous. Multiculturalism and migration, in this view, do not enrich societies but destroy them, erasing the cultural particularity of "native" populations.[54] By associating culture with genetics and territory, ethnopluralism invented a "newer" way to speak the language of race without immediately registering as racist.[55] By signifying "culture" as genetically encoded and territorially fixed, the ND articulates a politics of racial exclusion that is shielded from the charge of racism. Understanding this is essential for progressives: the far right's language of "culture", "heritage" and "identity" is a rhetorical strategy with roots in post-war fascist thought. This revision enabled far-right ideas to be more widely palatable.

Metapolitics and social media

For several decades, the ND's metapolitics remained an elite project. The real breakthrough came with the rise of digital technology and social media. The alt-right, which is a primarily Anglophone far-right cultural movement that emerged in the 2010s and played a key subcultural role in Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, adapted the ND's metapolitical strategy to the affordances of digital platforms.[56] Through the savvy use of algorithms, humour, memes and subcultural language, citizen "journalism", and transnational networks of "influencers", the alt-right opened new horizons for metapolitical activism. These techniques were also taken up by movements in Europe, particularly the Identitarian movement, which carried forward what researchers have termed *Metapolitics 2.0*.[57] The mainstreaming of far-right ideas, which refers to the process by which once-marginal positions become acceptable in mainstream political discourse,[58] is the intended outcome of a decades-long metapolitical project that has found its most powerful vehicle in social media.

Metapolitics 2.0 represents a qualitative transformation in how the far right pursues cultural change:

> *"Metapolitics 2.0 is not just produced by a small club of intellectuals. Metapolitics has now been 'democratized': influencers, activists, movements and prosumers now produce and reproduce metapolitical discourse. As a result, metapolitics has changed form. It is not limited to articles, essays or papers anymore. We can now see memes, trolling, hashtags, stickers and posters, but also comments, likes, shares, videos, clothing, conspiracy theories and vaporwave aesthetics as metapolitical action".*[59]

This democratisation of metapolitics has had profound consequences. Far-right ideas that were once confined to specialist journals and fringe networks are now circulated at scale through social media platforms, amplified by algorithms optimised for engagement, and normalised through repetition across countless channels and accounts. Rather than influencers, it is useful to conceive of these partisans as "ideological entrepreneurs" who "manufacture and sell tendentious political ideas, analyses, images, and slogans" governed by "the economic and celebrity logics that drive social media".[60] These influencers exploit the values of authenticity and transparency to advance reactionary politics,[61] while managing to maintain a veneer of legitimacy that keeps them within the bounds of platform rules on hate speech and extremism. The far right has also been effective at developing subcultural communities online: networks of users who share a common interpretive framework, coded language and in-group identity across borders. Dog whistles and coded symbols allow far-right actors to communicate with their audiences while evading content moderation.[62] Far-right meme culture, conspiracy subcultures such as QAnon and the broader ecosystem of reactionary digital politics all function as forms of metapolitical activism, shaping how millions of people understand migration, identity, gender and democracy.[63]

Far-right metapolitics as a digital ecosystem

Understanding far-right metapolitics as a constellation of varied actors is crucial for making sense of its success as a digital strategy. The far right's transnational agenda-setting capacity depends on a layered infrastructure: coordinated ideological discourse; civil society networks and activist groups developing and localising messages; and digital subcultures contributing to transnational dissemination of far-right ideas. By bringing together the eight different key actor types in Table 1 below, the far right has created a networked ecosystem that has made far-right ideas and values visible and acceptable. Most importantly, it shows that the far right's success is not simply due to an effective communication strategy but rather based on sustained investment across a "fuzzy" set of actors with no clear boundaries between political parties and a broader network of actors that predispose audiences to far-right ideas and values and recirculate and amplify the rhetoric of far-right political parties and candidates.[64] This

digital ecosystem enables transnational agenda setting, with emotionally driven narratives about immigration generating horizontal linkages between far-right political parties and candidates, ideological entrepreneurs, and alternative media across the EU. At the same time, we see substantial message discipline, as this digital ecosystem focuses on specific issues in a consistent manner across countries, with immigration being a key example. These transnational narratives are also localised in national politics.[65] Furthermore, coherence of the far-right's transnational agenda allows it to shape both mainstream political parties' responses and issue focus, as well as the relevant topics discussed in the mainstream press.

Table 1. Key actor types in far-right metapolitics.

Transnational activists in social movements
• Individuals that represent and organise as part of a far-right social movement • Example: Martin Sellner[66]
Intellectuals and think tanks
• Individuals and/or institutions that provide thought leadership for far-right metapolitics • Example: Mathias Corvinus Collegium[67]
Publishers
• Private and/or not-for-profit publishers of far-right ideas in books, magazines, pamphlets and other formats • Example: Arktos Media[68]
Ideological entrepreneurs
• Individuals that sell far-right political ideas, analyses and perspectives on social media platforms to cultivate far-right audiences • Example: Eva Vlaarderingerbroek[69]
Alternative media
• Online and/or print media outlets that publish stories with a far-right perspective and use sensationalism to draw readers from mainstream outlets • Example: COMPACT Magazine[70]
Digital subcultures
• Loosely bound ensembles of users on social media platforms that weaponise memes, irony, vernacular and algorithmic systems to share far-right ideologies and radicalise mainstream political discourse • Example: Red-pill "meme" and the manosphere[71]
Parties, politicians and campaigns
• Political parties, politicians and campaigns respond to the cultural perspectives developed by other actors and incorporate them into their political agendas • Example: AfD and Remigration[72]
Alternative platforms
• Social media platforms designed specifically to cater to far-right actors when banned or suspended from other platforms, or serve as more stable archives for controversial or extreme content likely to face content moderation • Example: Rumble[73]

