

“I just want to be the friendly face of national socialism”

The turn to civility in the cultural expressions of neo-Nazism in Sweden

Tina Askanius

School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Sweden

Abstract

This article is based on a case study of the media narratives of the neo-Nazi organisation Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and situates this particular actor within the broader landscape of violent extremism in Sweden today. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis informed by narrative inquiry, I examine various cultural expressions of neo-Nazi ideology in NRM’s extensive repertoire of online media. Theoretically, I turn to cultural perspectives on violent extremism to bring to centre stage the role of popular culture and entertainment in the construction of a meaningful narrative of community and belonging built around neo-Nazism in Sweden today. The analysis explores the convergence between different genres, styles, and content into new cultural expressions of national socialism which bleed into mainstream Internet culture and political discourse in new ways. In the online universe of NRM, the extreme blends with the mainstream, the mundane and ordinary with the spectacular and provocative, and the serious with the silly. In this manner, the analysis lays bare the strategies through which NRM seeks to soften, trivialise, and normalise neo-Nazi discourse using the power and appeal of culture and entertainment.

Keywords: Nordic Resistance Movement, neo-Nazism, violent extremism, online media practices, normalisation of racism and antisemitism

Introduction

“I just want to be the friendly face of national socialism. I want to be part of normalising this ideology so that we can all show our faces in the streets one day and we can bring our children to our marches without those fucking idiots throwing rocks at us. That is my main goal. [...] I became a father; I became a husband and I started caring about stuff and the best way that I can secure the future for Nordic babies is to be involved in the Nordic Resistance Movement [translated]”.

– Member of the Nordic Resistance Movement in the podcast
Mer än ord [More than Words] published on 21 February 2018

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These are the words of the host of *More than Words*, one of the latest additions to the family of podcasts curated by the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), as he reflects on his aspirations for the new podcast and his own role in the impending “race wars” and the subsequent transformation of the political landscape in Sweden. In order to normalise and “show the friendly face of national socialism”, NRM increasingly seeks to appeal to an audience beyond their own core members. Part of this strategy involves a shift in the tone and tenor of their online content – from militant propaganda to softer, less orchestrated and rehearsed political rhetoric packaged and presented in the form of (soft) infotainment and cultural content.

Images of violent confrontations between police and activists, street fights, hate speech, rallies, uniformed men marching in line, combat training, white-pride music, and beatings of “racial strangers” to the sound of the Waffen SS Choir are all copious elements in the growing repertoire of online media produced by and for the NRM, the largest and most active neo-Nazi organisation in Sweden today (Expo, 2018, 2020; Mattsson, 2018). Images of violence and violent rhetoric have always been an intrinsic part of their propaganda and key to telling the story of being at war with both Swedish “traitors” (“enemies of the people”) and “racial strangers” in the country. Increasingly however, NRM’s media narratives are saturated by other less explicitly political and militant registers in which violence, violent rhetoric, and openly racist hate speech reside in the background to give way to “lighter”, more civil discourse, and seemingly more harmless forms of propaganda. This is particularly present and potent in NRM’s cultural productions and entertainment online, which includes, for example, television entertainment, talk shows, music videos, memes, poems, and podcasts intended to amuse and entertain (see also Askanius, 2021).

In this article, I turn to these cultural expressions of neo-Nazi propaganda in order to understand how NRM seeks to construct palpable and distinctly Nordic narratives around national socialism suitable for contemporary audiences. I argue that this surge in cultural content – and with it a shift towards “softer” aesthetics, form, and style – is part of a broader project of normalisation at the heart of NRM’s media strategies and those of contemporary populist far-right parties and ultranationalist movements more generally. Normalisation is here understood as processes that “involve previously taboo ideas, frames, and practices becoming the new ‘common sense’” (Kallis, 2013: 221). The communicative efforts and discursive strategies through which populist parties have pushed to normalise far-right positions in public discourse have been explored extensively in the context of party politics and official communications (e.g., Cammaerts, 2018; Wodak, 2018), but we know less about the interplay and overlaps between the strategies deployed by mainstream populist parties and more fringe, antidemocratic actors operating at the extreme end of the right-wing spectrum – and often in more direct confrontation with the law. Drawing on recent work suggesting that scholars should approach the extreme right as a cultural rather than political space (only) (e.g., Miller-Idriss, 2018; Teitelbaum, 2018), I seek to understand the extra-ideological forces and the cultural components of a new “Nazism light” with which NRM seeks to mobilise and normalise. Three broad research questions inform the study:

- How are historical narratives of national socialism forged and sustained online through new forms of culture and entertainment?

- What are the communicative strategies (discursive, visual, aesthetic) through which NRM seeks to normalise the narrative of neo-Nazi ideology?
- How can the case of NRM help us understand the integration of extremist narratives into mainstream political discourse and digital cultures more generally?

Informed by narrative inquiry, the analysis thus critically examines the cultural expressions of neo-Nazi ideology in NRM’s extensive repertoire of online media. In doing so, I focus on three central components in their communicative strategies to normalise the ideology and tell new pervasive and more “civilised” stories of national socialism for contemporary Nordic audiences: 1) hybridity and remixing practices, 2) mimetic practices and pastiche, and 3) performances of the ordinary. In the concluding discussion, I discuss the findings in the context of broader developments of the extreme right and the relative success of extremist groups across liberal democracies in appropriating mainstream popular culture, humour, and entertainment in ways that desensitise audiences to racist and antisemitic discourse and help mainstream its underlying ideologies.

