Extreme-Right Organizations and Online Politics: A Comparative Analysis on Five Western Democracies

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*Please Do Not Quote- Work in progress*

1. Introduction

By the mid of 1990th the extreme right has experienced a dramatic rise in many Western democracies and profound changes have been undertaken by these political parties and movements in terms of ideology, political discourse, organizational structures, and action strategies (Marchi et al., 2012), among which an increasing use of the Internet to do politics by other means (Karmasyn et al. 2000, Mininni 2002). In Europe hundreds of websites run by neo-Nazi and skinhead organizations have been identified and transnational networks and domestic radical groups are found to use the Internet to avoid national laws and authorities restrictions (e.g. TE-SAT Report, 2007, p. 15, Tateo 2005). As noted by the Europol, all around Europe the extremists are increasingly active in social networks, in order to reach younger generations¹ and they use of the internet to spread self-made videos². According to the ‘watchdog’ organization Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), in 2010, about 1000 far right groups were online in the United States³ and the same phenomenon is well visible in Europe. Beyond the increasing numerical presence of collective actors on the web, however, research has started to reflect on the role that the Internet plays within these organizations (Garret 2006). Indeed as underlined by scholars, the Internet might allow “the construction of new public spheres where social movements can organize mobilizations, discuss and negotiate their claims, strengthen their identities, sensitize the public opinion and directly express acts of dissent” (Mosca 2007, 2). In particular, empirical studies on the Internet and radical organizations have stressed that extreme-right groups use the Internet for several different purposes, which include the dissemination of propaganda and the incitement of violence (Glaser et al. 2002). A study on American groups has showed that extreme-right organizations use the Internet in order to facilitate recruitment, to reach a global audience, and to connect with other groups (Zhou et. al

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² Süddeutsche Zeitung, 20/10/2008.
2012 IPSA Congress, 8-12 July Madrid

2005). Others have illustrated that it is used by right wing activists to create and reinforce a ‘sense of community’ (De Koster and Houtman 2008). Research on social movements argues that the Internet can help in generating collective identities, by facilitating the exchange of resources and information among actors and creating solidarity and sharing objectives (della Porta and Mosca 2006, 538). Finally, the Internet is also considered to play a role in helping the processes of mobilization, by reducing the cost of communication between a large number of individuals (della Porta and Mosca 2006, 542), even allowing the organization of transnational demonstrations (Petit 2004).

Existing research on the subject has so far focused above all on left-wing organizations and the Internet (e.g. see Mosca and Vaccari 2012) or on the US far-right. In Europe, attention to the extreme right and its political activity in the digital age has been episodic, mainly concentrated on the use of the Internet during electoral campaigns by political parties (for example Margolis et al., 1999; Cunha et al., 2003; Trechsel et al., 2003, Ackland and Gibson, 2004). Furthermore, comparative works are rare.

This paper aims to fill this gap. Focusing on different types of extreme-right organizations in four European countries (France, Spain, Italy and Great Britain) and the USA and conducting a formalized web content analysis of their websites, we investigate in a comparative perspective the forms and the intensity of the use of the Internet by extremist right-wing groups, with a particular attention to the construction of a common identity and political engagement of people. In order to broaden descriptive knowledge on the Internet and the variegated galaxy which composes the extreme right in each country (Wetzel 2009), our analysis deliberately includes both political parties and non-party organizations (for a total of 255 groups)4.

After presenting our method (section 2), we demonstrate to what extent and in which forms extreme-right groups make use of the Internet for various political purposes: the creation and promotion of ‘virtual communities’ of debate and exchange of information and communication (section 3 and 4); and the mobilization and recruitment (even at the transnational level) (5). We will show the main characteristics of the use of websites by different types of groups (e.g. political

4 Some scholars (e.g. Carter, 2005) define right-wing extremism as characterized by anticonstitutionalism and antidemocratic values (this is the reason it is called extremist), and a rejection of the principle of fundamental human equality (this is the reason it is called right wing). Others (e.g. Norris, 2005) prefer the label radical right in order to describe those organizations that are located toward one pole on the standard ideological left–right scale. Despite the still open debate on conceptual definition, which is beyond the scope of this paper, we use, interchangeably, the term extreme/radical right to refer to those groups that have as their core ideological values ethno-nationalism, xenophobia, antiestablishment critiques and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2007).
parties vs. sub-cultural youth groups), underlining the most important differences and similarities among them. In the conclusion (6), the results are interpreted against the (offline) political and cultural opportunities and constraints offered to the extreme right by the country.

2. Method and Sources

Lists per country with all extreme right organizations with a presence online have been obtained using a ‘snow ball’ technique. On the basis of different secondary sources (official reports, secondary literature, etc.), we first identified the most important extreme-right organizations in each country (e.g. the main political parties). Then, starting from their websites and the hyperlinks towards other extreme right organizations found in them (e.g. in the section our ‘partners’ or ‘friends’), we discovered the websites of less known groups. We identified approximately 100 organizations per country (300 in the USA)\(^5\). Finally, using a formalized codebook, we conducted a content analysis of these extreme-right websites performed on a reduced sample of 50% of groups per each category (see tab. 1)\(^6\).