The far-right remigration agenda is an instructive example to understand this digital ecosystem in action. Briefly, remigration is a proposal for the termination of the asylum system and repatriation of illegal migrants, repatriation of legal migrants with temporary visas for residence or work permits that present an "economic, criminal or cultural burden", and forced denaturalisation of migrants that maintain "loyalty to foreign nations or radical religions".[74] This represents an extreme exclusionary vision that essentially calls for the mass deportation of all migrants the far right might deem a "burden", including EU citizens.[75] This proposal is a response to the diagnostic "great replacement" conspiracy theory of Renaud Camus that has been widely utilised by far-right digital networks on social media and through alternative media sources.[76] This represents the convergence of "intellectual" work from far-right thinkers, amplified through far-right alternative media, and extensively amplified and recirculated by far-right digital subcultures, eventually becoming consolidated by a far-right activist (in this case, Martin Sellner) and articulated through rallies and summits attended by leaders of far-right political parties, many of which have backed the policy.[77]

The remigration case illustrates how far-right metapolitics works as an ecosystem rather than a campaign. The "great replacement" conspiracy theory circulated for years through think tanks, alternative media and digital subcultures before Martin Sellner advanced remigration as a policy proposal that mainstream far-right parties then adopted. The language of cultural protection itself builds on the ethnopluralist ideological foundation the ND developed. The Save Europe Act, a remigration petition promoted by ideological entrepreneurs, including Sellner and Eva Vlaarderingerbroek, represents how these ideas can become a transnational mobilisation instrument distributed through the same digital infrastructure that incubated it. Each actor type in Table 1 played a distinct role, showing that it was an ecosystem that drove this proposal rather than a singular actor. This is a structural lesson for progressives contesting the far right in the digital arena: the answer cannot be only to point out the illegal, exclusionary, racist and anti-democratic thrust of this proposal, but also to develop a similarly layered, transnational and sustained ecosystem that incorporates similar types of actors central to far-right metapolitics. The following chapters propose a model for a progressive digital ecosystem and rhetorical strategies to utilise within it.

PART 2

FIGHTING BACK ON HOSTILE GROUND: PROGRESSIVE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS IN THE AGE OF REACTIONARY PLATFORMISATION

CHAPTER 3: A 5D MODEL FOR A PROGRESSIVE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

While progressives acknowledge that reactionary capture of the attention economy is a destructive tendency for the public sphere, they must also develop a strategy to work within it in the short and medium term. To do so, progressives need a strategic model that learns from the metapolitical strategy of the far right, moving away from "communicating" better to building a robust digital ecosystem with varied actors and horizontal linkages. This chapter presents the 5D model for building this ecosystem, which must be grounded in emotionally resonant deep stories, cultivating audiences and coordinated authentic behaviour. This does not mean imitating the far right but instead taking the lesson seriously that a robust, multi-layered digital ecosystem[78] is crucial for challenging the far right. The 5D model (Table 2) provides a framework for political communicators, progressive campaigns and civil society to engage more effectively on social media platforms. The model can help communicators focus more impact and attention on progressive causes by relying on a more diverse set of actors to support and disseminate progressive messages. It is not a replacement for long-term strategies that require consideration of decoupling from US-owned platforms, sovereign public spheres, enforcement strategies and political vision. Instead, the model aspires to give a coherent framework for progressives to develop an effective digital ecosystem to drive their messaging in the context of reactionary platformisation. This chapter can be read alongside the excellent *Anti-Authoritarian Toolkit* (AATK),[79] which presents numerous concrete tactics that progressives can use to fight back against the far right. While many recommendations overlap, this chapter develops an integrated response to reactionary platformisation and far-right metapolitics through the 5D framework, tailored to progressive parties and campaigners in Europe. Readers are encouraged to consult the AATK for practical examples and activities that complement the strategic vision developed here.

Table 2. Summary of the 5D model.

Dimension	Actors	Actions	Intended impacts
Deepen Campaigning and canvassing should be broadcast through attention economies by highlighting citizen voices and connecting to deep stories	• Candidates and politicians • Campaign communications professionals • Activists, citizens, and voters • Civil society • Journalists and media	• Highlight citizen voices in campaigns by connecting to deep stories • Develop emotionally resonant and well-produced campaigning clips • Mobilise activists, citizens and voters to amplify campaigns • Maintain campaigning performances across election cycles	• Focus video content from issues to deep stories that induce hope, pride and/or outrage • Authentic amplification networks should be activated to spread content in hostile attention economies • Video content should drive media coverage by focusing on deep stories

