

## Extreme Speech and Global Digital Cultures

### *Introduction*

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In this article, we introduce the Special Section on Extreme Speech and Global Digital Cultures by developing the concept of “extreme speech.” In addressing the growing cultures of online vitriol and extremism, this concept advances a critical ethnographic sensibility to situated online speech cultures and a comparative global conversation that moves beyond the legal-normative debates that have been dominant in North America and Europe. We demonstrate this intervention by highlighting three interlinked arguments: Extreme speech inhabits a spectrum of practices rather than a binary opposition between acceptable and unacceptable speech; the sociotechnological aspects of new media embody a context in itself; and the violence of extreme speech acts is productive of identity in historically specific ways. This approach entails a methodological move that takes account of the meanings online users attach to vitriol as historical actors. It thus allows for critical frameworks to emerge from emic terms of action rather than moral concepts superimposed from the outside. Ethnographic explorations of extreme speech, we suggest, open up a new avenue to critique the contemporary global conjuncture of exclusionary politics.

*Keywords: extreme speech, global digital media, online extremism, right-wing populism, nationalism, violence, hate speech*

Recent political upheavals in Europe and the United States have once again highlighted the paradoxical nature of contemporary digital communication. The earlier discourse of digital technologies as a harbinger of openness and democracy is now clouded by a growing concern for the use of new media as

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a platform for spreading hate, intolerance, and exclusionary ideologies. The reemergence of nationalism in Western Europe under the post–Cold War global conditions of immigration (Banks & Gingrich, 2006) and the crippling “consensus at the center” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 66) signal a set of historical conditions; alongside, the resentment against EU-centricity and its refugee policy in postsocialist Eastern Europe have together triggered what a growing number of studies recognize as the new wave of right-wing populism (Brubaker, 2017; Schroeder, 2018). Transnational trade and mobility, the global financial downturn of the last decade, and the War on Terrorism have led to similar reactions in North America, while Islamophobia and the ideology of White supremacy that cut across these contexts stand as a symptom of right-wing populism’s sway as well as a means for that political faction to antagonize populations against minorities (Bangstad, 2014). Violent speech and metaphor as well as exclusionary rhetoric online have become central to these developments. Researchers are confronted with a new lexicon of online communicative tactics: ecosystems of fake news; disinformation campaigns; coordinated troll attacks; racist and misogynist hate speech; and targeted hacks aimed at influencing elections. Calls to monitor, legislate, and remove hateful and violent content have also reinvigorated older legal, political, and philosophical debates on accepted civility and legitimate forms of political communication.

Despite this heightened sense of urgency, these concerns are by no means new, nor can they be understood only in relation to experiences in the Western world. A cursory glance at the Global South reveals a long-standing anxiety about the dangers of unbridled speech in situations in which it can provoke ethnic and religious conflict, mass violence, and social unrest. In Ethiopia, following a series of violent protests and killings in 2016, the government made political commenting on Facebook temporarily illegal, citing the public order problem and the need to preserve peace. In Myanmar, social media have been used by Buddhist groups to ignite “murderous violence” against its Muslim minority (Lee, 2019). In Chile, social media are replete with racialized messages aimed against immigrants (Haynes, 2019). Legal stipulations to prevent hate speech on grounds of religious harmony and national security are routinely invoked to regulate online media in Pakistan, Malaysia, and India (Froystad, Rollier, & Ruud, 2019), while anti-Muslim speech in Sri Lanka has led to what scholars have termed as “Islamonausea” (Aguilera-Carnerero & Azeez, 2016). In all the cases, digital media have also evolved into vibrant forums for political participation and counter-speech.

