

## **Social Media, the Ultra-Right, and Freedom of Speech: A Case Study of CasaPound Italia and Facebook**

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In this article, I analyze the discourse on freedom of speech following the shutdown of various Italian ultra-right accounts on Facebook, the popular social media network. Specifically, I draw from the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to explore the neofascist CasaPound Italia (CPI)'s response to what the organization perceived as "censorship," as well as mainstream news media discourse of the issue. The data show that CPI employed various strategies to exploit the topos of freedom of speech for visibility and legitimacy. The study of news media coverage offers a perspective on how the issue was reported according to the newspapers' political posturing. The conclusions highlight the need for a stronger anti-fascist stance on freedom of speech, one that should also include freedom from hate speech as a communal, consequential right.

*Keywords: extreme right, neofascists, social media, freedom of speech, freedom from hate speech, CasaPound Italia*

The present study focuses on the discourse on freedom of speech on social media following the shutdown of the Facebook account of one of Italy's most important ultra-right organizations, CasaPound Italia (CPI), on September 9, 2019.<sup>1</sup> Facebook's spokesperson explained that the decision was a consequence of this organization allegedly engaging in "hate speech" and "incitement to violence"<sup>2</sup> online. In this article, I analyze CPI's reaction to the ban—with a focus on the so-called "freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have long debated how to best define the "extreme-right party family" (Mudde, 2000, pp. 1–24). I have chosen the term "ultra-right" to identify those groups who are anti-democratic and closer to fascism/neo-fascism than to less-authoritarian far-right or "right-extremist parties" (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 26–34). The term ultra-right allows us to avoid the frequent misleading practice of balancing extreme-right or far-right parties with, respectively, extreme-left or far-left ones (Downing & Husband, 2005, pp. 93–95). The prefix "ultra" closely captures neo-fascists' own self-representation as those beyond the right and the left.

<sup>2</sup> On that same day Facebook closed the pages of another ultra-right group, Forza Nuova (FN), which launched its own lawsuit. In this article, I focus on CPI as this organization is more active than FN in the cultural sphere and thus offers more data for my research.

speech” conference that the neofascists organized in Rome on October 18, 2019<sup>3</sup>; and the ensuing discourse on the three most important newspapers in the country: *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*. I draw from the Discourse Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) to explore main themes, keywords, and other relevant strategies to analyze the various texts.

### **Gramsci-ization and Normalization of the Ultra-Right**

As a leader of CasaPound recommended during the Rome conference on “freedom of speech,” “it is time that we work, as Gramsci said, on the hegemony . . . especially at the level of the digital sphere” (personal communication, October 18, 2019).<sup>4</sup> This reference to the Italian cultural theorist points out the so-called *Gramsci-ization*, or the metapolitical project of European neofascism (Bar-On, 2001, p. 342). Since the 1960s, this process has signaled a shift in the ultra-right’s political strategy away from direct confrontation and toward a more nuanced understanding of the importance of cultural leadership, aiming at the creation of a new hegemony, with neofascism as the central force of a (post)democratic order.

In more recent times, these metapolitical ambitions have benefited from the trend toward the so-called “normalization” of far-right ideologies, including the ongoing mainstreaming of radical right parties, on one side, and the radicalization of the political mainstream, on the other (Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022). Throughout this process, as Brown, Mondon, and Winter (2023) have emphasized, discourse has played a central role and, as such, it has become a key element for “understanding how [these] actors and ideas [have] become mainstream” (p. 164). The mainstreaming/normalization<sup>5</sup> of hateful rhetoric has also been characterized by an increasing “breath in terms of the number of social fields affected by transformation toward far-right-based perceptions” (Krzyzanowski & Ekström, 2022, p. 721): One of these “fields” is the debate on freedom of speech and social media, where ultra-right and far right actors have been very vocal.

Since the late 2010s, this debate has become particularly heated following the use of communication platforms for hateful propaganda and the consequent decision of most mainstream social media to deplatform “anti-establishment actors” (Rogers, 2020). Consequently, the expulsion of these actors from popular networking sites has raised concerns about “liberal big tech’ silencing free speech” (Rogers, 2020, p. 213), as privately owned social media giants have become powerful “cultural intermediaries” (Ben-David & Fernandez, 2016, p. 1170) in the public sphere. Another potentially negative consequence of deplatforming has been that those who have been shut down have claimed victimhood, often exploiting the situation in their favor. Indeed, the neofascists studied in this article are no exception, having taken advantage of the Facebook ban to fuel the debate. On one side, the “fascists of the new

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<sup>3</sup> I attended the “freedom of speech” conference and recorded it. The resulting transcription of the one and half hour-long conference was a 20-page single-spaced Word document, to which I refer in this paper as “personal communication.”

<sup>4</sup> These conference quotes are drawn from the Word document transcription of conference recordings. The transcript is available on request from this author.

<sup>5</sup> The two terms are often used interchangeably.

millennium" (as CPI often describes itself, see Castriota & Feldman, 2014, p. 224) are unapologetic about their adherence to fascism as they claim that in a *real* democracy their right to free speech should be granted; on the other side, they heavily depend on the exposure that only a mainstream social media platform such as Facebook can provide.

### Literature Review

As Reisigl and Wodak (2009) highlight, interdisciplinarity represents a major characteristic of the Discourse Historical Approach (p. 94). Accordingly, the entire structure of this case study is interdisciplinary, starting with the literature review, where I interrogate the relevant scholarship about free speech and social media, social movement research on the extreme right, and critical media studies.