Disrupt Relentless use of alternative media, ideological entrepreneurs and reclamation of subcultural style in digital culture	• Ideological entrepreneurs • Progressive alternative media producers • Digital culture and digital publics • Interest groups and civil society	• Enable a cadre of ideological entrepreneurs to advance progressive issues and cultivate audiences • Invest in "always on" progressive alternative media to set the agenda on progressive issues • Embrace subcultural styles using humour, emotion, transgression and in-person events • Connect interest groups and civil society with campaigns	• Ideological entrepreneurs should increase the visibility of progressive content and cultivate a growing audience • Alternative media should attract audiences to progressive creators and democratic values • Develop content that comports to attention economies and use multiple types of progressive actors to amplify progressive deep stories
Discipline Ensure consistent front-stage messaging connected to the key deep stories that progressives can mobilise with emotional resonance in attention economies	• Candidates and politicians • Campaign communications professionals • Ideological entrepreneurs • Interest groups and civil society	• Consistent messaging reinforcing and repeating a deep story across allied campaigns, ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media • Ideological entrepreneurs and civil society should buy into progressive messaging and provide another vector for the repetition of key narratives and the deep story	• Frame progressives as the protagonists of a deep story • Communications professionals should shape agendas on a few key narratives • Ideological entrepreneurs, alternative media and civil society should increase the visibility of progressive messages in attention economies
Distribute Reconfigure messaging to a transnational-first approach and focus on building progressive publics for amplification	• Candidates and politicians • Campaign communications professionals • Ideological entrepreneurs • Progressive alternative media • Interest groups and civil society	• Coordinate deep stories across borders to emphasise progressives' strengths and unity across the EU • Invest in connecting civil society and interest groups across member states with ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media • Develop narratives and deep stories in a transnational context before localising them to national contexts • Frame the far right as a geopolitical threat as a vector of manipulation by US and Russian interests	• Drive agenda setting in mainstream media with cross-border organic amplification • Allow examples from other parts of the EU to prove the validity of progressive policy • Enhance solidarity across progressive parties with shared, transnational narratives • Connections between ideological entrepreneurs, alternative media, interest groups and civil society enable cross-border authentic amplification
Develop Strategic upskilling of campaigns and communications professionals for digital-age research and intelligence	• Campaign researchers • Campaign communications professionals • Investigative journalists • Ideological entrepreneurs • Civil society	• Upskill campaign staff to audit algorithms, identify far-right violations of campaigning rules and hold companies to account under the DSA • Develop capacity to work with civil society and ideological entrepreneurs to engage in coordinated authentic behaviour • Develop scripts to counter disinformation and far-right narratives for digital publics • Engage in oppositional research to expose hypocrisy, use of dark money, foreign manipulation and violation of rules	• Understanding algorithmic logics can help campaigners better target messaging in hostile attention economies • Effective coordinated authentic behaviour can be better attuned to algorithmic systems and encourage better visibility of progressive voices • Publics armed with scripts to counter the far right can more easily debunk disinformation and far-right propaganda • Oppositional research can discredit opponents on a factual basis and force the far right to be on the defensive

Keywords: Deep stories, cultivating audiences and coordinated authentic behaviour

Before discussing the 5Ds in more detail, it is necessary to explain a few key terms that should orient progressive strategy. **Deep stories**, following Arlie Hochschild, are emotionally resonant narratives that organise political feeling: hope; fear; pride; shame; resentment; and anxiety. Her account of US Tea Party supporters focuses on the sense that they are patiently waiting in line for the American Dream, while minorities, women, immigrants and refugees are unfairly moved ahead by liberal elites. The European far right has a similar deep story: "ordinary" people are losing cultural status, public services and social order, while pro-EU liberal elites privilege outsiders over them. Far-right communication effectively frames events, policies and crises consistently in relation to deep stories. Progressives must develop a transnational deep story to orient their messaging and ensure it has emotional resonance.

Progressives must also invest in **cultivating an audience** that can be activated by candidates and politicians at election times or around key policy agendas. Social media users represent an important vector of "digital political labour" that amplifies the visibility of political messages on platforms.[80] In cultivating their audiences with metapolitics, the far right has been particularly effective at investing in alternative media and ideological entrepreneurs on social media platforms (defined in Table 1 in Chapter 3). Progressives should rely on a wide range of messengers, invest in alternative media controlled and developed by independent producers committed to progressive causes, and promote ideological entrepreneurs who support progressive ideas. Cultivating an audience requires developing a cultural movement around progressive ideas and ensuring that progressive voters and activists see promotion and amplification of these ideas as a duty. In the 2025 German election, while the AfD had a "dense supporter network", parties with "thinner participatory ecologies", such as the CDU and Greens, compensated by effectively using the subcultural styles and vernacular of platforms like TikTok, relying on fandom aesthetics, templatability, and harmonising with specific vibes and audio memes.[81] Progressives can thicken their "participatory ecologies" by engaging with subcultures online that are fluent in platform vernacular.

Finally, progressives need to develop tactics for **coordinated authentic behaviour** if they are to have a hope of comporting to the algorithmic structure of reactionary platformisation. This term is of course a play on Meta's designation of social media manipulation as coordinated *inauthentic* behaviour, which refers to artificial amplification of messages or users with fake accounts. Progressives can develop tactics that can shape algorithmic content distribution by using their supporters as a vector to amplify their message and reshape algorithmic visibility and rewards systems. Furthermore, with a transnational network with multiple types of actors, as the far right has already developed, progressives can contest algorithmic amplification within attention economies.

