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The Role of Social Media in the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Finland

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Introduction

Populism, although in itself an empty ideology, often attaches itself to other ideologies (Laclau 2005; Palonen & Saresma 2017; Ylä-Anttila 2017). Right-wing populism is typically entangled with xenophobic nationalism and neo-conservatism that often usher in racism and misogyny (Palonen & Saresma 2019). A ‘populist *Zeitgeist*’ is advancing across the globe across the ideological spectrum of populism (Suiter et al., 2018, 396); however, a particular right-wing populism has in the 2000s become a major political force in most European countries. In the Nordic countries that are characterized by multi-party system, right-wing populist parties have been central in the political arena in the past decade.

Scholars have acknowledged that social media have become influential channels for spreading right-wing nationalist-populist messages (e.g. Mudde, 2016, 28; Pettersson 2017; Suiter et al., 2018; Saresma, 2020). However, we lack more detailed knowledge of how politicians of populist parties benefit from social media (Jacobs & Spierings 2019, 1692) and what are the other social processes that in conjuncture with the emergence of social media facilitate the spread of right-wing populism. In this chapter we take Finland as a case study to examine the role of media technology in the rise of right-wing populism. We argue that transformations in the mediascape that began in the 1990s – the Internet, mobile technology and market competition – crucially afforded the emergence of the right-wing populist movement and its transformation into a political force. However, we do not argue that the role of these shifts in the mediascape should be taken as a sign of technological determinism; rather, our analysis suggests a broader angle to the complex connections of different social processes, namely racism, islamophobia, misogyny together with changing

technology, journalistic practice and new forms of spreading and interpreting mediated contents.

The Finns party (*Perussuomalaiset*) in its current form is a populist radical right party that mixes traditional conservatism and anti-establishment with extreme nationalism. The party was established in 1995 on the grounds of the agrarian populist Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue*). It is an exceptional case among the right-wing populist parties as its agrarian populist political legacy is intertwined with a nationalist and socially conservative political agenda and more recently increasingly with ethnic nationalism (Keskinen, 2013, 2016; Mickelsson, 2011; Pyrhönen, 2015, Norocel et al., forthcoming). In the 2011 elections, the party took Finnish politics by storm, polling 19 per cent of the votes. Again, in the 2015 elections, polling close to 18 per cent, the party joined the right-wing governmental coalition (Kantola and Lombardo 2019, 1112). A significant ideological shift to right-wing nationalist populism, however, took place in 2017 when the party went through a dramatic leadership change. The moderate leader Timo Soini stepped aside and his favourite candidate lost the election for the next chair to the party's right-wing fraction. Despite the break-up, in the 2019 elections the party polled again 17.5 per cent of the votes. The Finns Party was just one seat away from winning the general election and it thus became the largest opposition party.

This transformation from center-populist to far-right ideology in the party (Norocel et al., forthcoming) was enabled by the right-wing fraction's popularity gained gradually on social media, hidden from the sight of traditional media and political commentators. The party's new core element, ethno-nationalism of Finnishness (Arter 2010: 485, 501–502), connects it to other right wing parties in Europe. Ethno-nationalism refers to a belief that a nation is formed based on its ethnic and other uniform features such as genetic heritage. Groups that come from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds are understood as fundamentally incompatible. Ethno-nationalism as an ideology produces a clear distinction between 'us' and 'the others', the latter being systematically excluded from 'our' nation. (Ovaskainen 2019; Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming).

In this chapter, we demonstrate the strengthening of the far-right ideology on and through social media from the beginning of 2010s. More specifically, we examine the rise of the present chair Jussi Halla-aho and his success in taking over the Finns party as an example of how the transformation of media environment from a centripetal phase of mass communication to a multi-platform and centrifugal phase facilitated the mainstreaming of islamophobia and misogyny, ideologies that are at the core of right-wing populism throughout Europe.

In the first part of the chapter we argue that analysis of present day populism needs to examine the media environment as a system of connectivities by paying attention to two spheres: first, the structure and restructure of the media ecology in general; and second, the de-centralized anonymous online spaces, the so-called ‘echo chambers’. Then we focus on the mediated construction of two entangled ideologies in the right-wing populist movement – racism, or more specifically islamophobia, and misogyny. We argue that through these two intersecting ideologies national and local right-wing populist movements connect to transnational flows of right-wing discourses and practices. Nevertheless, as our analysis shows, these developments are simultaneously deeply rooted in the particular social context.