Placing the Nordic Resistance Movement on the map of the extreme right in Sweden

With NRM providing the empirical starting point for this article, I address the communicative practices of uncivility at its most extreme, that is, discourses and practices located at the very far end of the sociopolitical and ideological spectrum among extreme and openly antidemocratic fractions of civil society (see the introduction to this special issue and Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017, on the continuum of civil and uncivil society). Without going into detailed discussions on the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the notion of incivility, suffice to say that in this article, I operationalise the concept analytically by dovetailing on an understanding of incivility which is less occupied with the *tone* of the message and more with the *content* or substance of the message. Such a content-based definition of incivility takes into account how incivility can be more or less void of any of the subsets of tonal incivility (derogatory language, vulgarities, ridicule, or racial epithets) while the meaning of the message can still be uncivil (Papacharissi, 2004). This helps me understand and unpack how the incivility in NRM cultural productions and their assertions of white supremacy in many cases remains latent and not conveyed in manifest ways.

While NRM might be the most vocal and visible extremist group in Sweden (and the rest of the Nordic countries), today, it must be understood as part of a much larger and ideologically motley landscape of actors and networks currently making up what we might call the extreme-right movement in Sweden. Teitelbaum (2018) describes the broad and fractious landscape of what he dubs “the nationalist movement” as a triad comprising the militant “race revolutionaries”, the “identitarians”, and the populist “cultural nationalists”. Following this road map, we may place NRM among the “race revolutionaries” who have little compunction about promoting violence and violent revolution as the most direct route to achieving their goals. A group such as Nordisk Alternativhöger [Nordic Alt-Right] might be placed among the “intellectual”, suit-and-tie clad identitarians heavily inspired by the alt-right movement in the US, born and nurtured almost entirely online. Finally, Sverigedemokraterna [Sweden Democrats]

should, in Teitelbaum's triad, be understood as part of the increasingly mainstream position of cultural nationalism. As the third biggest party in parliament today – despite their roots in neo-Nazi movements – Sweden Democrats has spent considerable time and effort getting rid of its ties to the race revolutionary bloc and today operates within the sphere of democratic politics.

Historically, Sweden has long been a global epicentre for white supremacist activism and “intellectualism”, fuelled by a once world-leading white-power music industry in the 1990s (Teitelbaum & Lundström, 2017) and an extensive publishing industry (Lööv, 1999). With the recent rise in the numbers and visibility of extreme and openly violent groups and activities, Sweden offers a particularly interesting window onto considering and taking seriously the media strategies and practices of violent extremists within liberal democracies more broadly. Further, as a symbol or “pinnacle of progressive smugness” (Lester Feder & Mannheimer, 2017: para. 12) and political correctness in Europe,¹ Sweden has in recent years been positioned in international extreme-right circles – not least by the so-called alt-right movement in the US – as the frontier of the battle lines in the alleged imminent race war for a “white Europe”.

As an outlier case in the Scandinavian context – having experienced considerably more extreme-right violence and militancy in the past two decades than its Nordic neighbours (Ravndal, 2018) – Sweden makes for an interesting and rich site of analysis. While this particular neo-Nazi group, and organised racism in Sweden more generally, has started to gain traction in international scholarship (e.g., Blomberg & Stier, 2019; Hirvonen, 2013; Kølvråa, 2019; Teitelbaum, 2018), insights from the perspective of media and communication studies are still scarce (for exceptions, see Askanius, 2019; Askanius & Mylonas, 2015; Ekman, 2014, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018).

This case study offers a contribution that focuses explicitly on the media practices and strategies of one particularly dominant actor. Further, the point that popular culture and entertainment is political and matter significantly as formative “texts” in political subjectivity is an argument which has been rehearsed repeatedly in the field of media and cultural studies. Yet, outside this academic community, this position is still far from self-evident in a field heavily influenced by state actors and definitions with a tendency to focus on official documents, speeches, manifestos, and other kinds of explicitly ideological forms of political communication in which these actors are openly referring to violence, militancy, and armed revolution.

While by now we know a great deal of the extreme right in Scandinavia as organised political movements and formal political parties (e.g., Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014; Wahlström, 2010; Widfeldt, 2014) or organised vigilantism (Ekman, 2018; Gardell, 2019), we are still in the dark as to how to fully understand the extreme right as a site of cultural and subcultural engagement and as producers of not only political but also cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic texts and material artefacts (see also Miller-Idriss, 2018; Ulver & Askanius, 2020). With this case study focusing on the soft infotainment end of NRM's media practices, I thus not only want to address this knowledge gap but also make the argument that in order to understand the current moment and momentum of extreme-right movements across the Western world, we need to look beyond explicit political speech and traditional, more straight-forward forms of propaganda to give attention to the humorous, light-hearted, and entertaining media forms that currently mushroom and thrive online.