Tab.1 - Extreme-right Organizations Identified by Broader Categories and sampling (example for Italy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Group</th>
<th>Sample of the ER Population</th>
<th>Selection and sample for Content Analysis</th>
<th>Example Group (name and URL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Party</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><a href="http://www.forzanuova.org/">http://www.forzanuova.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political movements</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td><a href="http://www.fascismoeliberta.it/">http://www.fascismoeliberta.it/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgic &amp; Revisionist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ilras.tk/">http://www.ilras.tk/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Nazi groups</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td><a href="http://www.paroledalterzoreich.com">www.paroledalterzoreich.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural, new age and neo-mystical</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td><a href="http://utenti.lycos.it/sodalizio/indice.htm">http://utenti.lycos.it/sodalizio/indice.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth subcultural area, skinheads, sport&amp;music</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td><a href="http://www.venetofronteskinheads.org">http://www.venetofronteskinheads.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial organisations &amp; Publishers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ilpresidio.org/index.html">http://www.ilpresidio.org/index.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The codebook, for whose construction we relied on similar studies that use a formalized approach to the analysis of collective actors websites (e.g. della Porta and Mosca, 2006, Gerstenfeld et al. 2003, Zhou et al. 2005, Qin et al. 2007), focuses on the following broad aspects that we consider relevant to Internet use by right wing groups: virtual community/debate (with variables indicating the use of

\(^5\) The lists of organizations included in the analysis are available on request.

\(^6\) For this classification of the extreme right organizations (based on the self-definition of the group and the predominant nature of the message transmitted through the Web site), we relied on the most common typologies used for the study of the extreme-right (e.g. Burris et al. 2000, Tateo 2005, Michael 2003 for the American case).
the website as an arena promoting online interactivity with and among members and sympathisers—e.g. forum of discussion, newsletters, chats); presenting narrative about operations of the group, etc.; information (including variables measuring how much the organization diffuses materials such as articles, book references, news reporting, etc.); communication (including variables measuring how much the organization makes use on its web site of communication tools such as email, telephone contact, feedback forms, etc.); propaganda (with variables to capture the presence of content concerning propaganda towards insiders and outsiders, e.g. banners, hate symbols, multimedia materials); mobilization (concerning the use of the Internet as a tool of activation of members in off-line and on-line actions, e.g. publicizing political campaigns, promoting online petitions, etc.); and internationalization (e.g. the use of the Web to build transnational contacts)\textsuperscript{7}.

3. Extreme-right Web Sites and the construction of (virtual) communities

Research on extremist organizations suggests that the construction of the peer group is an important element, in that it contributes to increased involvement in an organization (della Porta 1992). In this respect, it is argued that the websites can play an important role, working as an arena for debates among like-minded people, where activists from everywhere can ‘meet’ and support each other (Caldiron 2001), as well as defining who are the ‘enemies’ and the ‘allies’, and what are the main goals of the group itself (Bernard 2005).

Our data show that in general, almost all extreme right websites analyzed (79 per cent) provide a section containing basic information on the group (such as ‘about us’, ‘who we are’, etc.) and the majority of them (57 per cent of cases) have sections used to portray the goal and mission of the group (e.g. ‘mission statement’, ‘statute’, ‘constitution’, ‘manifesto’, ‘what we want’, etc.). Moreover, approximately one third of the organizations (29 per cent) has an archive where the group annual reports or the chronology of the history of the organization are collected. Some websites sum up the goal of the group in a few sentences by highlighting special key words, as for example on the site of the French Le Coq Gaulois\textsuperscript{8} that simply auto-define the organization as ‘politically alternative’ or in the case of the Italian political movement Fronte della Nova Gioventù\textsuperscript{9}, on whose website the values of anti-communism, militancy and freedom are stressed. Others offer a

\textsuperscript{7} The web content analysis has been conducted in: March- June 2009 (for the Spanish case); August 2009- January 2010 (for the American case); December 2010-April 2011 (for all the other cases). The analysis has been done by coders (country language speakers) trained in the sampling selection and coding procedure (plus reliability test have done). The codebook is available from the authors on request.

\textsuperscript{8} http://www.coqgaulois.com/.

\textsuperscript{9} http://www.fdng.org/.
detailed description of the core value and the history of the organization as for instance on the web site of the English *Ku Klux Klan*, where it is explained that being “all about ‘heritage’ is not a racist thing, no members are permitted to have criminal records involving hate crime (…). We are here to protect our family and race and our honor as white Europeans, if you feel you hate us leave the site”.

Furthermore, frequently (in one third of the analyzed cases, 27.5) extreme right organizational websites contain a section with a *narrative of events* concerning the group, such as occupations, protests, demonstrations, clashes with the police and political adversaries or commemorative marches whose videos are often posted on their websites or on YouTube. This play an important role in emphasizing the existence of a numerically significant group behind the site, as well as in conveying a message containing the group’s ideology and identity (Tateo 2005).

Beyond the use of the websites as a ‘showcase’ of the group, our analysis also points out that a considerable effort is made by extreme-right organizations to create ‘cyber communities’ of *debate*. Spaces of discussion such as fora, mailing lists and guest books are widely used by right wing organizations (in 24.7% of all cases). In particular, around one fourth of organizations have on their websites a ‘newsletter’ (23.5%), namely a bulletin to which it is possible to subscribe, indicating a commitment to keep a channel of communication with their affiliates. Right-wing extremist websites less frequently contain ‘online surveys’ and ‘questionnaires’ (in 11% of cases).