This special section examines these contradictory characteristics of contemporary digital communication from a distinctly global perspective rooted in ethnography. We advance, in particular, the framework of “extreme speech” as a way to examine the expansion of online vitriol and its political consequences in different regions of the world. By bringing diverse contexts from both the Global North and Global South into the ambit, we emphasize the global dimensions of the phenomenon. Extreme speech is an anthropological qualification to the existing public controversies and academic debates around online hateful speech and violent online political extremism. We diverge from the casual interchangeability between the terms *hate speech* and *extreme speech* seen in popular discussions and instead insist on a rigorous theoretically grounded ethnographic sensibility that marks extreme speech as a distinct concept.<sup>2</sup> By

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<sup>2</sup> While the term *extreme speech* has been used before in public debates and scholarship to explore the tenuous relationship between hate speech, democracy, and freedom of speech—most notably in *Extreme Speech and Democracy* (Hare & Weinstein, 2009)—our approach differs from these legal-normative approaches by foregrounding a distinctly anthropological and global approach.

defining online vitriol as extreme speech, we depart, in particular, from the dominant legal-normative definitions of hate speech and the discourse of securitization around terrorism and political extremism. The legal-normative discourse of hate speech is primarily concerned with the relationship between freedom of speech and the harm caused by negative speech.<sup>3</sup> Debates around violent online political extremism, and especially “terrorism talk” popular in the public and political imaginations of online extremism, have revolved around notions of risk and processes of radicalization (MacDonald, Jarvis, Chen, & Aly, 2016; Melagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017). Without doubt, radicalization and harmful speech are grave concerns. However, it is important to problematize the orthodox understanding of extremism premised on a clear-cut normative binary between the liberal center and the extreme periphery and to explore how these political inclusions and exclusions are themselves produced globally across a range of cultural and political registers. In advancing this analytical task, extreme speech highlights the limitations of hate speech and extremism as a “discourse of pathology” based on the need to diagnose, preempt, and mitigate its negative effects. We argue that the production, circulation, and consumption of online vitriol should be approached as much as a cultural practice and social phenomenon as a legal or regulatory concept. This implies three theoretical moves.

First, extreme speech foregrounds the radical situatedness of online speech acts in different cultural, social, and political milieus globally. It takes seriously the cultural variation of speech acts, the normative orders bundled around them, and the historical conditions that underpin them. This implies that there is no easy-to-define boundary between speech that is acceptable and speech that is not. The distinction is instead constantly reworked in public and political debates, and the boundaries are redrawn, used, and misused. As a concept, extreme speech captures digital cultures that push and provoke the limits of legitimate speech along the twin axes of truth-falsity and civility-incivility, raising two critical questions for research: What are the processes that make hateful and aggressive language acceptable for its users—and indeed make it appear normal and desirable—and, conversely, how is the order-word of *hate* assigned to speech acts online as a weapon of authority and control?<sup>4</sup> In either case, there is no self-evident category of hate speech. Adopting a cultural approach to hate speech by examining its everyday use and cultural logics in Hungary, Boromisza-Habashi (2013) notes that a large volume of existing studies regard hate speech “as a transparent concept that stands for a kind of talk with describable characteristics” available for “evaluation” (p. 4). Hate speech is not, he cautions, “a simple window on reality” (p. 2). Moving beyond the binary and normative divisions between acceptable and unacceptable speech forces us to pay close attention to the granularity of everyday online practices that underlie contemporary digital cultures—that is, what people do with media in their everyday lived experiences and how the significance of their actions is mediated through discursive regimes across the world (Brauchler & Postill, 2010; Couldry, 2010). Analytically this involves examining the political-economic-historical contexts, meanings derived by online users, and the competing moral frames that guide speech acts.

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<sup>3</sup> Negative speech includes “insulting, degrading, defaming, negative stereotyping or inciting hatred, discrimination or violence against people in virtue of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity” (Brown 2017, p. 420; Matsuda, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> The second analytical angle on assigning the order value of hate as an instrument of power is only partly explored in the collection of essays presented here, but it forms part of our broader research program on extreme speech.