Further, as a contribution to academic conversations on the interplay between uncivility, racism, and populism at the heart of this special issue, I propose we understand the turn to civil discourse in NRM’s cultural productions as part of a strategic and instrumental attempt to incept elements of neo-Nazi ideology into the more acceptable anti-immigration rhetoric successfully sedimented in the public domain by right-wing populist parties in recent years (Krzyżanowski, 2020). Riding on the back of the broader discursive shifts towards anti-immigration propelled by the electoral successes of far-right populist parties, a fringe actor such as NRM become co-producers of what Krzyżanowski (2020) has dubbed borderline discourse, which merges uncivil (hate speech, antisemitism, and unmitigated racism) with civil discourse borrowed from the previously radical, but today “acceptable ‘rational’ and largely legitimate” ideas of right-wing populism (Krzyżanowski, 2020: 505). Finally, the analysis makes a specific contribution to research on notions of extremist narratives. More research detailing the different elements, actors, and dramaturgic components of contemporary neo-Nazi ideology is needed to be able to underpin and strengthen preventive methods in the field of violent extremism. This is relevant not least to the body of research seeking to inform and justify de-radicalisation initiatives by drawing on insights of narratives and counter-narratives to challenge and prevent violent extremism (e.g., Beutel et al., 2016; Leuprech et al., 2010).

Theoretical orientations

I draw on a range of critical perspectives on the rise of extreme-right, in some cases violent, movements across the continent and the role of media and culture in these developments. I am particularly inspired by the recent work of Miller-Idriss (2018) and Teitelbaum (2018) who, when read in tandem, make a compelling argument for focusing on the expressive cultural dimensions of extremist narratives and the extra-ideological forces that draw people into extremist movements. Teitelbaum (2014, 2018) considers music as part of a broader repertoire of cultural expressions of what he labels the radical nationalist scene in Scandinavia. Teitelbaum (2018) argues that the transformation of nationalism in Scandinavia has been perpetuated by a dramatic shift in musical practices on the scene. For Teitelbaum, music and the discourses surrounding it offer a window onto considering this scene and its transition from marginal subculture into a political and cultural movement. In doing so, he taps into a vast body of literature on the role of music and musical practices in white-supremacy circles and in organised racism more generally (Corte & Edwards, 2008; Teitelbaum, 2014, 2018).

Miller-Idriss (2018) describes the marriage between fashion, cultural narratives, lifestyle, and political beliefs and behaviour among far-right youth cultures in Germany. At the heart of the contribution of both authors is a call for scholars to take seriously the forms of “texts” that are often considered unserious. They encourage us to pay attention to expressive culture and lifestyle: popular culture and sociocultural aspects of “radicalisation”, for example, social and cultural identity and sense of belonging. Online media are obviously key components in this expressive culture and in creating stories of collective identities and shared belongings. Kølvråa and Forchtner (2019: 228) join Miller-Idriss and Teitelbaum in arguing that “extending the scope of analysis to styles of communication and self-presentation that are less overtly political, that is, those we

would place within the ‘cultural imaginary’” will enable us to capture a dimension of the extreme right that is less often addressed in scholarly and political discourses about these actors. However, they go on to say “that might also offer insights into their self-understanding and potential success in communicating their message to audiences” (Kølvraa & Forchtner, 2019: 228). In this sense, this research taps into a broader turn to culture in scholarship on extreme-right actors premised on the belief that by bringing culture to centre stage, we gain an understanding of these movements “not simply from the outside – as potential threats to the stability and security of European democracies – but also ‘from the inside’, in terms of communal allegiance and experience” (Kølvraa & Forchtner, 2019: 228).

Methods

The analysis involves a qualitative content analysis informed by the conceptual and methodological framework of narrative inquiry. Qualitative content analysis is a widely used method in media studies useful for analysing large amounts of data and establishing patterns across media texts and representations (Schreier, 2014). It involves the coding of data, but instead of undergoing rigorous statistical analysis, it tabulates simple frequencies (Battacherjee, 2012). The focus of tabulation is on qualitative aspects of the data, such as themes, frames, discourses, story tone, and so forth. The data was analysed using descriptive and analytical coding, going back and forth between listening to podcasts, watching videos, reading transcripts of both data forms, reading articles, and writing field notes. This flexible and iterative coding process at the heart of a qualitative content analysis helped me identify themes, patterns, and storylines across the motley range of texts and to generate theoretical coding related to the social, political, and cultural context in which this particular case needs to be positioned and understood. Because it is a largely descriptive tool, however, I integrate narrative inquiry to help me understand how communities are created and borders patrolled through distinct delineations of “we” and “them” in the story of what constitutes Nordic culture, tradition, and heritage, and how these cultural expressions are recruited for the ideological project of reframing neo-Nazism to a present-day, pan-Nordic nation-building project. The analysis provides us with insights into how these narratives are perpetuated by “the anxieties and obsessions that give them (positive and negative) continuity” (Albrecht et al., 2019: 19). Integrating narrative inquiry into the research design thus involved mining for interconnected elements between the key themes (first identified in the content analysis) and the construction of narratives, including the positioning of subjects (perpetrators, victims, protagonists) within these narratives.