Interestingly, when they are present, they are mainly surveys on current political and social issues relevant to the organization (e.g. on the topic of withdrawing crucifixes from schools, the future of the country current Government, the EU), mostly immigration policies, as well as on citizens opinions on the organization itself. For example, on the Italian website *Benito Mussolini* there is a specific section dedicated to surveys on Italian democracy and politics (the form of the State, i.e. Monarchy vs. Republic, immigration issues, i.e. forced repatriation of illegal immigrants, etc.). Similarly, on the website *RAS* we find questionnaires concerning international political affairs such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, American occupations, etc. (fig 1).

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10 On this point see the newspaper article “Neofascisti all’assalto della RAI” (Neofascists assault to RAI), *La Repubblica* 5th October 2008.

11 E.g. the Spanish skinhead group *N.B.P La ultima cruzada barrio del Pilar* (http://nubp.blogia.com/) publishes an online questionnaire that equalizes immigration to criminality.

12 For example, on the Spanish website of the group *Inmigración Masiva* (http://www.inmigracionmasiva.com/) we find an online survey about people attitudes toward the right-wing political party *Plataforma por Catalunya*.

13 [http://spazioinwind.libero.it/mussolini/index2.htm](http://spazioinwind.libero.it/mussolini/index2.htm)

14 [http://www.ilras.tk/](http://www.ilras.tk/)
Fig. 1 - *Examples of online surveys on extreme-right websites*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surveys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· What party have you voted for in last elections?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· If the Popular party won, would the situation have been different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Do you think that the victory of PP party will solve the problem of immigration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Do you think that the PSOE should be banned as illegal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What do you think about immigration and multiculturalism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What do you think Zapatero has offered to the terrorist against a promise of ‘peace’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· After two years from the terrorist attack of March 11th, who are the responsible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What do you think about the Spanish Constitution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What are the consequences for Europe arising from the French disorders in the banlieus?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.democracianacional.org/dn/ (our translation)

It is worth noticing that spaces of synchronous discussions\(^\text{15}\) such as chat-line, electronic sessions, etc., are less frequently present in extreme right websites (in 9.4% of all cases investigated) than spaces of a-synchronous (namely indirect) discussions, indicating that these groups are still facing difficulties in exploiting all the available tools of interactivity offered by the Internet. However, very common is the presence of published ‘policies or rules’ that govern the participation within these virtual arenas of discussion as forum and mailing lists (in 13.3% of cases). In these cases extreme right organizations appears to desire to be in the Internet ‘mainstream’, controlling through them their ‘image’ (Gerstenfeld *et al.* 2003, 40) and managing their web-‘content’ (Preece 2000).

Usually, policies and rules deny indeed vulgar language, blasphemy, violent and racist words—asserting that the group is non-violent and not hate-oriented, as in the case of the French right-wing website *Aime et Sers*\(^\text{16}\) where we can read that: “It is absolutely denied to public on this forum messages inciting to armed struggle, to martyrs, to terrorism (…). In this forum is not possible to display public maps, schemes, plans, news and instructions for the hand-building of weapons, ammunitions and explosives”. Similarly on the forum of discussion of the Italian organization *Militaria*\(^\text{17}\) anti-discrimination and anti-racist rules welcome the participants: “USMF does NOT tolerate any form of discrimination. Any posts violating this provision are subject to immediate deletion (…) USMF does NOT tolerate any members making inappropriate communications disparaging any race”. Similar rules about content related to discrimination on the basis of nation,

\(^{15}\)Spaces of a-synchronous online discussions such as fora allows members of a community to interact easily with one another, at any place and time convenient to them, while synchronous spaces of communication such as chats and online conferences are possible only when people interacting are online in the same time (independently of the place).

\(^{16}\)http://www.aime-et-sers.com/

\(^{17}\)http://www.militaria.com/
religion, and gender, can also be found frequently on the websites of the American extreme right organizations. We identified other cases in which the goal to distinguish between ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ prevails and the participation to the arenas of debate is allowed only by those ‘who share the group ideology’, or ‘who are fascists’. The discrimination of relevant boundaries between the ‘ingroup’ and ‘outgroup’ might create what Downing terms the ‘repressive radical media’ of the far-right (Atton, 2006, 574), however it is also considered to have positive effects on group identity (Gaßebner et al. 2003, 40).

In fact our data show also that extreme right websites in general rarely contain ‘explicit claims’ which stress that the group is not violent and that it does not incite violence or racism (in only 6.3% of cases). These anti-racist and anti-violence statements have often a double value: on the one hand, they help protecting the group from the risk of being banned from the Net, on the other hand, they are used by these organizations to emphasize their core values, defending the group itself on the basis of the same principles (related to racism, violence, etc.) usually used for their stigmatization in society. This is evident for example on the site of the organization National Democrats where the right of ‘pluralism of races’ is defended, “we believe in respect for, and preservation of, different races and cultures” (…). However, each race should have its own homeland. Britain has always been primarily a white, Christian country and to preserve our culture we would halt any further immigration and encourage those immigrants resident in Britain to return to their land of ethnic origin”. Similarly on the webpage of the group Order of White Knights the opposition of the organization against ‘hate on the web’ is explained in this way: “There is a common media spin and misconception that those who love the White Race hate other races. This is a stereo typical Hollywood myth perpetuated through the mainstream media (…).We are for love. Love of our children, women and White Race. Love your race. Respect other races. Hate your enemies”.