Deepen

The first dimension of the progressive digital ecosystem involves candidates' and politicians' performances in digital arenas. Candidates and politicians need to present themselves *performing* politics in collaboration with voters, highlighting everyday lives impacted by policies and connected to a deep story. One example from the USA – mentioned frequently as an inspiration by European progressives – is Zohran Mamdani's mayoral campaign. His viral halal cart video, in which he allowed street food vendors to describe how permits drive up costs for customers, is an instructive example of what deepened campaign performances might look like.[82] Such performances bring policy ideas to life by connecting to a deep story that connects dignity, affordability and effective governance. These are stories in which ordinary voters, workers and residents speak, and they are edited and framed in harmony with the campaign's deep story.

Deepening campaigning as a performance also means that activists, citizens and voters are not just an audience for content, but they are also producers and amplifiers. Progressives could take a page from this playbook by considering how housing, climate marches, austerity and other issues are an opportunity to highlight active citizens' engagement in campaigns and their voices as credible messengers of a deep story. Another example comes from François Ruffin, a member of France's National Assembly, who set out on a hitchhiking campaigning in 2026, travelling across France with a videographer who filmed unscripted encounters with people and distributed them across platforms. Throughout, Ruffin draws on narratives about precarity, loneliness and material hardship, featuring citizen voices at the centre.[83] A key set of actors here are also alternative media and ideological entrepreneurs that can act as other messengers that are harmonious with the message of a campaign. This catalyses coordinated authentic behaviour and need not be limited to specific electoral cycles but also an ongoing practice.

Disrupt

Progressives should pursue a novel strategy in the information environment that relies on a set of actors outside traditional campaigning. While mainstream media is an important way to reach voters, progressives must also consider the development of alternative media sources that are more ideologically driven, as the far right has done; naturally, this requires replacing the far-right's sensationalist feedback loops[84] with emotionally resonant, truthful reporting that reinforces progressive deep stories and relies on platforms such as YouTube for distribution. A related area of investment concerns ideological entrepreneurs that cultivate an audience. These ideological entrepreneurs can cultivate audiences' worldviews before and between electoral cycles and embed progressive deep stories before they are referenced by politicians. Progressive alternative media should consistently assume an oppositional stance to the status quo: covering the failures of centre-right governance; the corruption of far-right politicians; and the everyday impact of policy choices on ordinary people's lives. Progressive parties and campaign communicators can work to connect interest groups and civil society with these ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media as amplification vectors. Together, ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media should generate feedback loops that pull audiences away from mainstream media towards progressive content.

Progressives also need to reclaim subcultural styles that have long been part-and-parcel of left-wing politics. Today, the far right has colonised memes, humour, irony, online vernacular and transgressive aesthetics. Progressives should engage with and support ideological entrepreneurs and ensembles of users in attention economies that use humour, irreverence and the vernacular of digital culture to be funny, unconventional and even angry when it is merited. Furthermore, it also means using this vernacular and humour to frame the far right as the establishment that it has become: funded by oligarchs; in the pocket of foreign powers; and failing to deliver on any of its promises. In the case of Die Linke co-leader Heidi Reichinnek, her effective use of social media uses this vernacular with a strong oppositional message. While her post of an oppositional speech criticising the incoming CDU leader Friedrich Merz of using the votes of the AfD to push for migration reform went viral[85] and is partly credited with increasing Die Linke's vote share to 9% in the 2025 elections,[86] Reichinnek, as does Die Linke more generally, effectively incorporates oppositional vernacular and platform-centric styles[87] to criticise the centre-right and the far right while connecting effectively to deep stories. While this might be a natural position for leftists and progressives in *opposition*, even when in government, these strategies can be useful (especially with a decentralised, variegated digital ecosystem) to maintain engagement with audiences and voters.

The far right has long exploited community groups, local Facebook pages, WhatsApp networks and neighbourhood forums to circulate political content that bypasses the rules on political advertising, reaching targeted audiences with tailored messaging while evading the transparency requirements that

apply to formal political ads. Recent restrictions on targeted political advertising will not eliminate this practice, as the far right relies on community and group-based communication and advertising that may not qualify as "political". Progressives should respond in kind, within the limits of the law. Here, campaigns can exploit community-based digital communication, such as local groups, issue-specific forums and neighbourhood networks, in canvassing and persuasion.

Discipline

The far right has been particularly adept at maintaining consistent, front-stage message discipline about immigration on a vertical axis from politicians through alternative media, ideological entrepreneurs and digital publics. This coherence across these vertical levels of its digital ecosystem supports effective agenda-setting in mainstream debates and increases the salience of the immigration topic. For progressives, discipline means that candidates and politicians connect every public-facing statement to a deep story. Not every statement needs to be about housing, energy costs or anti-consumerist behaviour by corporations, but every statement must be legible as part of a coherent deep story about who is failing Europeans and what a progressive alternative looks like. Alongside deepened campaigning that centres citizens voices, communications professionals should ensure that their digital content focuses on reiterating a deep story in collaboration with citizens rather than chasing a news cycle. Ideological entrepreneurs and civil society should be able to buy into such a progressive messaging framework and contribute to its repetition.

Progressive deep stories must focus on universal rather than identity-specific messaging. This does not mean abandoning narrowcasting and targeted communications, but rather that front-stage message discipline should focus on what all citizens deserve rather than specific entitlements for particular groups. The far right has succeeded by casting progressives as being caught in infinite debates about "identity politics", while the far right itself drives the most divisive, identity-focused messaging by narrating the betrayal of "true", "native" and white Europeans. It is important that progressives ensure that they pursue messaging that stresses how their policies improve the lives of all in a universal manner, while using language that makes them tangible for their national and local audiences.