Second, extreme speech draws ethnographic attention to global online media affordances as a sociotechnological dynamic that deeply affects online speech acts, including cultures of vitriol, aggression, and abuse. Without falling into the trap of technological determinism—a perspective abandoned by the very frame of media “practice” we embrace—we nonetheless emphasize aspects of online use that have gained resonance on a global scale as they manifest across different cultural contexts. What features of new media cultures help create an enabling environment for hostility and provide a pool of resources to draw on to further fuel this hostility? What kinds of sociotechnological forms are available on new media platforms that facilitate vitriolic exchange, and what are the cross-cutting thematic patterns that spread across global instances of hateful speech online? To advance these questions, extreme speech foregrounds a critical analysis of self-publicity, formulaic language, affect, and fun as central elements of contemporary digital cultures, as well as the processes through which digital traces of these activities function to provide a continuous feedback loop for a data-driven marketplace (Masumi, 2015; Papachrissi, 2014). We suggest that many of these features behind extreme speech exist at the intersection of online affordances as a technological mediation inflected by the datafication of market and as an ethnographic space laden with meaning. These features are therefore not a sequential movement toward a new sociotechnological phase that can be isolated as distinct technological entities; they entail processes of mediation as interruptions and interactions that “mark moments of public life in specific places at specific times” (Hirschkind, de Abreu, & Caduff, 2017, p. S5).<sup>5</sup>

Third, extreme speech is inextricably linked to violence, but its implications are context specific. At a fundamental level, the concept builds on the premise that political action should be considered, among other things, as an aspect of situated speech acts and what Judith Butler (1997) considers as the realm of linguistic performativity. Public ideals and their brutal decimation are morally laden and enacted through speech acts encompassing verbal and audiovisual expressions. Furthermore, the concept insists that the connection between extreme speech, political hatred, and violent action must be ethnographically explicated. We draw on the tension that exists between two strands of anthropological scholarship on political violence to advance this analysis (Verkaaik, 2004). The first strand examines violence in relation to the perceived “crisis of identity” that results when stable categories of modernity, such as the nation, citizen, state, and ethnic identities, are confronted with the “postmodern” blurring of physical borders caused by the momentous mobility of people, technologies, and ideas in the global context of transnational capitalism

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<sup>5</sup> This critical analysis also cuts through the “algorithmic politics” involved in how the knowledge available about online vitriol and extremism on social media platforms is also mediated and controlled by the same technology companies that benefit from it. Much of the research on online and social media extreme speech is reliant on the public API access provided by social media companies that have made it increasingly difficult for researchers to access public information from them. This risks creating a division between data-rich and data-poor research environments, depending on how much access researchers have to information from the social media platforms. As important, it also influences the research frameworks and methods that are chosen to understand online vitriol based on the data that are easily available (this, for instance, is illustrated by researchers’ overreliance on Twitter, given the relatively easy access it provides to public free data). The same sociotechnological affordances and their corporate control, which influence what people do on social media, also produce the conditions of possibility through which knowledge about them can be captured.

and shifting geopolitics. The second strand of scholarship suggests that collective aggression and transgressive behavior should not be seen as anomalies within the changing body politic, but as practices that are *generative* and *constitutive* of identity and political subjectivity. The generative capacity of extreme speech as a form of transgression from the mainstream norm therefore signals a deep ambiguity: Extreme speech can be both progressive and destructive in relation to the situations it is implicated in. It thus helps to examine the specific contexts that instigate and shape online extreme speech *as violence*, and its divergent and often unforeseen implications.

As a “less congested” term than the more widely used term *hate speech*, *extreme speech* thus embodies a research ethos rooted in a critical ethnographic sensibility to cultural difference, local practices, and meanings drawn by users themselves in everyday lived environments.