In the context of the overall project in which this case study is embedded, the concept of narratives provides us with an umbrella concept, which allows us to look for “minimal story grammar” consisting of subject, action, and object (Franzosi, 2004) across the different extremist narratives identified in each case study. Coming out of a broad and polymorphous tradition of asking open-ended questions to the social world around conflict, plot, story arcs, and characters, narrative inquiry allows us to interpret texts and make comparisons across the different forms of material in the dataset.² Literary theory suggests that people make sense of events in their lives and the historical past by placing these into narratives (Blee, 2003). Today, media are essential tools to create, distribute,

and consume narratives, and online media, including social media, have proven to be ideal vehicles to spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other extremist narratives (e.g., Farkas et al., 2018; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018). I seek to understand how this particular organisation, NRM, is currently mapping antidemocratic narratives onto culture by drawing on rhetoric, visuals, and aesthetics inherent to affordances and cultures of the Internet. I approach the data as a series of coherent, collective, and interchangeable narratives strategically constructed to arrange a flow of discourses. Narrative inquiry thus helps me understand how violent extremism builds on stories and is used to create community and a shared set of “truths” about the world ending or falling apart (in the shape of white genocide, replacement, ecological collapse, etc.), which in turn further motivates this violence.

Empirical material and selection

Data collection in narrative inquiry is essentially about excavating stories. In the context of this particular case study, this entails excavating and dissecting NRM members’ own story of what they consider to constitute essentialist Nordic culture and to be of cultural value to their political project and ambitions. This story is set in the specific period of October 2016 to December 2018, which was a particularly productive and active time for NRM. This is the period in which they, under new leadership, underwent a reorganisation and changed their name from the Swedish Resistance Movement to the Nordic Resistance Movement, following the establishment of associated divisions in Norway, Finland, and Denmark. NRM themselves refer to this period as the “‘coming out party’ of national socialism” in Scandinavia and to Sweden as the new administrative centre and power hub of a future pan-Nordic state. In this period, NRM launched a number of new media and produced extensive online content in a strategic priority running up to the general elections in September 2018. For example, they launched a number of new, more informal podcasts and a satire initiative to boost the production and circulation of humorous and entertaining content. We may look to *Nordfront*, their main online hub, as one way of documenting this increased activity.³ The number of articles posted on *Nordfront* has steadily risen since the latter half of 2015 (coinciding with the starting point of the so-called refugee crisis in Sweden and the rest of Europe). Numbers peak in August 2018, the month before the 2018 general elections, with 853 articles published online.⁴ With this timeframe as a guiding principle for selecting and limiting the data, I thus capture and describe NRM’s self-representations and narratives produced within this particularly productive period, at the height of the most recent cycle of mobilisations in the long history of white-supremacy movements in Sweden. It is a period characterised by optimistic and emboldened discourse of a self-perceived success in terms of gaining the attention and support of the general population and in taking new steps towards normalisation.

Further, in the selection of empirical data, I have used the categories created by NRM. The list of labels or tags used to categorise and archive their material is long, messy, and inconsistent. The largest portion of the content is labelled as domestic, politics, culture, opinion, or simply The Resistance Movement. In this article, I limit the scope of empirical material to only include texts archived under the culture section on *Nordfront*. Within this category, content is listed with subcategories such as humour, satire, music,

pleasure, entertainment, literature, and media, with less frequent categories including Eurovision, documentary, outdoor life, and body ideals; this provides an idea of the span of their online catalogue and of what subjects – high and low – the organisation deems as meriting attention.

Empirical data includes web-TV productions, podcasts, and online articles, all produced by NRM members. More specifically, the digital database includes 14 articles⁵ published on *Nordfront*; a selection of 12 episodes of the podcast *More than Words* launched in 2018 (broadcast between February and December of that year); and a sample of the English-language podcast *Nordic Frontier* (13 episodes, broadcast between 2016–2018). Video material includes a selection of *Nordfront Studio* transmissions, a web-TV talk show (10 episodes, broadcast between November 2017 and September 2018), and *Kulturbunkern* [*The Culture Bunker*] (episodes 1–7), a programme dedicated exclusively to reviewing and discussing literature, art, music, films, and so forth. The sample of television programmes includes the one-off programme *Uppesittarkvällen* [*Sitting-up evening*] (300 minutes), an all-night Christmas entertainment show broadcast on 22 December 2017.

These texts are all presented as culture rather than news, and entertainment rather than propaganda (a term used by NRM themselves to designate the more programmatic political writings and productions of the organisation such as flyers, leaflets, activist handbooks, etc). In this sense, the texts in this sample differ from the programmes and content oriented more towards informational and educational purposes.⁶ The strategic sample selection thus provides a window onto considering the range of different themes, voices, styles, and forms that can be found under the broad category of culture and entertainment, which helps me identify and unpack the various strategies by which NRM seeks to normalise neo-Nazi discourse using the power and appeal of culture. In this sense, the analysis does not focus on similarities and differences between the different genres in the sample (podcast, web-TV, and text); instead, the content analysis allows me to gain a sense of how different parts of the material compare and relate to each other *across* the different forms of cultural productions currently circulated by NRM.