4. Information & communication through the web…and propaganda!

18 See for example the forum of the American neo nazi organization Stormfront which says that “the webmaster of the forum gives a judgment to published posts, deciding what is acceptable or nor acceptable, so eliminable”.

19 E.g. see http://www.fascismoeliberta.it/; or http://www.nazipunk.8k.com/index.html

20 An example of such types of claims can be found on the website of the organization Imperial Klans of America it is stated that the organization “suspend or banish any member immediately if they speak of or promote illegal actions. If anyone is found to be committing crimes they are immediately put up for suspension or banishment”.

21 http://web.archive.org/web/19961221205234

22 http://www.orderofwhiteknights.org/
Our data also indicates that both the European and American extreme-right organisations analysed make strong use of their web sites for an important cognitive aspect related to the group identity building and maintenance/survival, namely the collection and dissemination of information. More than two-thirds of extreme right websites (68.2%) contain a section in which they publish ‘articles, papers and dossiers’ and half of them (50.6%) have a ‘news section’ in which they post newspaper articles, or do news coverage, taking info from other newspapers or TV programs. Moreover, 40.8% of the websites provide materials for the political education of citizens such as ‘bibliographical’ sources. This informative material is various, with however some country context specificities. It ranges from ‘classics’ texts of the extreme-right literature (Hitler’s Mein Kampf, texts from authors such as David Irving, David Lane, Evola etc.), to biographies of leaders of the Fascist, Nazi or Franco’s period\(^23\), to commentaries, pamphlets and reports concerning political and social issues, either current or historical (e.g. on bioethics, abortion, the Freemasons. Often on the Social Republic of Salò, as well as on philosophy, religion and spirituality in the Italian case; on the Basque country, autonomy issues and the fight against the ETA\(^24\) in the Spanish case; on nationalism and bilingualism\(^25\) in the French case; on anti-multiculturalism and communism in the English case\(^26\)). What is striking for such extremist organizations constantly in danger of being banned from the Web, is the strong presence on their sites of tools of communication with the public. 34.5% of extreme-right organizations has a ‘search engine’ to help the visitor to easily navigate on their websites and almost two-thirds of them contains information about the ‘reachability of the organization’ (54.9%), such as a street address, phone and fax number and 82.4% provides an e-mail address\(^27\).

Finally our data stress that extreme right organizations are very much committed in using the Internet for propaganda (towards outsiders and insiders), disseminating via the internet a variety of typical ‘hate symbols’ and/or material explicitly recalling Fascist iconography and rhetoric (in 37.6% of cases). The most common are: swastikas or burning crosses, eagles, fasci littori and gladio (the traditional fascist symbols)\(^28\), photos of Mussolini and Hitler, images related to the

\(^{23}\) E.g. see the website of the Spanish group Fundación División Azul (http://www.fundaciondivisionazul.org/).


\(^{25}\) E.g. see the web site of the French group Alsace D’Abord (www.alsacedabord.org).

\(^{26}\) See the English website Sperhead Archive (http://www.spearhead.com/).

\(^{27}\) Moreover, 34.5% of extreme-right organizations has a ‘search engine’ to help the visitor the easily navigate on their websites.

\(^{28}\) See for example Brigata Nera (http://it.geocities.com/brigatanera88/).
German Reich, Stems and flags from the fascist past. Yet images such as fire and flames, swords, guns, escutcheons, fists and armed soldiers are prevalent\(^{29}\), but also representative figures (banners), graphic symbols or seals meant to incite hate against social and political adversaries (e.g. burning flags of enemy - American, Israeli - countries, “Stop” and ‘No entrance’ road sign for NATO, Israeli products, a child who urinates on Communist symbols, a skull jumping on *Che Guevara* image, etc.)\(^{30}\). The frequent presence of hate symbols and banners on the websites of extreme right organizations allow them to bring- using the infrastructure of the Internet – “a purpose and a renewed commitment, a sense of shared identity within an ideology whose history is revisited and presented as a rational alternative to mainstream political parties – one that vindicates the homeland assaulted by people of all races, one that is able to speak to the underprivileged, the youth, the marginalized” (Padovani 2008, 756).

Propaganda towards outsiders is strongly related to recruitment. Extreme right organizations focus often on the recruitment of young people (Verfassungsschutzbericht 2010)\(^{31}\). Although commentators are divided on the viability of the Internet as a recruitment tool, for the lack of face to face interactions, (Burris et al 2000, 231), our data indicate that multimedia materials-such as video and music downloads- are often present in the extremist sites (in 50.2% of cases). They are videos and audios of sermons and speeches by leaders of the Fascist/Nazi regimes, videos of recent demonstrations, public speeches by political parties\(^{32}\), and music such as Fascist and Nazi songs\(^{33}\), as well as songs from radical right music groups. In some radical right websites even ringtones and screensavers for PC are offered\(^{34}\), and other provide more advanced multimedia materials, as in the case of the *British National Party*\(^{35}\) that proposes the ‘BNP television’.