Transforming media ecology and the Finnish case of right-wing populism

The mainstream public in Finland became aware of a right-wing populist movement with an outspoken anti-immigration and Islamophobic agenda in 2008 when a blogger – the present chair of the Finns – Jussi Halla-aho gained electoral success as an independent candidate on the Finns (PS) list in local elections in Helsinki.

Halla-aho’s rise to the top in Finnish politics is intriguing for media research. Before the electoral success in 2008 he was unknown for the mainstream public as there was hardly any mention of him in the national media (Horsti 2015: 357). This counters the common argument within media research on right-wing populism that mainstream media attention, although critical and negative, is crucial for the success of new political populists (Ellinas 2010; Stewart, Mazzoleni & Horsfield 2003). In the case of Jussi Halla-aho, while mainstream journalism did not recognize the movement around

him before 2008 he succeeded in reaching a constituency in the online “echo-chambers”.

After the electoral success in 2008, traditional news values required the mainstream media to cover the political newcomer (see Norris 2009). Unlike in neighboring Sweden where the mainstream media categorically refused to include the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats among the regular political commentators, the Finnish media integrated Halla-aho in debates as the “immigration critique” – a term the Finns Party preferred. The sudden rise of Halla-aho from “nowhere” to electoral success, that is, his rise to politics through the unconventional paths of blogging illustrates the shift in the dynamics between the media and right-wing populism that began to take shape across Europe in late 2000s (Horsti & Nikunen 2013; Horsti 2015). However, it is also grounded on traditional news logic – such as the practice of covering a political newcomer and the practice of “objective” journalism that seeks to “balance” the treatment of controversial topics. Halla-aho figured as “the immigration critique” that “balanced” more liberal views on multiculturalism and migration.

Jussi Halla-aho’s blog *Scripta* that he had started in 2005 began to attract a wide following and an active community of commentators who, after later in 2008, created a separate anti-immigration discussion forum named *Hommaforum*. Halla-aho introduced the Islamophobic narrative in Finland through his blog and his message, combining nationalist and Islamophobic ideologies, was amplified on the Internet echo chambers and with help of the ‘digital foot soldiers’ (Hatakka 2019). At the time, the practice of anonymous online discussion at news and discussion sites had become popular. Simultaneously, however, mainstream media providers’ frustration over uncivil discussion on their anonymous discussion forums grew, and by about 2010 they began regulating online comments sections of news sites through pre-moderation, registration and identification of commentators (Nikunen 2011: 71–73; 77). The tightening of anonymity and moderation in the Finnish mainstream media resulted to the number of comments in the threaded discussion spaces being dropped (Pöyhtäri et al. 2013, 176). Debates among professional editors and journalists escalated, resulting to the self-governing body Council for Mass Media in Finland creating an annex to the journalists’ guidelines for monitoring the content generated by users in 2011. These transformations in the mainstream news sites that reduced

hate speech and racism online nevertheless increased the appeal of sites like Hommaforum where anti-immigration opinions and misogynist jokes flourished. This development characterises the typical trans-platform circulation of content in online spaces. Hommaforum is a prime example of a folk-cultural production model (Benkler 2006) – a more reflexive and participatory cultural production compared to that of the mass cultural production. The site’s architecture and structure invites participation and humor, while allowing the members to be known only by their pseudonyms (Horsti 2015).

Halla-aho created his online presence at a time when politicians were not yet communicating directly with publics through social media platforms. Political blogs as a distinguished genre are often paradoxically positioned outside the traditional political sphere. Anyone is able to launch a blog as the technological equipment is easy to master. Like all social media, blogs as a medium are relatively uncontrolled and uncensored, so they enable publishing acrimonious criticism and adversarial opinions. For politicians it is valuable to be able to express opinions more freely than in traditional media. (Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming.) Also, blogs as a medium are quicker and more flexible than the traditional media. As a genre, they allow circulating powerful, credible, and affective message (Pettersson 2017, 6).

