

# **Imitative Counterpublics: Affective and Networked Dynamics of Far-Right Mobilization on Social Media**

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This dissertation investigates how far-right publics in Germany network and mobilize on Twitter (now X) as a central platform of political communication during the late 2010s and early 2020s. The analysis is situated against a backdrop of escalating far-right violence and the so-called mainstreaming of far-right discourse in Germany and beyond, and draws on central events for the analysis, including the 2018 Chemnitz riots, the 2020 far-right terrorist attack in Hanau, and the 2020 EU-border crisis. These moments triggered intense public contestation, both offline and online, around questions of migration, racism, and belonging, and revealed how digital infrastructures shape affective expressions of the users as well as the publics that emerge here.

The dissertation aims to conceptualize the far right as a certain kind of *public* to capture the ways in which far-right actors form, sustain, and expand communities that are not only ideological but also deeply affective. Integrating critical public sphere theories as a central field of communication studies with queer-feminist approaches to affect, it challenges common classifications of far-right formations as counterpublics and instead argues that these publics reproduce and extend existing hierarchies through exclusionary and authoritarian logics. In this context, affect is theorized as a constitutive force in public communication, shaping how far-right discourse circulates and becomes productive, and how communities coalesce around shared emotions such as fear, anger, resentment, and grief, as well as forms of attachment like hope or national pride.

Methodologically, the dissertation adopts a mixed-methods design to analyze tweets collected during the immediate aftermath of the three events. Social network analysis is employed to identify influential actors and communities and to map how relational structures reflect affective alignments. Hashtag co-occurrence analysis traces discursive and affective themes as they surface in real time, illustrating how affect and emotions become attached to the issue of migration. Finally, qualitative analysis through the method of *reading for affect* examines how language (both in its content and materiality) is mobilized to generate belonging within far-right publics while excluding racialized Others. This triangulated approach allows for a multi-layered understanding of how affective media practices operate across network structures and discursive fields.

The findings demonstrate that far-right publics on Twitter mobilize through recurrent affective strategies that both imitate and subvert emancipatory critique, co-opting the language of marginalization to justify racist and exclusionary claims. The dissertation introduces the concept of *imitative counterpublics* to capture this dynamic, highlighting how the far right positions itself as an embattled minority while gaining network power within a landscape structured by historical continuities of dominance and platform governance increasingly shaped by far-right influence. Beyond its empirical contributions, the study advances methodological approaches for capturing affect in digital communication and theoretical understandings of publics as affective, contested, and performative formations.

In sum, this research contributes to critical media and communication studies by illuminating the affective and networked dynamics of far-right mobilization in Germany and by situating these dynamics within broader global transformations of digital publics. Its findings underscore the urgency of examining how far-right publics exploit digital media environments and affective politics to consolidate power, offering conceptual and methodological tools for analyzing similar formations across platforms and contexts.