Since the mid-2010s, the issue of what constitutes free speech and hate speech and the danger of social media being used for spreading hate online has preoccupied policy makers, scholars, and activists. Studies on the Internet and digital media have demonstrated that ultra-right actors were "the earliest adopters of [these] technolog[ies]" (Conway, Scrivens, & Macnair, 2019, p. 2), as they took advantage of the new available communicative affordances for "radicalizing" and even "intimidating" audiences (Conway et al., 2019, p. 1). Scholarship in this field has also highlighted the importance of paying attention to structural forces, especially algorithms, as they represent active agents in the process of signification (Ben-David & Fernandez, 2016). Indeed, certain social media affordances favor "covert discrimination" practices, contributing "to the perception of hate rhetoric as legitimate information" (Ben-David & Fernandez, 2016, p. 1171), and thus encouraging the circulation of "overt hate speech" (p. 1168).

Social movement experts have long investigated the presence of neofascists on the Internet (Caiani, della Porta, & Wagemann, 2012) and their "alternative media" (Atton, 2006). Studies on the relationship between these media and mainstream journalism have shown that ultra-right activists have learned how to take advantage of the decreasing faith in the integrity of legacy journalism and have presented themselves as reputable alternatives (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Meanwhile, mainstream media have struggled on how and whether to report on neofascist actors without running the risk of "amplifying" their significance (Padovani, 2022) or "platforming" them (Rogers, 2020).

In the field of critical media studies, growing attention has been dedicated to the debate on hate speech and the intricacies of whether democratically elected regulatory bodies should impose more controls on Internet giants and social media companies—or whether the market should be left to self-regulate. In an environment dominated by profit-making corporations, the latter situation has often prevailed, leaving it mostly to Facebook, Instagram, X, and the likes to oversee the content on their platforms. Although this argument cannot be explored further in this piece, it is important to note that scholars have long highlighted the complexities and normative standards that should be established for dealing with hate speech, and the ultra-right in particular. In a seminal piece on freedom of speech and far-right discourse online, for instance, Cammaerts (2009) tested the limits of self-regulation and the free speech argument as he asked whether "being a racist [can constitute] a democratic right" (Cammaerts, 2009, p. 3). Is it reasonable, in other words, to afford free speech rights to people whose views are inherently and historically antidemocratic? At that time, Cammaerts (2009) advocated for a proactive democratic stance to deny such rights. Yet, deplatforming extreme actors might have unintended consequences

as it might raise their profiles while making it more difficult for scholars and observers to study them once they migrate to underground platforms (Rogers, 2020).

The discussion on freedom of speech online has also prompted scholars to launch a critique on what exactly constitutes freedom of speech, usually framed as an individual rather than a collective right. As Napoli (2015) points out, the focus on freedom of speech as an individual right has undermined its public interest component. Rather than considering freedom of speech in relation to the public interest as a constitutive element of our "commonwealth," the emphasis has been on developing a "restrictive and individualist model of the public interest" (Napoli, 2015, p. 1), which has colored the scholarly discourse and governance of the social media space.

In fact, as a society, we have delegated responsibility for regulating the digital public sphere to corporate authority rather than to democratically elected bodies (Napoli, 2015). This has given neofascist groups additional ammunition to present themselves as righteous defenders of state rights over global corporations and, as they have claimed their right to free speech, they have also "throw[n] off their passive role as victims of the system" (Cowden & Yuval-Davis, 2022, pp. 4–5). This is exactly what has happened with CasaPound Italia. As the CPI's secretary general scornfully said during the "freedom of speech" conference in Rome, "Had we been shut down by the Parliament . . . we would have accepted the consequences . . . [instead] we join this fight as a struggle over national determination" (personal communication, October 18, 2019). By doing so, the neofascists have continued to sow seeds of suspicion in liberal democracies and advocated for a stronger nation-state capable of standing up against the "global elites."

In the field of critical discourse analysis, Wodak (2021) has pointed out to the frequent use of the topos of freedom of speech by the extreme right. According to Wodak (2021), the topos goes like this: "If freedom of speech exists, then wrong opinions can also be voiced [and] every opinion can be voiced" (p. 151). In the Italian context of the ultra-right, the topos of freedom of speech includes the following elements:

- A democratic "regime" was imposed in Italy by the Anglo-Americans after the end of World War II, a regime that marginalized those who went against their "New World Order."
- Efforts to silence *us*, the "dissenters," the "nonconformists", have lasted for decades, but fascist "ideals" have survived—and now it is time to express them freely.
- A reformed Italian state should take control over globalist forces, including social media.

In other words, for the neofascists, freedom of speech should include freedom *for* the ultra-right. Accordingly, this is (1) historically overdue, (2) a step toward a better society, and (3) would demonstrate the strength of the nation-state against the overreaching "global elites."

In conclusion, this section has pointed out the interdisciplinary nature of the extant literature in the field of social media, freedom of speech, and ultra-right discourse. Although this literature is growing, more work needs to be done to highlight historic and country-specific perspectives. Attention needs to be devoted to the discourse of the neofascists themselves and how (if at all) their perspectives echo in wider public discussions. The present research offers a contribution in this regard, as it explores CPI's discourse and the ensuing discourse on national newspapers.