Distribute

Progressives should focus on building a transnational digital ecosystem. This is due to two exigencies. First, digital publics cannot easily be cordoned off into national spheres. Stories and news in one country quickly becomes debated in a transnational public sphere. For example, the irregular influx of 60,000 migrants into Ceuta from Morocco in July 2026 became a Europe-wide flashpoint for debate and anxieties about illegal immigration in Europe.[88] It was quickly weaponised by far-right governments in Italy and Finland and legitimised by the centre-right, the Danish Social Democrats, in a letter to the EU.[89] Rather than show solidarity with Spain, just a few weeks later, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen posted a message about uncontrolled migration with a friendly photo with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, referencing the continent's "Christian heritage" and claims that migrants "impose a way of life on us".[90] While there is reason to be critical of Spain's response,[91] there was ample opportunity for a strong message against illegal immigration without legitimising a far-right leader. Instead of a misguided attempt to outflank the far right on its own territory, a message of solidarity reflecting fellow social democrats' attempt (and qualified success) to manage the situation would have exemplified the transnational solidarity needed to take on the far right.

Second, given the linguistic diversity of Europe and its many smaller languages, amplification of progressive messaging is limited compared to much larger languages, such as English, Hindi and Chinese. The far right has been effective at using English as a transnational *lingua franca* to coordinate and drive amplification within attention economies, connecting ideological entrepreneurs and far-right activists

across the EU.[92] A progressive digital ecosystem should also be oriented transnationally. This means that progressives should coordinate messaging around key deep stories that can be translated into national contexts but mutually intelligible across borders. Progressives already have transnational congresses and meetings that can serve as key sites for developing a shared deep story and identifying strategies to cultivate audiences. Further investment can connect interest groups and civil society with ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media that focus on Europe at a transnational level rather than within individual countries. Such strategies could contribute to coordinated authentic behaviour across borders and encourage amplification of progressives across the EU.

The far right is also particularly effective at using its transnational networks to generate stories focusing on the blunders of mainstream politicians on both the centre-right and the left. Progressives must develop a similar antagonistic answer to amplify stories about the failures and incompetence of the far right that does not travel with the same speed. Finally, progressives should develop strategies to showcase the far right as a tool of geopolitical (primarily American and Russian) interests. The far right is in the pocket of American oligarchs and aligned with Kremlin foreign policy. Progressives must be relentless in demonstrating these linkages to reclaim the narrative that progressives are fighting for a sovereign and independent Europe.

Develop

The fifth and final dimension focuses on knowledge among key actors needed to operate within the context of reactionary platformisation. While progressives have extensive skills in metrics-driven digital campaigning, this is not the only relevant form of communication. Upskilling in digital campaigning should now focus on understanding how platforms work at a structural level, such as how algorithms distribute content, how the far right effectively games algorithms, where platform rules are being violated, and how to use work with civil society organisations and regulators to hold platforms and far-right actors to account.

Concretely, campaign research teams should engage directly with civil society organisations that audit algorithmic behaviour; identify coordinated inauthentic behaviour and FIMI; and document and report violations to platforms, regulators and the media. For example, the Who Targets Me non-profit collects extensive data on political advertising and the What to Fix foundation focuses on monetisation dynamics. The DSA's mechanisms on trusted flaggers and systemic risk provisions are crucial tools, but using them requires specific forms of technical and legal literacy that are not central to progressive political campaigning. Here, civil society organisations, including anti-hate groups, digital rights organisations and human rights organisations, could contribute to campaigns to build shared capacity to identify weak points to counter the far right's success in attention economies.

A second component of upskilling continues in the line of antagonistic research capacity, which should focus on exposing far-right and centre-right hypocrisy, dark money and electoral regulation violations, and mobilising findings rhetorically. The far right extensively monitors progressive politicians, activists and organisations and uses its transnational networks to amplify their accusations that progressives are hypocritical elites. Antagonistic, investigative research into the far right is central to arming ideological entrepreneurs, alternative media and candidates with the rhetorical weapons needed to discredit the far right. A third area of upskilling is in terms of empowering publics, audiences and voters with the tools they need to challenge far-right ideas online and offline. Here, digital media can be useful for circulating scripts and sets of facts that supporters of progressives can use to counter far-right narratives; concretely, this means campaign research teams producing regularly updated, shareable rebuttals to circulating far-right talking points on immigration, crime or economic failure, which ideological entrepreneurs and activists can deploy in comment sections, group chats and face-to-face conversations. This goes beyond "media literacy" towards a coordinated set of

information dissemination dynamics that empower voters to fight far-right ideas in everyday life. This can be harmonious with antagonistic research that prioritises understanding and rapidly undermining far-right disinformation as it circulates.

CHAPTER 4: RHETORICAL STRATEGIES FOR PROGRESSIVES ONLINE

Progressives must refocus on how they use digital media in an attention economy. Social media platforms are not spaces for nuanced debate, but spaces for the emotive exchange of information. Progressives should not be shy about using emotions and should strategically mobilise outrage and anger, especially when occupying an oppositional position. While the far right uses emotional manipulation, progressives should mobilise emotions around deep stories, cultivate audiences and catalyse coordinated authentic behaviour. This also means that progressives should not be shy about engaging with a populist left-wing inflection. While this might sound unpalatable to progressives, this concretely means re-articulating "the people" universally, rather than just "native" Europeans as the far right does. Rather than using conspiracy theory as the far right does, progressives should truthfully and emotionally make the case that corporate power and wealthy elites have betrayed Europeans. This should be coupled with transgressive style and a willingness to challenge the stylistic norms of politics as usual.