This in no way blunts the critical political position and concern about online vitriol that this collection unequivocally takes. Indeed, our intention is not to abandon but to complement existing concepts and approaches developed to tackle violent speech by highlighting aspects that the normative framework of hate speech has ignored, and areas where the project has failed to provide meaningful interventions or has even enabled acts of repression. Mindful of the tumultuous course that hate speech has taken as a regulatory project and the uneven history of the moral principle of civility that underlies it,<sup>6</sup> we avoid a tendency to assess vitriol in the self-righteous schema of the liberal center and extreme periphery. Such moralizing positions can be, at times, counterproductive to the very effort to undermine violent speech. Extreme speech instead insists on building critical frameworks using lived categories and worldviews rather than concepts superimposed from the outside. By examining diverse contexts, situated speech cultures, and online affordances that normalize extreme speech, we are able to bring analytical rigor to examine more closely how such “little deaths of everyday life”—“the slights, the grudges, the clumsiness, the impatience, the bitterness, the narcissism, the boredom and so on . . . variously fed and magnified and inflamed by . . . racism, sexism, elitism” and other structures of exclusion—congeal “the perpetual preparation for violence” (Cavell, 2007, p. xiii). The “evidently small things” that respond to and construct tumultuous tragedies in our contemporary age are increasingly worked out on online networking sites. Extreme speech, as a concept, brings to the fore these specific, everyday “little” realities and their situatedness within the broader discursive regimes, as one critical step needed to make sense of the troubling times we inhabit.

### **In This Special Section**

Building on the contributions collected here, we highlight the need for this critical ethnographic intervention. First, we examine the circulation of the hate speech discourse in the public domain and how the “public life” of concepts such as hate speech can influence research agendas and political debates (Gagliardone, 2019; Pohjonen, 2019). This section highlights what the discourse of online hate speech actually does (or tries to achieve) when it is invoked to advance different regulatory actions and research agendas. In the following section, we demonstrate the analytical value of considering extreme speech as a spectrum of cultural practices by foregrounding the humor, fun, and banality that surround online vitriol

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<sup>6</sup> See Holston (2011) for a critical discussion on civility as a gloss over socioeconomic inequality. Civility, he argues, is not “inherently incompatible . . . with coercion, violence and religious intolerance” (p. 55).

(Haynes, 2019; Hervik, 2019; Udupa, 2019). These aspects of online practice, we suggest, provide the new enabling ground for right-wing movements and exclusionary politics to stabilize, complementing a composite space of support that includes conservative groups that use conventional strategies of “serious” appeal, dissemination, and manipulation. Suggesting that these practices connect with global new media cultures, we highlight the sociotechnological dynamics of digital new media, such as digital traces (Deem, 2019), archives (McGranahan, 2019), meme formats (Haynes, 2019; Udupa, 2019), and digital warfare (Al-Ghazzi, 2019), as well as examples of extreme speech perpetrated by the state via new and traditional media (Lee, 2019). We conclude by emphasizing the importance of providing a situated understanding of the relationship between online extreme speech and violence, and how this has manifested in different ways under specific historically inflected conditions.

### **The Many (Mis)uses of “Hate Speech”**

Questions about what hate speech is, and especially what should be done about it, have incited a significant volume of commentaries and controversies in recent scholarly and public debates (Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Gelber, 2016; Hare & Weinstein, 2009; Heinze, 2016; Herz & Molnar, 2012; Waldron, 2012). The difficulty in defining this “thin concept” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) is compounded by the current presence of at least three different overlapping discourses that operate on this concept. The first consists of critical legal and philosophical debates around legitimate and illegitimate speech acts in different national cultures. The second includes debates linking hate speech to violent online political extremism, which have been reignited around the ongoing controversies about the toxification of online communication, political polarization, fake news, disinformation, and the resurgence of the populist far-right in Europe and the United States. The third consists of comparative debates on political conflict and violence, which have linked the hate speech discourse to broader dynamics of ethnic, social, and political conflicts, and attempts to identify online hate speech as an “early warning system” to prevent and mitigate outbreaks of mass violence offline.