5. Mobilizing and engaging people via the Internet: toward a trasnationalization of the ER?

\(^{29}\) See also the website *Nuovo MSI* [http://members.xoom.alice.it/nuovoms/i/](http://members.xoom.alice.it/nuovoms/i/).

\(^{30}\) For example, on the site of the Italian cultural association *Gente d’Europa* [http://www.geocities.com/gente_europa/](http://www.geocities.com/gente_europa/) we can find the waving Italian flag and bright torches and on the French site *Aime et Sers*, we find the ‘no entrance’ road sign on the Israeli flag and a swastika turning around the world [http://www.aime-et-sers.com/](http://www.aime-et-sers.com/); In the United Kingdom, on the political party’s site *Manchester British Peoples’ Party* [http://www.bppmanchester.blogspot.com/](http://www.bppmanchester.blogspot.com/) we can find the image of an Arab person cancelling the words ‘freedom of speech’, a bulldog biking the European Union flag, “wake up, Britain!”, etc. .


\(^{32}\) [http://www.forzaniuova.org/](http://www.forzaniuova.org/)

\(^{33}\) See the website of the Italian extreme-right magazine *Il Popolo d’Italia* [http://www.popoloditalia.it/](http://www.popoloditalia.it/)

\(^{34}\) [http://www.ilduce.altervista.org/](http://www.ilduce.altervista.org/)

\(^{35}\) [http://bnp.org.uk/](http://bnp.org.uk/)
As mentioned the Internet is considered as an important aspect of political mobilization (as well as the development of trasnational organizations) because it allows for quick and broad dissemination of information (Petit 2004), overcoming problems of leadership and decision-making (Castells 2000), and favoring transnational ‘solidarity’ (Chase-Dunn and Boswell 2002). In fact, governmental sources underline the fact that the Internet can be utilized “by extremist organizations to promote their agenda, organize campaigns, collect information on future targets, claim attacks, inform other members of the group” (TE-SAT Report 2010, 6).

Our data show also that although still moderately, extreme-right organizations have started to use the Internet for a mobilization function and that, most importantly, this mobilization effort takes several forms on their web sites. Approximately one fifth of the organizations analyzed (18.8%) offer an ‘event calendar or agenda’, providing information on meetings, demonstrations and cultural or political events (e.g. concerts) among activists and sympathizers. Another 23.9% utilize the Internet in order to publicize their (off line) own ‘on-going political campaigns’. Examples of campaigns launched via Web by extreme-right groups are: the boycott of Chinese36 and Israeli products; against Europe37 and the accession of Turkey to the EU; against drugs and abortion38, pro-life, and against homosexuals39. In many countries, extremist websites publicize campaigns against immigration40 and some of the websites have been constructed specifically for this goal (as for example Immigración Masiva41 in Spain and Campaign for a referendum on Immigration42 in United Kingdom). Other examples of campaigns launched and supported via the Internet are the ArabOilBoycott launched by the American party Aryan Racial Loyalist Party (to boycott anti-American countries that sell oil in United States),43 and the campaign to protect ‘White rights’

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36 E.g. GipuzkoA88 (http://www.libreopinion.com/members/aberriadohil/)
37 The Manchester British Peoples' Party, for example, launched the political campaign against the communitarian common currency in the United Kingdom (http://www.bppmanchester.blogspot.com/).
38 E.g. in Italy, www.forzaniuova.it; in United Kingdom http://www.bpp.org.uk/
39 For example, the Church of Jesus Christ in America launched political campaigns in favour of the family and its protection, pro-life and against pornography (http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=e419fb40e21ce00VgnVCM1000001f5e340aRCRD).
40 The political party British First Party (http://www.britishfirstparty.org) launched, for example, the campaigns “Cleaning the fifth off our streets” and “British Jobs for British Workers”. Similarly, on the American site Knights of the KKK is launched the campaign against immigration, together with campaigns against adoption for homosexual couples and for defend ‘white’ Christian values (http://www.kkk.com/).
41 http://www.inmigracionmasiva.com/
42 http://www.referendum_1hwy.com/
43 http://www.loyalistparty.com/
against the violence by black people, initiated by the American organization *The European-American Unity and Rights Organization (EURO)*\(^{44}\). One of the most interesting campaigns is that one for freedom of speech promoted by the English group *Civil Liberty*\(^{45}\) and the campaign Against Political Correctness\(^{46}\) whose site itself is an ongoing political campaign.

Rarer, however, are attempts to organize political actions directly on the web (e.g. ‘netstrikes’, ‘mailbombings’, see Mosca 2006) by extreme right organizations (only in 5.1% of cases). When it happens these initiatives are usually ‘online petitions’ such as in the case of the English party *England First Party*, where on its website information to sign online petitions (“The English Claim of Right”)\(^{47}\), or the defence of animals (“End Ritual Slaughter Now”\(^{48}\)) can be found. Other (fewer) protest actions staged directly on the web are ‘mailbombings’, such as in the case of the American organization *American Knights of the KKK*\(^{49}\) which provides on its website pre-printed mails and addresses of Deputies and Senators to create these events on different policies. Similarly on the site *Campaign for a referendum on immigration*\(^{50}\), a mail model to address the Labour party in order to appeal for a referendum on immigration is published.