### ***The Context***

The discourse historical approach emphasizes the operationalization of context, which is key to understanding the production of discourse. More specifically, a sophisticated awareness of context is vital for analyzing (contemporary) fascism, given how fascists' discourse shifts according to time and place and how their lexicon is often coded. For this reason, an introduction to the Italian context of the ultra-right is necessary.

Since the 1990s, in line with trends in other democracies, in Italy as well the political field has shifted progressively to the right. This move has been characterized by right-wing parties gaining consensus and the reemergence of various parties and groups of neofascist inspiration. The results of the country's national elections of September 2022 and the rise of Giorgia Meloni as Italy's first female prime minister (2022–) mark the culmination of this process. Meloni was the secretary general of the *Fratelli d'Italia* [Brothers of Italy] party, which, in only a few years (2013–2022), became a major force in the Italian political scene. As a youth, she was a leader in the far-right party *Alleanza Nazionale*, the heir to the defunct neofascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*.

The panorama of Italy's neofascist movements is variegated. Within the so-called "fascist galaxy" (Caldiron, 2001), CasaPound Italia is one of the most visible actors. CPI is recognized by the Italian state as a cultural and political organization and is thus included in the democratic process. Although it has never reached significant levels of electoral support, CasaPound has joined the political competition at various levels, obtaining even some seats in local elections and city councils.

#### *CasaPound Italia's Media*

Since its foundation in the early 2000s, CPI has produced a vast array of media content, distinguishing itself for its ability to "reveal key elements of continuity with the past [while] updating core fascists concepts and forms of self-representation" (Castriota & Feldman, 2014, p. 227). In particular, the organization's use of digital media has drawn attention for its capacity to openly advocate for a return to fascism while tapping into contemporary communications.

Drawing from a repertoire of social movement activism, CasaPound Italia has always been interested in penetrating the national public discourse with multiform and far-reaching strategies. Such strategies have included street actions and marches, as well as the use of traditional media forms like its monthly magazine, *Primato Nazionale* [National Primacy], book publishing (*Altaforte Edizioni*), and its Web radio, *Radio Bandiera Nera*. The Internet has historically been at the center of this organization's "media system" (Padovani, 2016) and has been used to organize, recruit, and participate in national conversations. From time to time, CPI has also attracted the attention of mainstream media: Throughout the years, its leaders have been invited to prime-time talk shows, even on RAI, the Italian public-service broadcaster, while professional journalists and well-known intellectuals have participated in CasaPound-sponsored conferences and book launches, including the "freedom of speech" conference, on October 18, 2019.

### *The Shutdown of CPI's Facebook Account*

In reaction to Facebook's decision to ban all accounts related to this group, CPI filed a lawsuit. In her preliminary injunction on December 11, 2019, a civil court judge argued that, by closing down the account of a political organization, Facebook had violated the article in the Italian Constitution that protects the "pluralism of political parties" (Italian Constitution, Art. 49). The judge's argument proceeded as follows: (1) Facebook is central to the national political discourse, (2) the magistrate found no proof that CPI had been engaging in hate speech on its social media accounts, (3) the Italian Constitution protects the pluralism of political parties, and therefore, CPI's online presence must be safeguarded. Right after the order, Facebook appealed the decision; on May 26, 2020, a subsequent injunction confirmed the civil court ruling. According to the judge, the protection of free speech was not the main issue; rather, quite paradoxically, the guarantee of political pluralism—one of the most important principles of Italy's anti-fascist Constitution—grounded their decisions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Research Questions**

The main questions leading this research are the following: In a country like Italy, with its history of fascism and anti-fascist resistance, how does CPI articulate its discourse on freedom of speech? And how, if at all, does such articulation find echo within the broader public discourse?

### **Methodology**

The discourse historical approach highlights the need for "gaining distance from the data . . . embedding the data in the social context [and] clarifying the political positioning of discourse participants" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 87). This critical detachment is particularly necessary when studying neofascist language strategies. In their analysis of extreme right discourse, Wodak and Richardson (2013) further underline the importance of "tak[ing] a step beyond the immediate [to] . . . examine the dialectic[s] . . . between context and text" (p. 7): Indeed, ideological positions can be best revealed through a dynamic approach to the text, where the researcher is called to "systematically integrate all available background information into the analysis and interpretation" (Engel & Wodak, 2013, p. 77). Throughout this process, the analyst plays an active role, as we are encouraged to self-reflect and deepen our focus from the macro-level of the discourse to the micro-levels of the text.

Moreover, as Reisigl & Wodak (2001) emphasize, discourse is "realized through a range of genres and texts" (p. 90). In the case study presented here, the range of genres and texts includes CPI's "freedom of speech" conference in Rome on October 18, 2019 (specifically, the transcripts from the recordings of that conference) and the related news media coverage in *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*.

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook appealed the May 2020 decision. In December 2022, a trial court judge reversed the prior civil court's injunctions and established that Facebook had indeed the discretion to shut down CPI's accounts for violating the platform's community standards.

### Main Themes

I start the analysis of the conference by developing a list of main themes and key words. I attended and recorded the one and a half-hour conference and transcribed the recording using the software sbobina.it, which is reliable and inexpensive. The resulting document contained more than 14,000 words. I reviewed it, eliminated irrelevant sections or sections with unclear audio, and cut the transcription down to 11,166 words. I also took extensive notes and pictures during and after the conference. Based on the in-depth reading of the transcripts and my notes, I compiled a list of six main themes (MT):

- MT#1: "The [political] atmosphere is unbreathable." There is a "witch hunt" against "us."
- MT#2: The Italian Constitution is being "walked all over" by "our" political adversaries to "shut our mouth."
- MT#3: Hate speech is an arbitrary definition: The "globalists" have used hate speech to destroy differences and real pluralism.
- MT#4: Hate speech is what the global elites say it is: the speech of "those who dare to think differently from the norm," the "nonconformists," "us."
- MT#5: The global elites speak through their mouthpieces (mainstream media, including social media), which want to "kill freedoms" and thus, "our" right to speak.
- MT#6: All those who care about freedom of speech should join "us."