In his contribution to the Special Section, Gagliardone (2019) cuts through these overlapping debates by proposing a typology of the different ways in which the discourse of hate speech is used for particular purposes and interventions. This genealogical analysis of the “public lives” of concepts—and especially how they are used by researchers, politicians, advocacy groups, national organizations, and academics—helps foreground the sometimes incommensurable regulatory and political meanings that are superimposed on lived concepts. Indeed, as research has shown, the thin concept of hate speech can take, and has taken, a range of meanings that are susceptible to manipulation for various political purposes. The politics of invoking blasphemy laws under the rubric of hate speech and offense in Pakistan and Bangladesh is a case in point (Froystad et al., 2019). New regulation in Germany aimed at punitively enforcing social media companies to remove social media content flagged as hate speech has drawn ire from critics who argue that removing content without “prior determination of the legality of the content at issue by court” sets a dangerous global precedent for countries that more “vigorously enforce criminal provisions to quash dissent and criticism” (Article 19, 2012, p. 2).

The close alliance between the media-monitoring industry and hate speech discourse further complicates the matter. A good example is the case of Eastern Europe, where Mihelj (2011) shows how the “upsurge of nationalisms and nation-state-building projects across Eastern Europe in the 1990s gave rise to a

veritable industry of media monitoring and criticisms of hate speech" (p. 1). The use of hate speech in these cases embodies the colonial logic of "yet-to-be modern" societies prone to "emotions," manipulation, and public frenzy, which have to be tested against the high values of calm rationality of Western liberal democracy. In an ironic twist, this logic has also come back to haunt the previous colonial centers with an ongoing toxification of social media in the heart of liberal democracies themselves. The law-and-order rationale of hate speech is evidenced by international monitoring agencies that use the discourse of hate speech as a regulatory tool. Examples are abound when dominant groups reproduce the same logic within domestic political fields to repress dissent or manage political expectations. As Gagliardone (2019) notes in his typology, hate speech and the associated satellite concepts such as dangerous speech, fear speech, violent extremist speech, incitement to violence, and microaggression are used for specific purposes and are closely linked to political pressures "to do something about it." In Ethiopia, for instance, debates on hate speech have been closely linked to the "techno-political regime" that ties the significance of the ICTs to related debates on the developmental state, ethnic federalism, the role of free speech and political participation. Hate speech therefore has been used as a proxy for other grievances disarticulated from the political domain, such as questions about divisions of power and representation in a multiethnic country or about the limits of legitimate political influence from the global diaspora (Gagliardone, 2016; Legesse, 2012).

Such divergent use (and misuse) of the hate speech discourse can also inform global research agendas. Pohjonen (2019) highlights some of the theoretical difficulties researchers encounter when faced with the difficult task of negotiating conflictual definitions superimposed on this object of study globally. Drawing on a comparative meta-methodological analysis of two research projects on online hate speech in markedly different sociopolitical contexts and media environments, Ethiopia and Finland, he advocates a "bi-focal" or "doubly critical" approach to online hate speech research. This alternative research framework understands controversial concepts such as online hate speech as always-already embedded in the "performative" contexts of their use. Rather than describing a world "out there," they are also used to enact strategic outcomes in situations in which they are used. Seen from this perspective, the discourse of hate speech thus not only describes a state of affairs in the world but also acts to retroactively provide closure to the many diverse, unstructured, and often messy practices that underpin online cultures of vitriol in different parts of the world. Pohjonen, therefore, concludes that one alternative way to understand the many uses and misuses of online hate speech discourse is to approach the concept of online hate speech as a form of media commentary through which the messy world of online and social media practices is given political meaning as online hate speech over all the other possible ways of imagining this growing problem of our contemporary global media environments.

When seen as a form of commentary, the analytical limitations of the normative conception of hate speech become starkly evident. While the normative legal and human rights-based impetus behind hate speech is indeed useful in advancing specific policy interventions and protecting minorities, as Gagliardone (2019) reiterates, we emphasize the value of turning the normative bias "towards recognizing, isolating, and combating hate speech into more analytical efforts to understand it, together with the actors behind expressions of hate and intolerance."