Analysis: Cultural narratives of neo-Nazism

A crude description of the narrative underpinning NRM's political project can be summed up as follows: The story is grounded in a conflict or problem requiring a solution or answer, which involves various characters (victims, perpetrators, and protagonists). In NRM's ideological narrative, the central problem at the core of the conflict is construed as mass immigration and multiculturalism, spearheaded by Zionism and a feminised, degenerated Western culture. This problem poses a threat to a community – an “us”, articulated as the people, common people, the white race, true Swedes, and Nordic people – by a perpetrator – a “them”, construed as a range of caricatured enemies including “racial strangers”, Jews, an enemy within our own ranks, enemies of the people, or alternatively, Sweden-haters, which includes politicians, journalists, certain public intellectuals, feminists, and so forth. Against this backdrop, NRM proposes a (re)solution articulated in various versions of a “final solution” (deportation of all “racial strangers”, race wars, Sweden as “white sanctuary”), enforced by a future pan-Nordic state founded on national socialism. The desire and resolution are

thus connected by an arc of people, actions, and events. The culture and entertainment programmes produced by NRM speak to this overarching ideological narrative in various ways. However, in the cultural expressions of the ideology, this extreme narrative is couched in soft terms, and the story is told in an entertaining and often light-hearted manner. It is a narrative of antidemocracy and extremism, which both rationalise and romanticise violence but never or rarely do so by directly expressing violent intent or making explicit references to genocide, armed revolution, and the toppling of democracy. These are narratives that “fortify a community against the unversed, and also encourage a sense of belonging among the versed” (Albrecht et al., 2019: 16). To NRM, producing, circulating, and consuming culture is an essential part of strengthening this community and inherent to the struggle of preserving the imagined pure, white culture, values, and language of the Nordic countries.

NRM as “cultural critics”

The cultural sections of *Nordfront* comprise articles, videos, and podcasts categorised under a wide range of subgenres including film, art, culture wars, literature, music, myths, pleasure, novels, and features. The site offers a window onto both the range of cultural productions produced by NRM itself along with news and reviews of culture and cultural productions in general. In this latter category, the editors and columnists of *Nordfront*, taking on a role as “cultural critics”, will review anything from the latest episode of *Game of Thrones* (is it an unprecedented epic adventure or Zionist propaganda?) or *Family Guy* (should the reference to #metoo in a recent episode be interpreted as mocking the movement and feminism in general?), to the most recent Marvel or James Bond movie (will the next Spiderman be gay? Are rumours true that the new James Bond might be a black woman?). More niche productions such as Italian horror movies from the 1950s and 1960s or the subcultural film genre “Rape & Revenge” are also discussed (the latter to celebrate International Women’s Day). Other pieces provide critical commentary on new or classic literature or artwork, computer games, films, plays, and concerts. The nature of the cultural productions reviewed fall into three categories. First is a category of cultural content representing “the canon”, such as Hitler’s own writings or historic feature films by the Nazi cinema industry. In this first category – beyond the products coming directly out of the Third Reich propaganda machine – are artists and writers less straightforwardly affiliated with the NSDAP (the Nazi party) but known for their neo-Nazi sympathies. This includes, for example, HP Lovecraft or Emil Nolde, whose works are presented and discussed as “insider” art and culture that successfully made it into and remain in the mainstream today. A second category comprises mainstream cultural productions, which might be interpreted, tweaked, and appropriated to represent and express “nationalist-friendly” values, even if just through hidden signs, symbols, and messages incorporated into the lyrics, artwork, or literary piece. A third and final category includes culture produced by “enemies of the people” – presented as globalists, cultural Marxists, Sweden-haters, or the homo lobby – whose work is discussed primarily to educate and warn audiences; performance artists and feminist writers are emblematic of this category. In this sense, essentially no cultural content falls under their radar, and all expressions of culture and entertainment, whether contemporary or historical, can be recruited for one of these three purposes.

The most explicit example of how NRM performs the role of cultural critics is found in one of the most recent additions to the cultural sections; the new flagship *Kulturbunkern* [*The Culture Bunker*] (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 *Kulturbunkern*, episode one: “What the f*** is culture?”

WEBBTV: Kulturbunkern #1: ”Vad f*n är kultur?”



WEBBTV. Missade du nylanseringen av Kulturbunkern i senaste avsnittet av Studio Bothnia? _____ och _____ försöker i det första avsnittet att reda ut vad kultur verkligen är.  5

Comments: Translation of caption: “Did you miss the relaunch of Kulturbunkern in the last episode of Studio Bothnia? In the first episode, [the hosts] try to sort out what culture really is”. Published 6 October 2018.

In this 15–20-minute talk show, recorded in a studio of piled-up books, old vinyl, and VHS cassettes, the two hosts – one soft-spoken and timid, the other self-confident and witty – present audiences with commentary and interpretations of their own favourite films, albums, and genres. In doing so, they offer assistance to members and potential recruits in navigating the flow of globalised cultural content and in distinguishing healthy from unhealthy and harmful culture allegedly produced by the Jewish film industry or other “enemies of the people” in Sweden and beyond.

Having examined NRM’s media practices as “cultural critics”, the remaining analytical sections pay attention to NRM’s communicative strategies in their own productions of culture and entertainment. Here, I identify three overlapping yet distinct features that may help us understand the means by which they seek to normalise neo-Nazi discourse: 1) hybridity and remixing practices, 2) mimetic practices and pastiche, and 3) performances of the ordinary.