I now explore how these main themes are realized within the conference speeches, exploring the formation of the in-group and the out-group, and then studying a selection of key terms and the linguistic articulations surrounding those key terms. I do this by focusing on the use of pronouns, nouns, synonyms, adverbs, adjectives, and verb modalities.

### Us vs. Them

Before delving into the analysis of what was discussed during the conference, it is important to spend a few words on CPI's choice of the term "conference" to define their October meeting, a noun that conveys professionalism and expertise. The Italian word (*convegno*) derives from the Latin *convenium*, which indicates "the act of coming together." Right from this lexicon choice, we can already perceive a sense of self-importance, almost an ecumenical, hegemonic intent.

A sense of identity and belonging was tangible in the room where the conference was held, in a lavish Hotel in Rome city centre. The conference was advertised on all CPI's media (website, Twitter, and Telegram); the atmosphere was professional yet familiar. There were approximately 80 attendees, six panelists (including a university professor; a member of the Italian public broadcaster's board of directors; an elected official for the Brothers of Italy party; a reporter—the only woman in the panel; the editor in chief of a well-known national newspaper; the editor in chief of CPI's magazine, *Primato Nazionale*), and a news crew of about 4–5 people. Among the attendees, many were dressed in that nostalgic "Roman fascist" style: Ray-Ban sunglasses, Italian-made black leather jackets, tailored suits, and, for the younger folks, tattoos and a dark, gothic look.

The editor in chief of *Primato Nazionale* opened the conference, focusing immediately on “us,” who “we” are, who “we” represent, and against whom “we” are fighting. During the initial remarks, however, the identification of the in-group moved quickly from the presenter and the conference’s organizers to everybody in the room and beyond:

Line 1: [This conference is] the culmination of a journey but for us culmination  
Line 2: does not mean that we have reached an end point, rather [this means] a new beginning . . . a  
Line 3: new impetus. With [this] conference . . . we barge in a  
Line 4: debate that is fundamental for us or better, it is fundamental not only for us but  
Line 5: also for all those free men who . . . take at heart freedom of expression (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

In the Italian language, pronouns can often be implied because the person is evident from the verb desinence. Yet, in this brief excerpt, the explicit repetition of the first-person plural pronoun indicates the speaker’s preoccupation with creating the in-group, calling on everybody who loves freedom of expression to join in. In doing so, *Primato Nazionale*’s editor in chief positions CPI as the organization that will “barge in” and lead the struggle for freedom. This takes courage. Indeed, the in-group quickly expanded to embrace those “who take at heart freedom of expression” and eventually, “everybody who will not lower their head under censorship and bullying” (personal communication, October 18, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the out-group, treated rhetorically as one single group, includes the government (at the time led by Giuseppe Conte of the *5-Star Movement*), the “globalists” (presumably Mark Zuckerberg and other social media elites), the “English-speaking world,” the “communists,” and even the “liberal Leninists” (personal communication, October 18, 2019)—this last group described as somewhat of an oxymoron, as Leninists are not typically known for their liberal positions. One possible reference, here, is to the post-Communist Left in Italy, mocked by the ultra-right as an unusual mix of Marxist absolutism and liberalism. These “liberal Leninists” might be a synonym for “cultural Marxists,” another strategy the ultra-right uses to escape from the otherwise obvious anti-Semitic connotations implied in the concept of the “globalists,” as a way to link liberalism to socialism, and Communism to the “Communist Jews” (Richardson, 2015). Yet, the sense of danger and the urge to act were tangible in the words of subsequent speakers. As another panelist, a university professor, pointed out: “We must be smarter than the censors and communicate in such a way that we escape censorship”; “We must show that we are more liberal than the progressives”; “We need to beat them at their own game” (personal communication, October 18, 2019).

Although the main focus of the conference was the shutdown of CPI Facebook accounts, this soon became part of a broader narrative. As the (invited) member of RAI’s board of directors underlined, “We live within a [time of] historic conflict, which very often is impalpable but is out there.” It is a “war,” he insisted, a war over “language and imagination”: if we give up this “fight for freedom,” we are giving away “our imaginary power” (personal communication, October 18, 2019): namely, the power to create our own history and to express ourselves.