Boromisza-Habashi (2013) notes insightfully that those who partake in hateful speech rarely describe it as such, let alone condemn it. The category of hate speech simply does not make sense to them. In practice,

hate speech is usually a “charge” or an “order”—an enactment of taking political sides through accusations and denials. If vitriol and abuse are an interactional device honed by conventions, expectations, and cultures of language in use (Irvine, 1993; Udupa, 2017), how do we make sense of them? What meanings do they hold for users, and what valence do they accrue within interactional contexts of the digital age? By approaching extreme speech as a *spectrum* of practices, we advance these questions in the next section.

### **A Spectrum, Not a Binary**

Examining extreme speech practices in Danish weblogs and Facebook comment threads, Peter Hervik (2019) reveals how these communities treat issues of refugees, migration, Islam, and opposition to their views as a cultural war of values and conflict. Extreme speech as a “spectrum of practices,” he argues, helps to “achieve a better sense of where the speech and confrontational reasoning comes from” and to recover an analysis of agency of actors involved in the production and dissemination of such speech. Noting that “legal and moral criteria are not easily agreed upon when it comes to doxa,” Hervik goes on to show that extreme speech is not confined to online spaces, but “includes a totality of exchanges with neighbors, co-workers, family, watching television, reading newspapers, going to meetings, and listening to public talks.” Across the interlinked online and offline spheres, Hervik notices a “programmed, negative adversativeness,” which he defines as “ritualized opposition” leading to a divisive use of language and naturalization of racialized difference. Such recurrent ritualistic communicative patterns include the use of a distinct indignant tone, sarcasm, racialized reasoning, and high fives and showing a general indifference to facts. For instance, he analyzes two road signs in Northern Denmark that closely show an insidious, almost tongue-in-cheek form of humor that sends out caustic messages against immigrants. Here, supporters of the right-wing Party of the Danes had planted simple, homemade road signs below the usual sign boards indicating the distance to local towns. The homemade road signs displayed the number of kilometers it takes to reach Iraq and Syria, with pointed arrows to show the direction. The message was so indirect and surreptitious that it was difficult to take offense to the road signs laced with humor and sarcasm. As Hervik rightly points out, such forms of extreme speech, bolstered further by arguments on social networking sites, “[transform] discrimination into something funny.” It is twice exclusionary because it not only expels immigrants—the object of road sign “humor”—but also blocks out critics who do not approve of anti-immigrant discourse as those who do not “get the humor.” In Internet parlance, they are the “normies” (Nagle, 2017), and translated in right-wing populist discourse as the tiring, pedantic, and corrupt “elite”—fragments of the outdated era of liberal modernity.

The quotidian nature of extreme speech as humor is not limited to Europe’s current wave of far-right populism. Nell Haynes (2019) discusses the connection between mundane humor and extreme speech in Chile, arguing that “seemingly mundane states are always part of larger and sometimes more dangerous discursive circulations.” In the economically disadvantaged and politically disenfranchised border towns of Northern Chile, culturally sanctioned humor is aimed at discrediting immigrants from Bolivia. Facebook posts filled with texts, visuals, and memes circulate aplenty, just like the imposing physical graffiti on physical walls where humor “works on a number of levels from the morphologic and lexical to the incongruences between image and language.” These posts are often viewed as “just funny stuff” (“*weas chistosias, no más*”). The quotidian nature and humorous formats help anti-immigrant sentiments to become enfolded into the everyday discourse, with little active recognition or resistance. As a result of the social norms both

created and sustained through racializing humor on social media, the most vulnerable members of an already triply marginalized immigrant community are further excluded, often with direct effects on their livelihoods.