Emotional strategies for progressive rhetoric online

Specifically, progressives can mobilise three emotions that the far right has also utilised to provide a meaningful and engaging alternative: anger; pride; and hope. Outrage and anger are the emotions that attention economies reward most reliably. There is a clear distinction between anger directed at scapegoats and anger directed at those who genuinely hold power and use it to enrich themselves, entrench injustice and fail to deliver. It is important that progressives perform outrage on the front stage and connect it with deep stories that envision an alternative and are not shy about blaming the elite actors – right-wing politicians, far-right parties, corporations and billionaires – that have brought us to this current moment. Table 3 discusses emotional strategies for anger, pride and hope in relation to the 5D model. In the rest of the chapter, further context is provided for each emotion.

Table 3. Connecting emotional strategies with the 5D model.

Dimension	Anger	Pride	Hope
Deepen Campaigning and canvassing should be broadcast through attention economies by highlighting citizen voices and connecting to deep stories	Candidates perform outrage alongside citizens, connecting hardship to policy failures where appropriate	Showcase communities where progressive governance has delivered	Citizen voices demonstrate how progressive policy transforms real lives
Disrupt Relentless use of alternative media, ideological entrepreneurs and reclamation of subcultural style in digital culture	Expose far-right corruption, centre-right failure and billionaire capture of key policy areas	Engage ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media to illustrate progressive achievements through platform vernacular and styles	Cultivate audiences by spreading hopeful messages that conform to the norms and styles of digital culture
Discipline Ensure consistent front-stage messaging connected to the key deep stories that progressives can mobilise with emotional resonance in attention economies	Connect anger and outrage to centre-right and far-right failures to deliver in areas relevant to progressive deep stories	Connect progressive achievements to a coherent, universal identity and showcase how progressives are fighting for solutions	Develop a consistent, bold front-stage vision, rather than cautious technocratic messaging
Distribute Reconfigure messaging to a transnational-first approach and focus on building progressive publics for amplification	Amplify far-right failures transnationally and frame the far right as a tool of hostile foreign interests	Ensure cross-border solidarity on progressive achievements to demonstrate how progressive governance is effective across the EU	Create a consistent, transnational vision for what progressives want, connected to deep stories and clear, bold solutions
Develop Strategic upskilling of campaigns and communications professionals for digital-age research and intelligence	Utilise antagonistic research and investigations to constantly inform progressives about far-right failures and attempts to undermine Europeans' futures	Create messages that incorporate the achievements and work of civil society and effective institutions to address challenges related to deep stories	Clear, hopeful messages that are grounded in facts and research that can be redistributed in everyday conversations and social media

Anger

Anger in progressive political communication should be directed at three targets. First, at the concrete failures of far-right governance and its corruption. Second, at the governments, corporations and billionaires whose decisions have driven the affordability crisis: failing housing policy; energy companies that still post record profits; or the billionaires who have captured the information environment. Third, at the structural betrayal of the centre-right: decades of austerity, privatisation and environmental deregulation that have systematically dismantled the public services and social protections, as well as increasing cooperation with the far right. This is a record of failure that progressives should be ruthless at documenting and amplifying in the digital sphere. Following recent research on social media, negative framings of other parties and anti-elite messages generate substantial engagement.[93]

Pride

The far right also makes use of a specific form of chauvinistic pride that is based on racism, sexism and nostalgia. Progressives have tended to shy away from the use of pride, understandably so in the context of recent reckonings with Europe's colonial past and racism. Critical self-reflection on these histories is important, but it does not contribute a positive alternative to the far right and does not support the kind of message discipline and deep stories needed to counter the far right in attention economies. Indeed, the progressive record provides plenty of achievements that Europeans can be proud of, from the strongest welfare-state systems in the world, effective healthcare, environmental and consumer protections, worker's rights, and European integration. These are hard-won privileges that European progressives have fought for and delivered and should be a source of pride for progressives today, even when these systems are under attack from the right. Progressives should take pride in this record and communicate it with emotional force while depicting failures as the result of attacks from the right.

Hope

Deepened campaign messaging in digital publics can be particularly helpful by showcasing citizens that have challenges and how progressive policies and ideas can address these problems. While progressives can present alternative *policies*, hope must translate this into meaningful imaginaries of how these policies can transform individual lives and feature the community leaders, activists and citizens that exemplify hope. Communications professionals and ideological entrepreneurs should be producing a permanent stream of stories that sustain hope between elections by showing that progressive politics is connected to improving real people's real experiences. Hope also requires progressives to be willing to be visionary rather than incremental. While cautious, costed, technocratic policy proposals are important behind the scenes, front stage messaging must be bold and exciting. The far right is not cautious and consistently promises impossible futures to its voters. Progressives need not be disingenuous, but they must match far-right pipe dreams with visions based on the most important factors that affect voters' lives while showcasing a path which demonstrates that positive and transformative outcomes are genuinely achievable.