### **Keywords**

Let us now explore how the discourse evolved around various keywords. For this exercise, I selected the following terms (see Table 1):

**Table 1. Keywords and Occurrences in the Conference Transcript.**

<b>Key Words</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Freedom	37
Censorship	20
Hate	18
Democracy	9
Constitution	6

I analyzed the text of the speeches looking for how each of these words was characterized. Specifically, I paid attention to the lexicon: choice of adjectives, synonyms, adverbs, verb tenses, and modalities. Indeed, through these choices, the ideological nuances of the discourse can be deconstructed. Right from the start, freedom of speech was upheld as a fundamental freedom under attack. The most immediate danger, according to one of the speakers, the university professor, was that of censorship:

Line 1: Obviously, this is the great challenge of the future: how to be able to  
 Line 2: maintain this freedom, an extremely important freedom,  
 Line 3: without incurring into censorship (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

By underlining the “taken for granted-ness” importance of freedom of speech (note the adverb “obviously,” Line 1), the speaker positions CPI at the center of the discussion. The use of another adverb (“extremely” Line 2) and an adjective (“important” Line 2), both used to characterize “freedom” in the subclause, functions as a linguistic maneuver to dissipate any doubt about the organization’s commitment to freedom. Here, we can perhaps hypothesize a *text-internal* reference to the “liberal Leninists” mentioned above: The continuous reminder of the “obvious” importance of freedom of speech and the risks of censorship might be read as a way of subtly mocking liberal democracies, with the implication that they have failed to guarantee even the most basic liberties.

The verbs in the present tense and their modality convey a sense of urgency. It is imperative that “we” do whatever it takes to “be able” (Line 2) to maintain freedom of expression. In fact, CPI’s discourse is firmly planted in the present and projected into the future. In this temporal framework, the past seems not to exist, like, for example, the (relatively) recent history of the country, when the Fascist regime shut down all freedoms, including freedom of speech. At that time, censorship was exercised by various government organizations and accepted by many. If we did not know this history, the neofascist CasaPound would appear to truly share one of democracy’s most fundamental values.

Later on, the same university professor went on to discuss the difficulty of defining “hate”:

Line 1: it is difficult to define what hate or not hate is and this naturally depends on those

Line 2: who make these statements. In reality, there is no moral or juridical  
Line 3: authority that decides what is obvious legitimate hate and what is illegitimate  
Line 4: hate (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

From this sentence, we can establish some key argumentative elements. First, it is problematic to define what hate is, as "hate" is "naturally" dependent (Line 1) on those who accuse "us" of hate; in other words, hate is in the eyes of the beholder. It is not objective but subjective; it is an interpretation, and, therefore, it can be wrong. The use of the adverb "naturally" underlines that this is a matter of fact and that the line must be drawn between "legitimate hate" and "illegitimate hate." This subtle shift reveals the ideological presuppositions: The speaker began by stating that it is difficult to differentiate between hate and not hate, but then changed the terms of the discussion and de facto legitimized some forms of hate. In this panelist's view, therefore, hate can be reasonable, justifiable.

The use of the adjective "obvious" (Line 3), which precedes "legitimate hate," further underlines the common sense, almost intuitive quality of such hate. "Obvious" (*ovvio*, in Italian), from the Latin *obvius*, literally means, "that which goes towards," that which "presents itself spontaneously and easily" (Treccani, 2003). The expression "in reality" (Line 2) normalizes the argument: what is obvious is ordinary and real.

The noun "Democracy," or the adjective "democratic," occur nine times during the conference, the first time in the speech of a member of RAI's board of directors. In his intervention, the panelist associates "democracy" with "pluralism":

Line 1: Democracy is first of all to guarantee pluralism . . . [which means] ensure  
Line 2: all cultural and free expressions in a country . . .  
Line 3: this doesn't always happen in the mainstream system and  
Line 4: therefore the Web becomes the tool through which these nonconformists'  
Line 5: voices can find citizenship (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

The public broadcaster's board member introduces the concept of pluralism. The irony here is that pluralism, a hallmark of anti-fascism, is claimed to revindicate the right to free speech of the neofascists themselves. Notably, the reference to CPI as "nonconformists" (Line 4) is how the ultra-right likes to define itself: It is concerning, therefore, that this speaker uses such a term to refer to CPI, as if he were one of them.

On another occasion, *Primato Nazionale's* editor in chief uses the term "democracy" in association with the Italian Constitution:

Line 1: Deliberately, out of the blue, they have decided to trample on Article 21  
Line 2: of the Italian Constitution, which . . . is the one that protects  
Line 3: freedom of expression. It is just a kind of Orwellian dystopia (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

"They" (Line 1) is a reference to the global social media elites, those who want to destroy *our* freedom of speech. The choice of the adverb "deliberately" (Line 1) is telling: This is being done intentionally,

with premeditation. Once again, history tells us something quite different, as it was the fascist regime that willingly and intentionally, shut down all freedoms, including freedom of speech. Therefore, the real Orwellian dystopia here is the fact that a fascist group claims to be the guarantor of pluralism, the champion of freedom of speech, and of a Constitution whose essence is anti-fascism and whose very existence is the result of the anti-fascist Resistance.

Finally, the senator from the Brothers of Italy party introduced the concept of “digital sovereignty”:

Line 1: just like we have national sovereignty, we should have digital sovereignty as  
 Line 2: well. We are now digital identities and for those like us who have a nationalist  
 Line 3: vision and believe that the nation is a physical concept of identity, history,  
 Line 4: physical borders, [our struggle] must coincide with the defense of [our] digital  
 Line 5: sovereignty (personal communication, October 18, 2019)

The “physical concept of identity” (Line 3) is a dog whistle, highlighting the notion of the ethno-national state, where geographical borders and race are key elements of the supposed *physical* distinctiveness of a nation. Here, the concept of “sovereignty” (Line 1 & 5) extends from the national to the digital sphere. This is part of the broader neofascist struggle against the so-called anti-sovereign forces: another name for the ultra-nationals, the “globalists,” of which media giants such as Facebook are supposedly an integral part.