The “just funny stuff” proliferates as *gaali* in India, where a resurgent group of right-wing Hindu nationalist volunteers online and diverse groups of contesting ideologues exchange abuses, swear words, name-calling, and putdowns to advance their positions in a digitally enabled polymedia public domain. Udupa (2019) proposes “fun” as an analytical concept to examine the forms and meanings of online practice that constitute the daily drip feed of exclusion. Fun is not just about hilarity, nor is it about frivolity of action. She argues that fun should be seen as a “meta-practice” that shapes the interlinked practices of fact-checking, abuse, assembly, and aggression among online volunteers for right-wing nationalism. In a climate of organized ideological production backed by funding and patronage from right-wing political groups, these self-styled volunteers direct the discourse at religious minorities, liberal critics, and marginalized caste groups, simultaneously voicing an aspirational middle-class restlessness to see the country free from government corruption and inefficiency. She highlights four aspects of fun to delineate fun as a meta-practice: being “funny” as tactical ways to enter and rise to prominence within the online sphere; deriving fun from the sheer freshness of colloquialism in political debates that stands in contrast to the serious tone of political deliberation; fun as satisfaction of achieving a goal by working with one’s own resources; and fun as group identification and collective (if anonymous) celebration of aggression. Creating an experience of absolute autonomy among online users within ideological battles, fun not only normalizes extreme speech but also makes it enjoyable in a lulz-filled online culture.

Fun and funny in all these cases illustrate the slippery ground between humor, insult, and abuse. They signal a spectrum of practices that constitute exclusionary speech acts, now imprinted with a new kind of digitally enabled jouissance.

The cultural complexity of extreme speech suggested by these studies is increasingly worked out through digital affordances that tend to have shared effects on a global scale while maintaining distinct cultural particularities. The resonance of digital features on a global scale is best seen as a shared set of practices enabled by the transnational circulation of tropes, formats, and discursive resources rather than in terms of technological determinism or cultural imperialism—both models now amply challenged by critics of global culture.<sup>7</sup> How, then, do global digital media as shared practices and transnational sociotechnological features shape extreme speech?

### **Formats and Affordances**

In her contribution, Alexandra Deem (2019) explores the Twitter hashtag #whitegenocide as a window into the digital subculture of the new extreme right in the United States and Europe. She adopts a “digital trace”-based approach to this sociotechnical mediation of Whiteness to emphasize the liminality and

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<sup>7</sup> Algorithms add the “post-human” global dimension to digital culture, analyzed by Goriunova (2017) in a fascinating formulation of a “lurker” that operates “with sagacious data wisdoms . . . [whose] . . . mode of knowing becomes the new mode of governance” (p. 3917).

relationality of online speech practices, as opposed to essentializations and obsessions with the “origins.” The ideology underpinning the formulations of “White genocide” reflects the view that White populations across the globe are now subject to an existential threat brought about by immigration and the mixing of races. Against hasty write-offs that would treat this phenomenon as little more than hate speech from a disgruntled fringe group of White supremacists, Deem argues that a close reading of the #whitegenocide hashtag can illuminate the emergence of an extreme right social movement constituting a coherent culture and community of White supremacists on Twitter. She identifies a productive symbiosis that such online cultures of White supremacy have historically had with Twitter’s trending algorithms and data-driven business model—technological systems that also inform the kinds of content that get amplified in digital environments. These “cultural logics” embedded into Twitter’s technologically mediated functionality, she notes, can also become easily weaponized by a new extreme right seeking legitimacy in the mainstream political arena. At the same time, the algorithmic prominence of retweeting and hashtagification heightens their ability to propagate across networks of followers through processes of user-driven iteration and “attention hacking.”

Udupa (2019) finds a similar sociotechnological mediation of fun as a meta-practice: when the logics of spreadable digital media infuse the performative effects of distance and deniability into the body politic of right-wing ideologies. In digital environments, fun instigates collective pleasures of identity that can mitigate risk and culpability for right-wing movements. It deepens the commonsense familiarity of exclusionary messages, thereby enabling political protection accorded to them. Haynes (2019) sees this effect in the “formulaic language” of Internet memes that allow for the expression of that which may not be voiced under other circumstances. The genre of text and its digitality contribute to understandings of what is acceptable or unacceptable discourse. Advancing the analytic of social media form and affordances, McGranahan (2019) incisively excavates the Twitter feed of Trump as “an archive of lies” and shows the intersections of digital platform affordances with the cultural logic of organization and the concept work at play in the move from words to action. In so doing, she reflects on her sustained engagement with the Twitter community and the political shock of Trump’s activities on Twitter based on his “endless conveyor belt of half-truths, distortion of facts and outright lies.” By adopting a Foucauldian approach to the “history of the present”—the conditions of possibility that have made the present moment what it is—she explores what such an “ethnography of an archive” can say about the contemporary moment and what modes of political resistance it can facilitate. Contextualizing her approach to extreme speech as an archive of lies within the anthropological and historical work on archives, McGranahan further argues that archives are important because they are able to generate “political realities and social truths.” Trump’s lies, she argues, are a form of extreme speech that generates not only political outrage but also “affiliative truths” that lead to specific forms of social community and action.