Halla-aho has almost ceased his blogging after he took over the party leadership in 2017 – reflecting a transformation from a political outsider into a political insider as the leader of the main opposition party. The recurring topics in his blog since 2005 connect to nationalism and severe opposition to immigration (particularly asylum seekers and refugees) and multiculturalism (Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming). In a series of court cases he gained public exposure to his writings in 2009–2012, and in 2012 he was convicted of blasphemy and ethnic agitation. Focus on clearly demarcated themes is an effective device in spreading propaganda, and repetition, what Halla-aho uses deliberately, is a typical means of populist communication (Taveira & Nyerges 2016).

Digitization complicated the agenda setting power of mainstream media, particularly by providing online spaces where news could be shared and discussed. It also contributed to a transformation of the media ecology. For instance, in Finland in

2009, the readership of the traditionally strong newspaper market dropped 10 per cent compared to the previous year (Statistics Finland 2019). Digitization and globalization were forces that restructured journalism in Europe, also in Finland. The boundary between journalistic content of edited opinions and non-edited contents became increasingly blurred particularly because discussions around news shifted to echo-chambers (Sunstein 2001), online spaces formed around web sites and blogs of nationalistic movements where like-minded individuals gather together to exchange similar views.

However, this was only part of the story. Instead of dividing immigration debate into civil mainstream media spaces and aggressive online echo chambers, we suggest examining the media environment as a system of connectivities. This environment is a techno-cultural construct (van Dijck 2013), meaning that the connectivities and affordances emerge in the intersections of technology and human activity. The *Hommaforum* discussion space is an exemplary case in this respect. The architecture facilitated the construction of a community, creating a sense of belonging and commitment. This was particularly crucial for political mobilisation in the early phase of the movement before it gained electoral success and political power within the Finns party.

The concept of hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) captures well the current situation where affordances of various media are utilized. This hybrid media system is comprised of traditional media, social media, and alternative or false media, and it enables various actors to participate in meaning-making and knowledge production as well as dissemination and reframing of information (Hatakka 2019, 48). In the hybrid media system engendered by digital technologies, traditional news cycles are replaced with more dynamic information cycles (Suiter et al, 2018, 398), which may be an advantage for spreading misinformation, disinformation, or propaganda.

The case of the Finns Party public communication depicts the function of hybrid media system and connectivity in an exemplary way. The Finns Party has combined various media in their communication. They used traditional media such as the party newspaper, which the older agrarian conservatives trusted (Norocel et al., forthcoming) and paid campaign advertisement in legacy newspapers. The new radical right-wing anti-immigration faction, on the contrary, trusted much more

communication in new social media platforms, such as blogs (Halla-aho's *Scripta*) and discussion forums (like *Hommaforum*). Halla-aho has also been active in Twitter and Facebook, and his comments spread to other media through these platforms.

Utilising the hybrid media system and the always alert 'digital foot soldiers' who willingly spread the message of their 'master', Halla-aho's message is circulated, repeated and amplified through multiple social media channels – through a media system of connectivities. His message is based on the entanglement of oppressive ideologies that are central for right-wing populist mobilization – islamophobia and misogyny. In what follows, we will demonstrate their mediated construction and their transnational connections – however, rooting them in the particular Finnish context.

Entangled ideologies of islamophobia and misogyny

While being nationalist, Halla-aho's writing in his blog also connects to transnational radical right-wing ideologies circulating in social media and to populist networks that cross nation state borders. The transnational Islamophobic movement divides the world into "civilized Western cultures" and "primitive and dangerous Muslim culture". It does so primarily through two discourses – racism (specifically Islamophobia) and misogyny (see e.g. Horsti & Nikunen 2013; Nikunen 2015; Saresma 2017; Hatakka 2019; Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming). It was indeed Halla-aho who mainstreamed Islamophobia in the Finnish public debate already in 2010s in his blog *Scripta – Kirjoituksia uppoavasta lännestä* [Writings from the sinking West]. As the title of the blog demonstrates the key ideology in his writing is the alleged destruction of Western civilization because of the intrusion of Muslims. He emphasises cultural differences of certain groups of people, and these differences are a means of exclusion of the 'other'. An understanding of 'Finnishness' as a shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage is essential to the blog's message. However, he does not want to specify the common features, as if it was common knowledge:

As I have written before, it is sophistic gimmickry to question "Finnishness". I admit that I cannot define a "Finn". I do, however, have a strong intuition, based on which I recognise who are Finns. (Halla-aho 2011a.)