Hybridity and remixing practices

In the culture section of NRM’s online universe, we see ample evidence of the collapse of any meaningful boundary between political communication and popular entertainment – a convergence of cultural categories which is often described as being at the heart of the current extreme-right moment but also of transformations of the media landscape more generally (Ouellette & Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this sense, neo-Nazi groups today, and extremist actors more generally, dovetail on a broader cultural trend of an increasing symbiosis of popular media, political punditry, and persuasion. Part of this hybridity is about the convergence of the mainstream and extreme at the level of actual content on the platform.

One way to illustrate the complex ways in which the mainstream and the extreme merge is to look at the musical universe in the programmes. Here, a recurring feature is the juxtaposition of white-supremacy music and mainstream pop and rock music. For example, the podcast *Nordic Frontier* starts each episode with the introduction tunes of Music Waffen SS Choir Neue Deutsche Welle (a remixed version of the German war marching anthem “Grün ist unser Fallschirm” [“Green is our parachute”]), soon followed by the tunes of a Swedish version of the Nazi song “Die Fahne Hoch”, “Håll fanan högt” [“Hold the flag high”], or “classics” such as “Segra eller dö” [“Victory or die”] with Division S from the skinhead era. However, in this and most other NRM podcasts, traditional white-power music is mixed with mainstream pop and rock music. This is not done without framing and explaining how music performed by mainstream artists – some of whom are presented as race-traitors – should be interpreted. For example, in episode 52 of *Nordic Frontier*, The band The Knife is presented as “classic Swedish music” whose lyrics – despite the fact that they are “anti-racist multicultural celebrating homos” – can be read and rewritten for a neo-Nazi audience.

The same logic seems to apply when, in episode 63 of *Nordic Frontier*, the hosts play Avicii after announcing the news of his suicide. When introducing the song, the host argues that the artist represents “another white man lost in the sea of capitalism” and a “man dying at the hands of his racial stranger of a manager”. Recruiting his death to tell a story of “white genocide” is one of many examples of how the hosts actively repurpose and rewrite the narrative around a singer, band, or entire genre. Similarly, the recurring “Song of the week” interchangeably presents white-power music along with mainstream artists and bands whose songs are unwillingly and unknowingly recruited for political purposes as ideological readings are projected onto the lyrics or titles of the songs (e.g., “Vackert Land” [“Beautiful country”] by Bo Kaspers Orkester).

Mimetic practices and pastiche

Another dimension of hybridity and convergence between the mainstream and the extreme can be traced to mimetic practices, forming yet another important element in the organisation’s communicative strategies to normalise neo-Nazi discourse. Using what is essentially a copy-paste strategy, NRM not only imitates and draws on popular and mainstream programmes in form and style, but they also appropriate well-known programmes and create their own pastiche version of various cultural treasures. The television show *Uppesittarkvällen* [*Sitting-up evening*], broadcast on 22 December 2017, provides an illustrative case of how NRM seeks to persuade and

placate through such mimetic practices by repurposing familiar and well-worn genres (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 NRM pastiche of the all-night Christmas show, *Uppesittarkvällen*



Comments: The person to the right, Arne Weise, was for more than two decades a recurring Christmas host at the national public service channel Sveriges Television. The image is a montage. Published 22 December 2017.

Figure 3 “Merry Christmas, all you ‘Haters’”



Comments: “Yule”, included in the subtitles, was a pre-Christian festival, and the usage of the word can be seen as a reference to pre-Christian times. Published 22 December 2017.

Figure 2 shows an NRM member with one of the actual hosts of the original television show, Arne Weise, edited into the screen. In Figure 3, the three hosts open the show. The subtitles read “Merry Yule/Christmas, all you ‘Haters’ watching at home!” With their neo-Nazi version of the show, they celebrate rather than ridicule the format, which is hailed by many viewers as a dear tradition and a cultural treasure encapsulating Swedish culture. With this appropriation, they mimic a mainstream cultural institution and re-inscribe new meaning onto a longstanding and popular tradition in mainstream Swedish television culture.

Packaging content and messages in formats that both sound and look familiar is thus part of the ongoing effort to recast the ideology, in a more palatable form, for a contemporary and distinctly Nordic audience. A lot of the content in this lengthy programme is of course political, but the show also has features where NRM members go winter swimming or talk about the healthy aspects of outdoor life in winter time. There are interviews with “ordinary” people coming out of supermarkets (who clearly do not know who they are being interviewed by) about Christmas shopping or their take on what qualifies as a truly traditional Swedish Christmas dinner. This brings us to the third and final aspect of the group’s communicative strategies to normalise neo-Nazi discourse: performances of the ordinary – that is, the mundane dimensions and strategic communication of the everydayness of their activities and commitment to the cause.

