The online networks of the French far right

Preliminary evidences from a study applying integrated Social Network Analysis and Content analysis approach

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Abstract
Far right organizations use the internet as a tool to diffuse their messages. Existing scholarship mainly focus on the usage of online communication for recruitment and propaganda. Less attention has been paid to the extent to which these digital media practices can be enacted to promote communication coalitions between far right parties and other organizations. To what extent the web can facilitate the construction of alliances within the broad and highly differentiated camp of far right activism? The paper combines Social Network Analysis (SNA) with Content Analysis approach to study the existence and the characteristics of ties between 30 French far right websites. We manually classified these ties according to the issue focus of the digital text associated to the links. Finally we illustrate what are the websites that occupy a central position in the French far right network distinguishing by issue type. Combining SNA (a methodology developed by structuralist ethnology) with content analysis (a more functionalist approach) to study online communication networks offers important insights about ideological differences and affinities between far right party and non-party organizations, including violent groups. We show that on issues that are not at the core of far right ideology—such as economy and the environment—French far right networks appear to be fragmented and ‘policephalous’: they are highly diversified, and loosely coordinated. Differently, networks on classic far right concerns—migration, security, civil rights and opposition to the establishment—have a ‘star structure: they are denser and much more concentrated on few central actors. Overall, the results suggest that despite ideological differences, communication coalitions between different types of far right organizations are possible. However, ties are limited to “core” ideological topics of this political family.

Keywords: Far Right, France, Front National, Social Network Analysis, Content Analysis

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1 This paper is part of a comparative research project on cyber activism of far right organizations in Europe. For France, the research has been founded by a research prize on “xenophobia and antisemitism” from the City Hall of Paris.