An example of the blog's anti-immigration and anti-Muslim propaganda goes as follows:

For every nine [immigrants] with attitude problems that we receive to be supported, there is one that is in some way useful. The reason is that those who accuse me of focusing too much on skin colour or religion do not see anything else in those who arrive. To them, the dark skin of the arrivals and the fact that they worship Allah are good enough criteria to enter the country. Because otherness is a fetish to them. (Halla-aho 2006b.)

Here, mentioning Allah marks the unwanted immigrants as Muslims, which is a repeated group throughout Halla-aho's blog that is framed as a threat to Western civilization and the Finnish nation. This is islamophobia in its purest form.

Islamophobia is "a form of culturalized racism that includes persistent Orientalist myths about Islam and Muslims" (Horsti 2017, 1442; see also, Werbner, 2013; Taras, 2013). Islamophobia includes the beliefs that Islam creates a culture that is sexist, misogynistic, violent, and anti-democratic, and that Muslims cannot think rationally (Kumar, 2012: 42–60). It is thus not only religion that is attacked, but the intersections of culture, ethnicity, modernity, class, and sexuality in relation to religion. Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism (Goldberg, 2009: 175), emphasizing presumed differences in *culture* as the cause of certain incompatibility, instead of *biology*. However, characteristic to the Islamophobic discourse is the entanglement of biological racism with cultural arguments (Horsti 2017, 1442). The fragment of Halla-aho's blog cited above exemplifies this entanglement of cultural and biological racism as both religion ('worshipping Allah') and biology ('dark skin').

In Finland, as well as in the other Nordic countries, right-wing populists have utilized the common understanding of Nordic gender equality in their attack against Islam (Lähdesmäki & Saresma 2014; Horsti 2017), suggesting that Muslims "are inherently patriarchal and backward" and thus a threat to liberal values such as the rights of women. Simultaneously in other discussions same people are eager to narrow down the very rights, e. g. by supporting anti-abortion mobilization, gender-neutral

marriage or day care for all children in defense of conservative, even reactionary gender politics (Poggio & Béle 2018; Saresma 2018, about conservative gender ideology, see e.g., Grönroos 2016).

The etymology of misogyny draws back to ancient Greek words *misogunía* and *misogúnēs*, “woman hater”. Misogyny means the hatred of or prejudice against women and girls, or, “feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are much better than women”, as *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it. It is important to note, however, that neither Islamophobia or misogyny is a psychological state of a person but a structural process. Kate Manne (2018) suggests that misogyny should not be understood primarily in terms of the hatred or hostility some men feel toward all or most women. Instead, misogyny is “hostile, demeaning, shaming, and punitive treatment of women”. In practice, it means controlling, policing, punishing, and exiling “bad” women, those who challenge male dominance. Misogyny is, thus, a cultural system and not just a matter of individual zealotry. It matches perfectly well with populist rhetoric where the homogenous “us” is placed against “them” as the Other. In this scenario, creating an enemy functions as a means to strengthen the sense of “us”.

Empirical analysis of Halla-aho’s blog shows that the primary argument he makes repeatedly is based on gendering the immigrant ‘other’ (see e.g., Saresma 2017; Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming). For example, in a blog post titled “Monikulttuurisuus ja nainen” [Multiculturalism and a woman], Halla-aho (2006c) claims that multiculturalism (as a problematic phenomenon) is caused by women: unlike the majority of men who bravely stand against immigration, women and particularly “green-leftist do-gooders” choose to defend immigrants or “barbaric rapists”. Halla-aho hopes that “as rape will evidently increase”, it would be these particular women who are raped by the foreign perpetrators. This violent misogynous fantasy of rape is channeled to target the “suitable” victims, the women who do not share Halla-aho’s Islamophobic ideology.

A more recent example of his social media communication through Twitter demonstrates how his gendered and racist views spread through the hybrid media system. In early spring 2020, the debate about Turkey opening its EU border to

refugees made Jussi Halla-aho eagerly participate in this discussion in the parliament and Twitter – now as the chairperson of the leading opposition party of Finland. He linked on his Twitter page a mainstream media news article (MTV 2020) about Greece using tear gas against refugees who tried to enter the country at the border and tweeted: “The [mainstream media] story claims there were women and children. On the video, there are bearded men who yell “allahu akbar”. They [liberally minded people] say it is insulting to talk about invasion.” (4 March 2020.) Again, refugees are racialized based on their religion and ethnicity and gendered, suggesting that there are no women among the refugees and that men would not be “genuine” refugees. Halla-aho implies that the refugees are intruders – dangerous religious fanatics – invading the cradle of Western civilization but because of political correctness it would be “insulting” for him to explicitly say so. The tweet was liked by 1,8 thousand people and retweeted 217 times, and so his message circulates and is amplified by the participatory labour of his followers.