### **The Discourse in Mainstream News Media**

I now turn to the discourse in mainstream media. I analyze a selection of the news reports, combining a DHA approach with an examination of the structure, location, and other quantitative elements specifically related to the genre of news reporting. I start with a macro-level analysis in which I detail the contours of coverage and then delve into some micro elements, as they develop around specific keywords in context, looking for possible resonances, or differences, between the news media and CPI’s positions.

#### ***The Contours***

I searched three newspapers: *Corriere della Sera* (Italy’s most prestigious news organization), *Repubblica* (the second most read newspaper), and *Stampa* (the third most important), using the Dow Jones/FACTIVA databank. The keywords for the search were “CasaPound” (the commonly used shorthand for CPI) AND “Facebook” in close proximity, and at least one of these words: “libertà” [freedom] OR “odio” [hate]. The period was September 2019 (the initial shutdown) through May 2020 (the time of the second civil court sentence).<sup>7</sup> I saved all the news items in a Word document to facilitate the study of the text.

The search returned 20 news items (a total of 10,585 words—an average of 529 words per item). The longest article (in *Repubblica*) was 1,140 words (Manconi & Fiorillo, 2020); the shortest—90 words—was

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<sup>7</sup> A pilot search conducted in November 2022 confirmed that this time period was one of two peaks of coverage in the five years prior.

published in *Corriere* (Pennisi, 2019b). The news items were distributed across time and among the three outlets as follows (see Table 2):

**Table 2. The Data Set.**

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>
1	09/09/19	259	Top News	Stampa
2	09/10/19	90	First Page	Corriere
3	09/10/19	733	News	Corriere
4	09/10/19	634	Politics	Repubblica
5	09/10/19	601	Commentaries	Repubblica
6	09/11/19	844	Commentaries	Repubblica
7	09/11/19	519	Politics	Repubblica
8	09/11/19	694	Politics	Repubblica
9	09/12/19	92	World	Repubblica
10	10/04/19	705	Commentaries	Repubblica
11	10/26/19	710	News	Repubblica
12	10/31/19	217	Primo Piano	Corriere
13	11/02/19	786	Politics	Repubblica
14	11/14/19	433	Local News	Corriere
15	12/13/19	447	Politics	Repubblica
16	12/13/19	728	Commentaries	Repubblica
17	12/28/19	194	Economy	Corriere
18	03/29/20	1140	Culture	Repubblica
19	05/27/20	488	Local News	Corriere
20	05/29/20	271	Top News	Stampa

The differences, both quantitatively and qualitatively, among the three news organizations are noteworthy. *Repubblica*, a center-left leaning newspaper, pays more attention to the issue in terms of the number of news items (12), word count, and relevance (as determined by location in the article). It is significant, for example, that the news items are often published in the political and commentary sections rather than in the news section; it is also important to highlight that Paolo Berizzi, a veteran investigative reporter on the Italian neofascists, authored some of the articles. For *Repubblica*, this is a political issue, not just a matter of news reporting.

*Corriere della Sera* (a centrist newspaper) published six news items on this topic, two of which appeared on the local/regional pages of the newspaper. Most of the attention is concentrated around the time of the shutdown, with the first news item published on the first page on September 10, 2019. After that, the location where the articles were published (three of them in the news section) indicates a diminishing emphasis on the issue.

Finally, *Stampa* (a center-right newspaper) does not seem to give much attention to this topic, publishing just two news items. However, it is important to note that those two news items were authored by a prominent journalist, and both of them were given relevance in the “Top News” section of the paper.

### Keywords

I now focus on a selection of keywords to compare and contrast the narratives in the three newspapers. I selected the following key words based on an in-depth reading of the news sample (see Table 3):

**Table 3. Keyword Occurrences.**

Keywords	Repubblica (12 items)	Corriere (6 items)	Stampa (2 items)
Hate	47 Occurrences (average 3.9/article)	11 Occurrences (average 1.8/article)	1 Occurrence (average 0.5/article)
Fascism	51 Occurrences (average 4.2/article)	2 Occurrences (average 0.3/article)	1 Occurrence (average 0.5/article)
Freedom	15 Occurrences (average 1.2/article)	6 Occurrences (average 1/article)	2 Occurrences (average 1/article)
Constitution	15 Occurrences (average 1.2/article)	0 Occurrences	0 Occurrences
Anti-fascism	5 Occurrences (average 0.4/article)	0 Occurrences	0 Occurrences

Most occurrences of the noun “hate” appear in *Repubblica*, with 47 total mentions and an average of 3.9 mentions per article, compared with 1.8 average mentions in *Corriere* and 0.5 in *Stampa*. *Repubblica* clearly emphasizes accusations of hate speech against CPI with an editorial position that is openly in favor of Facebook’s decision. At times, the Rome-based newspaper assumes an “activist” stance, as it advocates for the Italian magistrature and the Senate to shut down neofascist parties or cultural organizations like CPI.

How is hate predicated according to these news items? *Repubblica* celebrates Facebook’s decision while calling for “hate” to be “stopped,” “confined,” or “fought back.” The newspaper clearly identifies the neofascists with “hate,” as evidenced in these definitions: “L’odio oscurato online” [Hate obscured online] (Berizzi, 2019b); “istigano all’odio” [(they) instigate hate] (Pucciarelli, 2019); “non si può legittimare l’odio” [hate cannot be legitimized] (Berizzi, 2019c, para. 2); and “il popolo dell’odio” [the hate-filled people] (Palladino, 2019, para. 1), in reference to CPI.