Moreover, Internet is also used by extreme right groups for fundraising: more than one third of the groups investigated (36.5%) use the Internet to sell some kind of merchandise (*e-commerce*), such as clothes, *militaria* and souvenirs from WWII, books, magazines, CDs and videos, etc., in order to support financially the organizations activities. For example, on the Italian site *Militaria Collection*\(^{51}\) it is possible to buy uniforms from WWII and accessories, caps, helmets, belts, flags, standards, posters, medals and awards, military insignia, SS insignia and even firearms. Similarly, the website of the American youth sub-cultural group *Micetrap Distribution*\(^{52}\) sells online compact discs, flags, clothing, DVDs and VHS tapes, screwdrivers, pins, patches, laces and braces, books

\(^{44}\) [http://www.whitecivilrights.com/](http://www.whitecivilrights.com/)

\(^{45}\) “Therefore we will be building an activist base of legally trained individuals capable of undertaking civil rights demonstrations with the intention of publicizing cases and issues” ([http://www.civilliberty.org.uk/about.htm](http://www.civilliberty.org.uk/about.htm)).

\(^{46}\) [http://www.capc.co.uk/](http://www.capc.co.uk/).

\(^{47}\) “Become a signatory to The English Claim of Right. Both England and Scotland as part of their Acts of Union of 1707 lost their own national Parliaments and instead Westminster became, and remains home to, the Union Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” ([http://efp.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/](http://efp.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/)).

\(^{48}\) “Sign the online petition to request the repeal of the current exemption in the law that allows animals to be subjected to the unnecessary suffering associated with Halal/Kosher slaughter”

\(^{49}\) [http://www.kkk.com/](http://www.kkk.com/)

\(^{50}\) [http://www.referendum.1hwy.com/](http://www.referendum.1hwy.com/)

\(^{51}\) [http://www.militariacollection.com/index1.htm](http://www.militariacollection.com/index1.htm)

\(^{52}\) [http://www.micetrap.net/shop/catalog/default.php](http://www.micetrap.net/shop/catalog/default.php)
and magazines, jewelry, vinyl records, stickers, miscellaneous and auction blocks. As it has been suggested, it is likely that these items play a double function: On the one hand, they help advertise the groups and diffuse their message, and on the other hand they provide an income to sustain the organization (Gerstenfeld et al. 2003, p. 36).

There are finally efforts among the extreme right organizations analyzed to orientate, though the web, the group and its activities internationally: 32.5% of all cases have on their websites hyperlinks/ties to international or cross-national right-wing organizations abroad (as, for example, the European National Front, and the Unione Mondiale dei Nazionalsocialisti), accounting, on average, for 15 cross-national and/or international links each (tab.2).

**Tab. 2 - International and Cross-national ties of the extreme right organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>ITALY</th>
<th>SPAIN</th>
<th>FRANCE</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>All Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International and Cross-national ties</strong></td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this line, they also try to appeal to an international audience by offering on their websites some contents translated in languages other than the language of their own country (in 10.2% of all cases). More interestingly, when it happens it concerns especially those sections that contain important information about the identity of the group (such as the sections ‘about us’, ‘who we are’, ‘our goals and mission’, etc), testifying a desire of extreme right organizations to use the internet to make their cause known worldwide. For example, the Italian political magazine *Uomo Libero*\(^{53}\) offer the homepage translated in English, French, German and even Japanese; moreover, it has 163 international and/or cross-national links.

To summarize, what factors influence the extent and the forms of the internet use by right-wing extremist groups? Figure 2, which offers a summary of the six aspects of political activism on line explored so far, expressing the degree of activity by right-wing groups on each index by countries\(^{54}\).

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\(^{54}\) Each of these six additional indexes of the forms of Internet usage derive from the sum of the lower lever indicators used for each dimension (see section 2) which have been normalized, in order to vary between 0 and 1. Finally, in order to be comparable, each index has been standardized to the 0 to 1 range by dividing the resulting score by the maximum possible value.
shows that some country patterns with regards to right-wing political activism online emerge. American extreme-right organizations are more active in the use of the Internet than their European counterparts on most of the functions analysed (propaganda, communication with the public, mobilization etc.). Among the European cases, the Italian context seems particularly conducive for an active use of the internet by extreme-right organizations for political purposes\(^{55}\) (and secondly the French context)\(^{56}\), whereas the Spanish case is the least favorable concerning the online political activism of these radical groups.

For example, the American right-wing extremist websites (and secondly the Italian ones), are those which mainly provide bibliographical materials for the political education of citizens (in 65% and 43.8% of cases respectively), newsletters and news coverage (50%) and they are the most equipped for what concern information about the reachability of the group (almost all of them).

On the other hand, the Spanish radical right groups are the least likely to have a ‘news’ section in their websites (only in 10.4% of cases), offer instruments to the visitors for the communication with the group (32.8%), provide ‘articles, papers and dossiers’ (48.3%), as well as to organize through their websites political mobilization, either offline and online (for example online actions are totally absent) and stimulate virtual debates among adherents (only 18.9% of them have a ‘forum’ and 2.7% a chat).