Leveraging emotion with transgressive style

Effective use of emotion in attention economies also requires adjustments to style. The far right's digital politics can be understood as a kind of carnivalesque populist style in which transgression against the norms of democratic culture becomes a source of collective pleasure and in-group solidarity.[94] Progressives, on the other hand, have often responded by defending democratic norms, correcting misinformation, and appealing to facts and expertise. The far right's transgression targets the norms of equality, representation and human dignity. Progressives can reclaim transgression by targeting different values: the deference to corporate power; oligarchs; and a political class that has presided over austerity and housing, energy and climate crises. Research suggests that this

allows for candidates and campaigns to generate engagement and visibility on social media platforms by adapting to the styles of digital vernacular and culture.[95]

Leveraging transgression involves fielding candidates who are willing to speak plainly and break the codes of buttoned-up, establishment politics. This should go alongside developing digital progressive culture that is fun and enjoyable, generating in-group solidarity that is oriented towards democratic ideals, rather than the racist and exclusionary solidarities that the far right mobilises. Attention economies reward content that generates strong emotional responses. The far right has built its digital ecosystem around the emotions of outrage, transgression and in-group solidarity. Progressives can build theirs around anger at power, pride in achievement and hope for a better future. The emotional work of progressive digital politics is to establish these emotions at the centre of progressive messaging and to drive deep stories upon which progressives can win elections.

A strategic direction to seize the techlash

Simmering frustration with technology companies presents progressives with an opportunity to mobilise themselves as credible anti-establishment messengers grounded in truth and also politically productive. Focusing on seizing the techlash against primarily US-based technology corporations and billionaires who have demonstrably and visibly taken control of European public spheres and are trying actively to bend them to their own political and economic interests. These individuals have made their political commitments clear: they are aligned with Donald Trump; hostile to European regulatory frameworks; and actively working to reshape democratic norms in their favour. Perhaps more visibly than anyone else, Elon Musk's direct intervention in European electoral politics is the logical endpoint of reactionary platformisation, where the structural bias of the platform becomes indistinguishable from the personal political agenda of its owner.

As digital media occupy a substantial part of Europeans' everyday lives and public frustration is mounting, this is a worthy topic for campaigning on, alongside key issues central to the progressive agenda. Young people across Europe are acutely aware of how social media is affecting their mental health, education and social lives. Consumers are frustrated by technology companies that produce unrepairable, expensive products while compromising their privacy to target them with advertising, attempt dynamic pricing and train closed-source AI models. Already, the EU has managed to engage in meaningful regulation, such as the AI Act, DSA and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), yet technology billionaires in the USA are lobbying hard to compromise enforcement and shape regulation in their interest, with Meta, for example, meeting most frequently with the Patriots for Europe regarding technology regulation.[96] Furthermore, businesses and public institutions have recognised their vulnerability to US-based technology infrastructure, and appetite for a sovereign European software industry is growing as the Trump administration has tried to use US software companies as a tool for leverage over Europe. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of data centres and the extraordinary energy and resource demands of AI development are generating new areas of environmental and economic concern. These frustrations are primed for progressive mobilisation.

The EU's DSA is the most substantial accountability mechanism for social media platforms in the world, and it is a direct target of the Trump administration and US social media corporations that see it as a threat to their business models. This pressure is in fact a boon for progressives, making the DSA a concrete example of European digital sovereignty worth defending. Progressives should campaign confidently on various aspects of DSA enforcement and engage directly with digital services coordinators and civil society to protect social media users across the EU, framing it as a fight for freedom of expression, dignity and safety in opposition to billionaire elites that seek to line their pockets at Europeans' expense.

Seizing the techlash would allow progressives to build an anti-elite narrative grounded in fact rather than conspiracy by focusing on how oligarchs and billionaires compromise Europeans' privacy, data sovereignty, consumer protection entitlements and social lives. While some might be concerned about innovation and economic growth, progressives can also stress that the size of giant US technology multinationals cannibalises European innovation and that EU countries have the skills, engineers, business leaders and regulatory capacity needed to actualise a digital public sphere that respects citizens' fundamental rights while still maintaining innovation. European-led technology growth in response to low-quality, invasive and surveillant US software is an economic vision that progressives can drive forward. Europeans can be reminded that many of the key innovations attributed to Silicon Valley were developed with European public investment and European talent.

Progressives can utilise populist rhetorical structures by making tech billionaires the face of the "establishment", which is itself grounded in fact. Where the far right has spun baseless, anti-Semitic conspiracies about billionaire George Soros, progressives can tell a true story about how US tech companies are paying substantial amounts to lobby the EU to reduce consumer protections and undermine democracy. Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk can credibly be oriented as villains in a progressive deep story about excessive corporate power and failing democratic accountability. Ideological entrepreneurs and alternative media should amplify these connections continuously, building a narrative in which the tech oligarchs are as recognisable a symbol of elite failure as any domestic politician.

Progressives should also focus on how digital rights affect Europeans on an everyday basis. Digital rights on privacy are central, and campaigns, candidates and alternative media should focus on how the EU's strong protections on digital rights limit the surveillance we are seeing in other markets, such as in Asia and North America. For example, they could focus on how political advertising is now limited and more transparent thanks to EU policies, how the DMA ensures more competition and interoperability in the kinds of digital services that Europeans can access, and use comparisons with other markets to remind publics of the many digital rights and consumer protections that progressives have fought for and won. Too often, Europe's strong protections are seen as an impediment to innovation, so progressives should remind voters what this innovation means in practice: dynamic wages that devalue labour; gig work replacing full-time employment; and constant surveillance by corporations to extract wealth from consumers. This is a natural extension of the affordability deep story that frames tech "innovation" as economic extraction of ordinary citizens' wealth.