Performances of the ordinary

The third and final key feature of NRM’s productions of culture and entertainment implicates the performative staging of the ordinary. The podcasts provide pertinent examples of how radical messages are couched in soft terms and extremist and uncivil ideas (essentially racist and antisemitic hatred) are presented through civil discourse, often revolving around everyday mundane issues. In both *More than Words* and *Nordic Frontier*, courteous hosts and guests discuss mundane topics – anything from low-carb diets and weight loss experiences to the weather, plans for the weekend, difficulties around working full-time and being a full-time activist, and combining activism with having kids. The mood in the studio is serene and relaxed, and the hosts present coherent arguments, speak articulately, and smooth over racist speech by maintaining a light and civil tone. If transgressions are made – which is often the case in *More than Words* – these are beeped out in post-production. *Nordic Frontier*, in particular, is characterised by a light and laid-back atmosphere. There is of course talk of politics and the seriousness of the dismal political realities of a country and continent at the brink of collapse, but this is seasoned with “funny” drops, jingles, entertaining interludes, and popular music. Further, the podcast is rife with antisemitic references, but these are all presented to the audience in a playful, subtle, and witty way. For example, the show is promoted with the tagline “The final solution to your podcast problem”, hosts ask for financial support for the show to ensure “the future of Nordic babies” under the banner “Donating macht frei” [“Donating makes you free”], and it includes a recurring feature called “Holocaust LOLs”.

The strategic performance of the ordinary and the mundane in the *talk* around politics in the podcasts is an important dimension of the broader communicative processes thorough which the group is toning down violence, overt race biology, and antisemitism and getting rid of hate speech and symbols, which put them at risk of censorship or legal repercussions. This strategy also plays out at the level of visuals and aesthetics. Just as references to Hitler or Nazi salutes are edited out of the podcasts, various visual proxies are used to communicate that which “the system” clamps down on. In Figure 4, a kitten is used to illustrate “the forbidden arm gesture” in an article discussing the similarities between the repressive state in contemporary Sweden and the Panopticon described by Orwell in the novel 1984.

Figure 4 Hitler-saluting kitten



Av juridiska skäl använder vi här en kattunge för att illustrerar den förbjudna armrörelsen. Förhoppningsvis är den fortfarande laglig för katter att utföra.

Comments: Translation of the caption: "For judicial reasons, we let a kitten illustrate the forbidden arm gesture. Hopefully, it is still legal for cats to exercise it". Published 8 June 2019.

Carefully and playfully toeing the lines of legality, they use the image as a shortcut to communicate hate speech and symbolism. In these texts, only rarely is overt hate speech or violence explicitly advocated or portrayed (in fact, the hosts of *Kulturbunkern* speak of their distaste for violence on film). With this more subtle – not overtly violent or even political – imagery, they not only package themselves as a friendlier, less-threatening version of themselves (in contrast to the image of uniformed men marching the streets, as often projected in mainstream media), they also tap into an ambivalent Internet culture in which transgressional humour is both expected and rewarded (Whitney & Milner, 2017). In this Internet culture forged by fringe communities such as 4chan – rife with ambiguous humour and intertextual references to popular culture, particularly cartoons and video game aesthetics – silly memes of cats and so-called LOLCats have come to signify a whole of set of co-opted meaning and recoded far-right messages (Miller-Idriss, 2019). This convergence between the serious and the silly adds yet another layer to the blurring of boundaries in their cultural productions.

To illustrate how neo-Nazis attempt to package their ideology in ways that shield it from immediate public condemnation, Kølvråa (2019) describes how NRM is replacing swastikas and World War II imagery with symbols from Norse paganism and Viking iconography to make the ideology more palatable in a Swedish and wider Nordic context. The Viking in turn embodies a neo-Nazi ideal of hyper-masculinity and homosocial community. In much of NRM's more recent cultural production however, the Vikings have gone soft. The protagonists at the heart of the story are soft guys with kids and dreams, struggling with work-life balance, giggling at cute kittens online, dressing up in home-knitted Christmas sweaters, and wearing Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer masks. This image of the neo-Nazi as an "ordinary, nice guy" cracking jokes, using irony and intertextual references from mainstream pop culture, in some regards stands in stark contrast to the image of the hyper-masculine skinheads of the 1990s and early 2000s, but

also to the violent and aggressive imagery projected, for example, in “combat videos” showcasing confrontations with police and protesters or street attacks against “racial strangers” set to white-power music, found elsewhere in the organisation’s repertoire of online media. There is thus a discursive dissonance between civil and uncivil, mainstream and extreme, and the spectacular and the ordinary reflected in the group’s current self-mediations and narration. It is a dissonance between an increasingly *emboldened* and aggressive political project on the one hand, using *toned-down* rhetoric that carefully toes the lines of legality, on the other. At the core of these practices and processes through which boundaries are increasingly blurred is an aspiration to make uncivil discourse and ideology appear more civil and the spectacular more mundane, and to tell the story of a new “sanitised version of Nazism that would normalise the Hitler state in the minds of contemporaries” (Blee, 2007: 15).

Conclusions

The current mainstreaming project of NRM bears unmistakable resemblance to earlier processes of “cleaning up” and rebranding neo-Nazism. Historians have argued that, back in the 1930s, part of the success of the NSDAP in Germany had to do with how they managed to adapt their message to different audiences, toning down the violent rhetoric to cater to those who were turned off by the street violence of the paramilitary organisation SA (Evans, 2003). The party underwent a process to “clean up” the official image to attract women and the middle class, denouncing connections to violence, and reframing the message to be one of order and safety for the German nation and the nuclear family (Koonz, 1987). Back then, this clean-up tactic proved effective by masking brutality with decency, traditional values, morals, and safety for the family. The tactic served to construct a two-faced dynamic to Nazism, where a seemingly civil, respectable, and serious side masked a violent and uncivil side, much like the dissonance we see in NRM’s communicative strategies to normalise neo-Nazi discourse in Sweden today.