**Fig. 2 – Forms of Internet use by extreme right organizations by country (mean values)**

\(^{55}\) As we can see from the figure, the USA shows the highest values on 3 out of six indexes of political activism (virtual community/debate 0.25; communication 0.50; mobilization 0.15) and the second highest on 3 out of six. Italy shows the highest values on 3 out of 6 indexes (communication 0.43; propaganda 0.75; internationalization 0.28) and the second highest on two out of six. Spain has the lowest values of online activity on 5 out of 6 indexes.

\(^{56}\) The French extreme-right organizations emerge as the most committed in mobilizing adherents by offering on their websites the ‘event calendar/agenda’ of the group (25%), whereas the English ones are those most frequently utilizing the Internet to publicize their political campaigns (30.9%).
However, our research also underlines that, in spite of the different country-contexts, there is a similarity, among the same types of ER organizations in the five countries, in the political use of the web, suggesting that the offline organizational characteristics (i.e. belonging to the same sector of the extreme-right milieu/ideology) might have an impact.

As indeed our analysis shows (for the aggregate data, see figure 3), in all countries (but only partly in the USA, France and the UK\textsuperscript{57}), extreme-right political parties and movements are those more likely to use the web to fulfill functions such as ‘informing’ (0.43) and ‘communicating’ (0.45) with the potential audience - according to a more traditional use of the Internet as an additional channel to the usual political means of consensus seeking. For instance ‘articles and dossier’ are mostly present on the websites of political parties (in 23% of cases), which are also those more often offer a ‘news section’ (in 20.2%)\textsuperscript{58}.

On the other hand, in (nearly) all countries, sub-cultural youth organizations and neo-Nazi groups are those more likely to use the Internet (in a more innovative way) as a substitute for face-to-face interactions and social processes, being particularly active respectively in exploiting the web for ‘mobilizing’ their adherents (0.15-0.16 both) (but not in Italy and Spain, where they are overcome by political parties) and for building ‘international contacts and contents’. They are for example the

\textsuperscript{57} In the USA, on communication and information are prominent political movements and nostalgic revisionist extreme-right groups, but not political parties; in France political parties and movements are second, overcome by cultural association in these two functions of the Internet. In the UK political parties are prominent together with commercial right-wing groups and not political movements as for communication and information.

\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, 34.5% of extreme-right political parties has a ‘search engine’.
types of extreme right organizations which mostly provide multimedia materials for propaganda and engagement of people on their websites (in 72.2% and 59.1% of cases respectively). Neo-Nazi groups are, in all countries, the more internationalized groups (0.38). Furthermore, surprisingly, in all countries, traditional right-wing organizations such as the nostalgic, revisionist and negationist groups (as well as cultural associations), are characterized by high levels of political activism on the new arena of the Internet (in particular for all that concerns propaganda towards outsiders and insiders, 0.80\(^59\); and debates; 0.28\(^60\)).

**Fig. 3 – Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations (mean values)**

![Forms of Internet use by type of extreme right organizations](image)

6. Conclusion

In this paper by focusing on both political parties and non-party radical right organizations, and highlighting, via a content analysis of their websites, the specific functions of right-wing websites for several aspects related to political activism online. If so far research has paid little attention “to right-wing media as alternative media” (Atton, 2006, 574), our study has instead pointed out that

\(^{59}\) E.g. bibliographical references are especially present in the websites of cultural organizations (20.2%).

\(^{60}\) E.g. nostalgic groups are those on whose websites ‘hate symbols’ and banners are more frequent (17.7%).
there is an active use of the Internet by extreme-right groups in all Western Democracies we analysed, suggesting that the increasingly diffused ICTs, represent (and are exploited as) an opportunity for groups, that would otherwise be banned from the dominant societal discourse, to have their views heard.

First of all, as emerged, the extreme right makes strong use of Internet technologies as an instrument of information. Also in our comparative study, as underlined by Padovani (2008) one of the their main function is indeed to forward information about local, national, and international events of political, social and/or cultural relevance for the movement (ibid., 760), as well as to solicit financial contributions for their groups. The majority of the extreme right organizations are also well equipped in terms of instruments to facilitate the users, and pay significant attention towards communicating with them. Moreover, they skillfully employ multimedia materials for their propaganda via the Web, with the goal to presumably recruit new young members (which are the main target of radical right, disaffected youngsters (Chroust 2000: 116); but also, as emerged, in order to strengthen the faith of actual members and sympathizers, diffusing through their websites an ‘identity kit’ of similar and redundant symbols, images, icons, norms and values’ referring to National Socialism, fascism and the core ideas of the extreme-right, such as ethno-nationalism, law and order and xenophobia, Mudde 2007, 21). In this way they use the ICTs to promote a coherent and unified ideology (Roversi 2006).