CONCLUSION

The relative success of the far right on social media platforms in Europe and abroad is not a simple story of effective political communication or inherently receptive audiences. It is a story about infrastructure, corporate power and clever adaptation to a transforming public sphere. Social media corporations built platforms that rewarded anger and outrage, amplified extremism, and treated the governance of far-right content as a political liability rather than a democratic obligation. The far right effectively adapted to this environment, exploiting structural advantages to build a transnational digital ecosystem, connecting far-right political parties and candidates with ideological entrepreneurs, alternative media, subcultural networks and far-right civil society. This allowed the far right to shape mainstream media agendas with its narratives on immigration and European identity and forge transnational links across EU member states and the Atlantic. The result is a public sphere increasingly colonised by far-right ideology, leaving progressives to respond on the terrain that the far right has already won.

This policy study argues that two entangled dynamics brought us to this conjuncture. First, the trajectory of reactionary platformisation tells an important story about how social media corporations' early years of naïve libertarianism proved fertile ground for the far right. While there was some attempt to address the most extreme forms of the far right and a moment of professionalisation of a trust and safety industry dedicated to better enforcement of platform rules on organised hate and extremism, today, platforms have been captured by reactionary ideology and have demonstrated their allegiance to President Donald Trump's second administration. Reactionary platformisation has created communications infrastructure that structurally disadvantages progressives. Second, far-right metapolitics have proven a successful strategy of long-term cultural agitation that has expanded from the confines of arcane far-right intellectuals to a transnationally networked set of digital subcultures, influencers, alternative media and platforms, activists, and intellectuals. This has proved to be decisive in the far-right's attempt to mainstream its exclusionary, racist politics and normalise its anti-democratic agenda.

Progressives must respond to these dynamics with a bold and aggressive strategy. For too long, progressives have sought to play defence: fact-checking misinformation; defending democratic norms; trying to outflank the far right on immigration; or challenging extremist ideas in good faith. While the far right's ideologies are diametrically opposed to fundamental European values, progressives can still learn from the far right's digital communication strategy. The kernel of a progressive strategy must be to develop deep stories, cultivate audiences and encourage coordinated authentic behaviour. This means that progressives must develop a digital ecosystem that outpaces the far right's by *deepening* campaigning with citizen voices and effective performances by candidates; *disrupting* the information environment by enabling progressive ideological entrepreneurs, alternative media and subcultures; *disciplining* messaging around deep stories rather than on policy talking points; *distributing* progressive messaging with a transnational-first perspective; and *developing* the research and regulatory expertise for campaigns to effectively operate on hostile platforms. Progressives should be just as willing to mobilise anger, outrage and pride as they are to use hope (for an overview, see Tables 2 and 3). Finally, progressives have an opportunity to seize the techlash to drive forward a grounded, fact-based rhetoric that centres popular concerns and expand a digital ecosystem by using rhetoric that pits European people and institutions against the far right backed by primarily US-based billionaires who are colonising our public sphere hand-in-hand with the second Trump administration in Washington, DC. Progressives cannot wait any longer to organise a transnational, networked ecosystem to fight back against the far right.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR, FEPS & PARTNERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BHARATH GANESH

Dr Bharath Ganesh is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies and affiliated with the Institute for Logic, Language and Computation (ILLC) at the University of Amsterdam. Bharath's work covers the far right and social media, disinformation, and platform governance. After completing a PhD at University College London, he worked at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford and taught at the University of Groningen. His research can be found in *Sociology Compass*, *Cultural Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and in the book *The Trump Carnival* (with Elizaveta Gaufman).

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FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

Avenue des Arts 46
1000 Brussels, Belgium
info@feps-europe.eu
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

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Leokoriou 38-40
10553 Athens (Greece)
info@eteron.org
www.eteron.org
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Av. da República, nº34 – 8º andar
1050-193 Lisboa
geral@fundacaorespublica.pt
https://fundacaorespublica.pt
@respublicafundacao

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The far right in Europe is thriving on social media platforms. This policy study traces this success to two entangled dynamics: (1) reactionary platformisation, the structural transformation of digital public spheres led by social media corporations that systematically advantages the far right; and (2) far-right metapolitics, a strategy of cultural agitation that has mainstreamed far-right ideas and developed a transnational, networked digital ecosystem.

Social media corporations have enabled the far right and failed to limit its reach, paving the way for the capture of platforms by reactionary billionaires epitomised by Elon Musk. Platform policies, content moderation, algorithms, and advertising systems have contributed to the far right's rise and created a rigged playing field benefiting anti-democratic actors. The far right has adapted to digital technology and turned it to its advantage. It has networked a wide range of actors (influencers, alternative media, everyday users, subcultures, and politicians) to shape media agendas and make extreme ideas more visible and acceptable in public debate.

Progressives, meanwhile, have yet to develop an effective response to reactionary platformisation and far-right metapolitics. This policy study hopes to orient progressives towards a bold, aggressive agenda to fight back.

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