His thinking follows the typical trajectory of transnational right-wing populist discourse that amalgamates Islamophobia and misogyny. The tropes of “Muslim rape” and Muslim invaders reappear in transnational Islamophobic blogosphere (Fekete 2011; Horsti 2017). Muslim men are constructed both as infantile and emasculated and as violent, hypermasculine, animal-like, even beastly (Saresma & Tulonen, forthcoming; Puar 2007, xxv). Misogyny that intersects with Islamophobia is an example of Iris Marion Young’s (2003) idea of masculine protection. In a patriarchal ideology, White man is the protector of the Western society and the imagined White nation (signified by the White woman). He is the legitimate ruler, and women and children are expected to serve as his obedient and humble royal subjects. It is only this gendered power hierarchy that can save White women from brutal violence that is allegedly performed by racialized perpetrators. This politics of patriarchy has become a central frame for social media debates in the situation where nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist rhetoric affect ‘the social divides of nation, gender, and body’, and where people are either friends or enemies, either perpetrators or victims (Wodak 2015, 5).

In misogynist-Islamophobic ideology, the role of the White woman (and in many cases specifically the blond Nordic woman) is, however, paradoxical (see Horsti

2017). On the one hand, the Nordic female represents the border of territory, family, race, culture, and identity that needs male protection. The woman embodies the nation and represents the threshold of what belongs to men. On the other hand, the (Nordic) White woman represents the civilized, independent and emancipated modern woman (an opposite to the supposedly oppressed primitive Muslim woman). However, while the role of an independent woman may be celebrated, her “openness” and softness nevertheless are conceived as weaknesses, the female body is a boundary for which violation and infection from the outside are constant threats (on the feminist theory of the “open body,” see Jegerstedt, 2012).

Conclusions

Above we have given examples of the relationship between social media and right-wing populism in a particular context using as our case a Finnish right-wing politician Jussi Halla-aho and his rise to political power. As we demonstrated, with the help of Halla-aho’s online presence – through a blog and, more recently, Twitter – the emergence of transnationally widely spread right-wing populist ideologies of Islamophobia and misogyny, has shaped the political life and political practices. Social media appears to hold a significant role as a new political arena that shapes and structures public debates.

How are these particularly Finnish currents connected to transnational flows of right-wing discourses? It has been suggested that women’s rights movement and multiculturalism cause a need to re-imagine masculinity and whiteness in a turbulent societal setting, where both male privilege and white privilege are questioned. Nevertheless, the current atmosphere in many countries is characterized by hardened attitudes towards women’s rights (such as abortion) and towards migration (particularly of Muslims), and they are interlinked with the rise of right-wing populism in the political sphere. The era of “post-truth”, neo-conservatism, and a backlash against women has made it possible for men such as Donald Trump in the United States or Viktor Orban in Hungary to gain major positions of power. Neither Trump nor Orban hides their disregard of women and women’s rights. Perhaps on the contrary, Trump’s blatant misogyny – besides his explicit racism and outspoken

Islamophobia – could be interpreted as one of the reasons for his victory in the 2016 presidential elections.

There are thus obvious similarities in the ways transnational right-wing populist movements amplify and gain significant affordances in the transformed media environment. Digitization, social and participatory media practices and the decline of legacy media structures (including public service media) have afforded the spread of racism and misogyny. The right-wing populist logic mobilizes people transnationally by appealing to them emotionally and by creating a sense of community. The sense of “us” is produced through feelings of resentment and hatred of others and through an unquestioned and ahistorical sense of entitlement that expresses itself as male privilege and White privilege. By bringing to the fore how Islamophobia and misogyny entwine in right-wing populist discourse and how the conjuncture of various transformations in the media environment tends to facilitate their appeal and spread in one specific case (Finland) this chapter has paved the way to allow scholars to analyze the similarities and differences of similar forces elsewhere in the world.

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