Extreme-right organizations also make some attempts to promote virtual debates on their websites, creating on them ‘virtual’ agoras where like-minded people can meet and exchange ideas. However, as seen, truly interactive spaces of debates were rarer than asynchronous arenas and, moreover, they are ambivalent, characterized both by a strong intervention by the organization leadership for the purpose of ‘content management’, and in order to trace the boundaries of the group. In line with this findings one question must be posed for future research: What happens to democracy and free speech “if people use the Internet to listen and speak only to the like-minded?” (Sustein, 2007)

Also the potential mobilization via the Internet is only partly exploited by extreme right groups, which increasingly rely on it for advertising their off-line actions, periodically supporting campaigns of various kinds in their websites), but still rarely for staging directly in it online actions. Protests staged directly on the web are much more used by left-wing movements (della Porta and Mosca 2006, 543).

The internet is emerged however as a very powerful (and also empowering) tools for these organizations offering to them the possibility to link, also transnationally, to one another both electronically and logistically. Dong that, as argued “even geographically isolated groups with only a few members can become part of a collective”, and this not only “facilitates the sharing of
information and other resources, but it also helps forge a stronger sense of community and purpose” therefore collective identity (Gerstenfeld, 2003, 40).

Nevertheless, beyond this general picture some country specificities in the degree and the forms of the use of the internet by extreme-right groups have emerged, which we can try to interpret referring to the political and cultural opportunities offered to these organizations in their respective country. Indeed, in line with similar studies conducted on radical left wing movements and other civil society organizations (della Porta and Mosca 2005, Bruszt et al. 2005), we believe that the characteristics of the external environment (both of the general context and of the organizations) matter on explaining the presence online of these groups/collective actors (della Porta and Mosca 2006: 545).

It is worth noting that with regard to political opportunities (such as for instance potential institutional allies in power, the presence of legal constraints toward right-wing groups, etc., see Mudde 2007), Italy seems to be the most open country and the same can be said as for all that concerns the cultural and discursive opportunities (that can determine a message’s chance of success in the public sphere, Koopmans and Olzak 2004), which seem to be favorable to right-wing groups (Wetzel 2009, 327; on the diffused mistrust in representative institutions, see EUMC, 2004, p. 17; on anti-immigrants appeals by political elites, ECRI 2006)\(^{61}\). Against this background, the Italian extreme right tends to be very active through the Web to organize both in the real world and in the online reality its political activities. By contrast, the US political context (similarly to the UK and partly- France) seem equally more ‘closed’ to the accession of extreme-right organizations to the political system (either because there are no other political parties with which the extreme-right could align, and because the electoral system, especially in the USA and UK, doesn’t offer parliamentary representation of these actors). However, if, as emerged, the French and English extreme-right movements show a intermediate level of political activism, the American ones are those which mostly use the Internet for conducting politics. Here it is likely that the result can be accounted for by the more favourable cultural and ‘technological’ opportunities\(^{62}\) of the US context compared to the European ones. The right-wing extremist claims diffused online, can be seen as acceptable public opinion in the US- where freedom of speech tends to overcome other

\(^{61}\) It has been noted/argued that in terms of the societal attitudes towards the extreme-right, the salience of certain issues which extreme-right organizations can easily mobilize (e.g. immigration, religion, law and order etc), as well as the orientation of the political elites toward these parties, in Italy, in the last decade, ‘the far right has become more visible (…), gradually normalized, accepted, certainly more tolerated than before’ (Padovani 2008, 754).

\(^{62}\) We refers here to the degree a country have opportunities to make citizens easily accessible to the new technologies in terms of availability, price, age, etc. (e.g. the so called ‘digital divide’).
concerns – than in the European countries studied, where the fascist experiences left legacies of legislation and policies concerning racist violence and crimes, Caiani et al. 2012). In this line, it has to be noticed that Spain is one of the European countries showing the lowest level of Internet penetration, measured by access to the Internet (33.6%, whereas the European average is 46.9%; see della Porta and Mosca, 2006b). Moreover, the traditional organizational and ideological weakness of the Spanish extreme right (Rodriguez, 2006) seems to be reflected in their inability to exploit Internet opportunities for their political actions. In fact, as many commentators stress, since the end of the dictatorship the Spanish extreme-right - unable to manage the political and social changes of the transition to democracy - has always been suffering from weakness, both in terms of political parties and elections and in terms of social acceptance (Casals 1999, Norris 2005). In sum, our results suggest that offline characteristics of collective actors do matter in explaining their behavior online (della Porta and Mosca 2004).

This is also confirmed by the other finding of this paper which underlines that different types of right-wing organizations use the Internet for serving different purposes. In particular, youth sub-cultural and neo-Nazi groups, in all countries, have appeared as the organizations more actively committed to the use of the web as an alternative channel for mobilization. This is in contrast to the more ‘institutionalized’ political parties, which, in general, use the Internet mainly as a showcase of their organizations, more than as a new interactive political arena. As also suggested by researchers on left-wing social movements, more formalized and hierarchical organizations make a more traditional and instrumental usage of the Web, whereas less formalized and more fluid networks are much more interested in using the Web for innovative functions related to the identity construction and mobilization (della Porta and Mosca 2006, 546). To conclude, without assuming that the online political activism and behaviour of individual and groups mirror the actual activities of them in the real word, our study demonstrates that the online and offline environments cannot be considered as two separated entities (Ibid.), but they instead influence each other constantly (Bruszt et al. 2005).

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