*Corriere* takes a more neutral position. In the corpus, the word “hate” appears 11 times, with less frequency than in *Repubblica* (an average of 1.8 mentions per article). Moreover, 10 of those mentions are in quotation marks, attributed to various sources, from politicians’ interviews or press releases, including quotes from CPI’s representatives (see Pennisi, 2019a).

*Stampa* uses the term “hate” once, and in quotation marks. It does so scornfully, sarcastically, as in this example: “CasaPound’s specific fault . . . is unknown, other than a generic allegation to ‘have

distributed hate,' an indictment acceptable in Stalin's tribunals" (Feltri, 2019, para. 1). The commentator insinuates doubts as to why CPI's account had been shut down, implying that Facebook's pronouncement was comparable to the arbitrary decisions made under the regime of the Soviet dictator. In the same paragraph, Facebook's decision is described as "unappealable as per the edict of the Sun King, namely, Mark Zuckerberg, the boss of social [media]" (Feltri, 2019, para. 1). Both associations (with the Soviet Union and prerevolutionary France) echo the anti-globalists discourse according to which social media are instruments in the hands of the "global elites," ready to crash those who think differently, the *nonconformists*, without any possibility of appeal.

References to fascism are more frequent in *Repubblica* (51 recurrences of the 54 totals in the news sample, with a frequency of 4.2 mentions per article). For *Repubblica*, the issue of fascism (and, as we will see later, anti-fascism) is important (compare it to an average of 0.3 mentions per article in *Corriere* and 0.5 in *Stampa*). A public-advocate journalistic stance characterizes the discourse in this regard. Headlines in *Repubblica* call for fascist parties to be "shut down," "embanked" (Berizzi, 2019b, 2019a), and "obscured" (Pucciarelli, 2019). The Rome-based newspaper makes explicit references to historical fascism by highlighting the ideological closeness between "the fascists of the new millennium" and the "brutality of nazifascism" (Pucciarelli, 2019, para. 3); the "fascist regime" (*Anche quando* [Even when], 2019); and the "real fascism" (Berizzi, 2019b).

*Corriere* mentions the term "fascism" on two occasions. The first time, it explains that Facebook's decision was based on an internal review process and not on any real allegation of "apology of fascism," which is "a crime [according to Italian laws] but absent from Facebook" (Pennisi, 2019a, para. 5). The second time is in reference to the social network's accusations of CPI's participation in "neofascist events" (Pennisi, 2019a).

*Stampa* mentions the term "fascism" once. It does so sarcastically, accusing Facebook of being the real fascist: "Above the State rules a private law, opaque and supranational, which separates those who are right from those who are wrong: we have not seen anything more fascist than this" (Feltri, 2019, para. 2). The reference to a "private law" and the use of the two adjectives "opaque" and "supranational" reflect CPI's anti-globalist discourse. Indeed, the headline of this specific news item, "Fascists where you don't expect them," says it all: the true fascists are those in charge of social media, and, one could add, a State that allows external forces to mingle into internal affairs and dictate what can be said and what cannot.

*Repubblica* contextualizes much of its coverage, at least in the period after the shutdown and before the magistrate's decision in December 2019, within the discourse on hate speech. The newspaper shows a firm stance underlining that freedom of expression cannot "ever [be] about legitimizing hate" (Berizzi, 2019a), contrasting CPI's argument about "legitimate hate" and "illegitimate hate" (personal communication, October 18, 2019). However, once the civil court magistrate ordered Facebook to reopen the accounts, the discussion on freedom of expression became more nuanced, with two important commentaries (Luna, 2019; Manconi & Fiorillo, 2020) in which the authors highlighted the dangers of letting a private corporation like Facebook interfere with Italian political matters, expressing concern for the potential censorship function of these social media.

In the news sample, *Corriere* does not discuss the issue of freedom of speech at any length. Instead, it gives opportunities (through interview excerpts) to exponents of ultra- and far-right parties to voice their positions. For example, the paper quotes the leader of CPI defending his organization from "censorship" (Pennisi, 2019a) or an exponent of the Brothers of Italy party accusing the [then center-left] government of being a "liberticidal structure with the power of asking Facebook to censor ideas that [the government] does not like" (Caccia, 2019, para. 1). According to this representation, CasaPound becomes the victim of a régime that curtails the freedoms of political opponents: Moreover, by giving voice to these extreme positions, *Corriere* might run the risk of mainstreaming, or "platforming" them.

For *Stampa* freedom of expression is meant to protect "bad ideas, as the good ones do not need to be protected" (Feltri, 2019, para. 1). Once again, the commentator sarcastically admonishes those who are pleased with Facebook's decision: "Given that the Sun King has [now] shut down CPI, such [a] gang of ugly people, who cares? We will see what happens when, by the same whims, they [Facebook] will bury other more 'socially presentable' pages" (Feltri, 2019). The name "Sun King" is used, here, as a synonym for Mark Zuckerberg to underscore the power his network has in deciding who can speak and who cannot. As in any absolute monarchy, there is no appeal, no discussion: All decisions are made arbitrarily. As we can notice, among the three news organizations, *Stampa's* articles most closely align with the CPI discourse itself.

Finally, *Repubblica* is the only news organization that includes references to the Constitution and its anti-fascist provisions. Likewise, only *Repubblica* mentions the term "anti-fascism" as "the roots of our country" (Casadio, 2019, para. 3) and its very "nature" ("Anche quando" [Even when], 2019).