Strategies of softening and normalising are at work visually, aesthetically, and rhetorically in these texts. NRM’s own cultural productions are characterised by hybridity and a play with genre conventions. We see a convergence of popular culture and entertainment with political and news discourse. At the level of content and aesthetics, the extreme blends with the mainstream, the mundane and ordinary with the spectacular and provocative, and the serious with the silly. These strategies continue the long history of “political mash-up” in protest movements’ media practices (Askanius, 2013) and of fascist movements aestheticising politics (Ekman, 2014). Yet, online media as sites of cultural engagement accentuate and accelerate these processes and allow for extremist groups to go beyond the pale in new ways.

I take NRM’s recent upsurge in the production of culture and entertainment as a jumping-off point to understand how the ideological narrative of neo-Nazism is transposed onto new sites of consumption and engagement today. The analysis provides insights on the various ways in which the cultural expressions of NRM reinforce a value system that harmonises with the neo-Nazi programme. These cultural expressions not only align with, but also add to, the overarching ideological narratives underpinning their activities. The analysis has probed the ways in which NRM constructs meaningful narratives

of community and cohesion among themselves while seeking to make historical forms of national socialism attractive to new audiences – using communicative strategies to normalise and defuse neo-Nazism to potential outside audiences. In their attempts to create a new and distinctly Nordic “Nazism light”, entertainment and culture work as key vehicles in conveying the story of “white genocide” and the impending race wars in a persuasive and entertaining manner. In this sense, this is a case of a largely marginalised, fringe group with a violent and antidemocratic agenda adopting some of the same normalisation strategies that seem to have worked for more mainstream far-right populist parties across Europe in recent years: re-packaging, softening rhetoric, and getting rid of or toning down overt hate speech and symbols associated with traditional fascism (Wodak, 2013). In such “borderline discourse” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017), unmitigated racism is fused with “civil, quasi-academic and politically correct language” (Krzyżanowski, 2020: 505).

The case of NRM illustrates that in order to understand the current moment and momentum of extreme right movements in liberal democracies, we must look beyond ideology and traditional, more straightforward forms of propaganda to give attention to seemingly trivial elements of neo-Nazi discourse drawing on elements of popular culture and entertainment genres. To be sure, the television talk shows, podcasts, and Christmas specials analysed in this case study all challenge ideas of what neo-Nazism and extreme-right mobilisations might look like today. At first glance, cute kittens and skinheads wearing silly costumes seem trivial, banal, and unworthy of serious analytical attention. Yet, in order to understand contemporary forms of neo-Nazism and its potential appeal, we need to understand how the ideology is currently being recasted and reframed for a modern-day audience and how it is increasingly expressed through cultural forms which bleed into mainstream Internet culture and political discourse online. The analysis shows that far from being trivial, these texts subtly cement the deep-seated structures of neo-Nazism: identity, race, gender, and power. Indeed, “Nazism must be recognized as something more than simply brutality, genocide, destruction and war to understand its contemporary actuality” (Darwish, 2018: 4) and recognise the forms it re-emerges in today.

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Notes

1. Journalists and commentators have observed how Sweden, for some time now, is considered a well-established “punching bag” for the extreme right internationally, seen to offer a perfect laboratory for the American right to “prove that progressive idealism would inevitably cause disaster at the hands of Muslim immigrants” (see, e.g., Lester Feder & Mannheimer, 2017).
2. The mothership of the empirical data consists of both interview data and autobiographical data (analogue narrative), register data (recorded narrative), and online media data (digital narrative). For the data on suspected crimes, we trade relatively bare narratives of interconnected events and relations for a large number of recorded narratives. The digital narratives and analogue narratives, on the other hand, draw upon qualitatively richer data and thus allow for analysis of narration within a discourse.
3. The annual reports of Expo between 2015–2019 further documents this rise in activity – both on- and offline.

4. In May 2012, they published over 100 articles for the first time and the number steadily grows from an average of around 200 to just under 400 in the months prior to the October 2015 moment, or momentum, when the “crisis” started. In June of 2019, we began to see a notable decline, when numbers went below 400 for the first time since the 2015 refugee crisis.
5. A selection of articles published in *Nordfront*'s culture section were included, and they represent a mix of cultural reviews and long-reads on the politics of cultural production. In these long-reads, the editors discuss the importance and wider implications of culture to “the battle” and reflect on the various cultural productions launched in the selected period.
6. One such example of a more straightforwardly ideological and agitative text is the podcast *Ledarperspektiv*, launched in April of 2018, which is dedicated solely to top-down and one-way information on the official political programme of NRM from the leading figures of the organisation to its members and supporters. Contrary to many of the programmes and texts analysed for this article, *Ledarperspektiv* does not include music, call-in opportunities, audience interaction or any other “entertaining”, user-oriented elements.

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