In conclusion, given the three newspapers' political alignment, it might not be surprising that *Repubblica* pays more attention to the shutdown of CPI's accounts than the others. It is also significant that *Corriere* mainly treats the topic as a "news event" without giving it much political relevance. The Milan-based newspaper maintains a neutral stance as opposed to *Repubblica*, which more clearly contextualizes the debate within the issue of hate speech and the discussion about the anti-fascist core of the Italian Constitution. *Stampa's* articles, although very few, express well the classic European liberal position of the newspaper in favor of open markets and against monopoly capitalism. Classic liberalism, at least in principle, opposes the formation of oligopolies in favor of a completely free market, which should self-regulate. This sort of liberalism, at least in principle, goes against monopoly capitalism and the resulting oligopolies in the media/communication sector. Interestingly, this approach resembles CPI's anti-globalist positions. The neofascists, too, even though from a different intellectual tradition, point out the nefarious consequences of monopoly capitalism, which for them is an expression of global finance, or global capitalism. But, of course, the neofascists fully support the formation of national capitalism, one of the pillars of the fascist doctrine of the State.

### Discussion

As we have seen in the analysis of the conference speeches, CPI's intent was to forge new alliances and expand the in-group to include "all those free men who . . . take at heart freedom of expression" (personal communication, October 18, 2019) and who are determined to defend *our* "digital sovereignty" (personal communication, October 18, 2019). They even dare to mention the Constitution

(although not certainly its anti-fascist provisions), as they represent themselves as the defenders of Article 21, on freedom of speech. However, in stark contrast with the almost ecumenical tone of their discourse, there is a complete lack of self-analysis on their part about their own responsibilities for the shutdown imposed by Facebook or any empathy for the damage that their postings might have caused to others. Instead, CPI exploits the opportunity to claim the high ground: For them, fascism represents an extraordinary point in the history of humanity, and hate speech is a subjective judgment constructed by political adversaries to shut down those who dare to think differently.

It is, therefore, concerning that some elements of this delirious discourse find an echo in an important national newspaper like *Stampa*. The comparison between Mark Zuckerberg and the Sun King, even though it might be eye-catching, does little to advance the discourse on whether neofascists should be allowed in the public sphere or how we should intervene through democratic means to regulate hate speech on online platforms. On the other side, *Corriere's* "neutrality," which sometimes provides a platform to these actors by giving them a voice through the interviews, is also counterproductive, although somewhat expected, given this newspaper's journalistic tradition (Padovani, 2022). The only national newspaper among the three analyzed, here, that adopts a firm position in the discussion about social media, the ultra-right, and hate speech, is *Repubblica*. This latter is also the one that introduces the topic of anti-fascism, which does not appear in any of the other news articles in the sample. Based on the XII Disposition of the Italian Constitution, which prohibits the Fascist party's reorganization in any form, anti-fascism should represent a fundamental ethical and civic value in Italy and, as such, should not simply be the expression of a partisan position or of a certain left-leaning newspaper. Again, it is only *Repubblica* that makes any reference to the XII Disposition. None of the other newspapers even mention the Constitution.

### Conclusions

In this case study, I have explored CPI's discourse on freedom of speech and the consequent discourse that developed on a selection of national newspapers, showing the importance of a critical analysis of the various texts and narratives. Clearly, the neofascists have tried to exploit the topic of freedom of speech to permeate the public discussion, hoping to achieve a certain degree of cultural hegemony, one in which their ideology and political identity could be openly shared and acknowledged. However, as CPI has continued to avoid confronting the tragic history of fascism, its discourse has remained entangled in a series of conspiratorial webs inhabited by the usual ghosts: a threatening "English-speaking world," the "communists," the "globalists," the "liberal Leninists," and the "anti-sovereign forces." Fortunately, the fact that these extremists feel that they have to argue in favor of their right to be on social media means that something about their views has not yet been (fully) normalized—perhaps revealing that prevailing norms against neofascism still stand in opposition to their "right" to exist. In other words, the trenches of civil society have not been totally overcome, and their path to normalization is not going smoothly.

The discourse historical approach adopted in this study encourages scholars to add a normative dimension to their research (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 119). Indeed, the debate on social media, freedom of speech, and the ultra-right is an opportunity to mobilize broader, far-reaching discussions on the status of our democracies. In order to contrast the seemingly common-sense nature of neofascism and its hegemonic tendencies, it is important that the discussion on freedom of speech is accompanied by a parallel

discussion on freedom *from* hate speech, intended as a communal, historically determined, consequential right. Freedom *from* hate speech—and, I would add, freedom from fascism—is a civil and political right recognized by the United Nations (Art. 19 and 20 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, n.d.) and the European Court of Human Rights, among others. More discussions about freedom from hate speech should inform the public debate on freedom of speech and the role of social media in this regard.

This research is a further reminder that history needs to always be reassessed and restated, as we should never allow neofascists' efforts at rewriting it to go unchallenged. This means that we should engage in a vigorous discussion on the significance of anti-fascism in contemporary societies and ask ourselves whether it is still a value we want to uphold as a common, shared foundation of our democracies—a claim of humanity—or a divisive and partisan position as it seems to have become. Finally, we need to challenge the well-rooted neoliberal expectation that the market, and in this case global social media giants, will self-regulate rather than be regulated by democratically elected bodies. We should never forget that when democracy retreats, neofascists are ready to take advantage of what is left.

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