Digital affordances of archiving and tracing, as well as formats of memes and incentives for joking, constitute enabling conditions for extreme speech in all the cases analyzed earlier, suggesting that the technological architectures of the Internet media and their cultural translations embody a context in itself. This follows studies that have revealed that the rules, protocols, conventions, and default designs shape user interfaces and the work of the code in the background, thereby enabling and constraining forms of communication (Fuller, 2005; Manovich, 2001). Although not isolatable as technological entities, they nonetheless constitute the condition of possibility for any digital mediation. Under such conditions,

sentiments gain a new momentum and global valence. However, contributions collected here suggest that these sentiments cannot be understood in terms of a neat separation between rationality and affect. Throughout, we have approached affect anthropologically—in terms of media practices rather than context-free understanding of sentiments as precognitive burst channeled through digital media.

By locating extreme speech in the discursive relations of witnessing, Al-Ghazzi (2019) changes the perspective and draws attention to the violent scenario of warfare in Syria, where the authoritarian regime has placed the images and voices of children at the center of its political domination symbolism, even as activist networks desperately utilize such images based on the misplaced assumptions that a suffering child's voice would move Western publics into a desired action. The wrenching and tragic trajectory of images of children circulating on digital media have become the subject of severe contention among warring factions. Al-Ghazzi argues that instrumentalization of children's suffering under conditions of violent warfare encourages media witnesses of conflict to outsource the labor of truth telling and meaning making to the most marginalized and traumatized victims of that conflict. The allure of authentic voice may empower individual children to expose what war does, but it ultimately reinforces subalternity because it shifts attention to individuals at the expense of the broader picture of suffering and the voiceless masses. On the one hand, extreme speech that reworks the boundaries of truth and falsity, the fake and the authentic, has become a significant weapon in the violent warfare in Syria. On the other hand, instrumentalization of children's suffering has decontextualized violence, which has been more easily subsumed within the preexisting discourses in the transatlantic West, including those on fears of migration and instability.

As the preceding sections indicate, extreme speech is a methodological concept inasmuch as it is a conceptual one. Methodologically, it foregrounds how the different cultural meanings attributed to the concept of hate speech are always under constant negotiation and emphasizes the need to examine cultural contexts of approval and disapproval that surround the production of online vitriol. A key methodological intervention is to understand the worldviews, epistemological particularities, and lived environments guided by a critical ethnographic commitment to learn and see the insider views as a "working morality" (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013; Hervik, 2019). It is a way to hone the critical perspective rather than an endorsement of the views expressed by extreme speech actors or claiming moral equivalence between different ideological positions. As Banks and Gingrich (2006) state, "As a rule of thumb, 'empathy and not sympathy' is the appropriate formula for such fieldwork" (p. 11). Defining the approach as "cultural thinking," Boromisza-Habashi (2013) similarly notes that "contestation involves the clash of equally coherent (although not equally acceptable) cultural logics" (p. 3). As part of their engagement with the extreme speech framework, all the authors in this special issue foreground such an ethnographic sensibility to their respective topics—either rooted in ethnographic fieldwork among extreme speech producers and users, or in analyzing contested articulations behind modes of discourse (memes, archives, and traces). Emphasizing the anthropological tradition of moving between different orders of analysis and between theory and fieldwork, extreme speech reiterates the need to combine micro-perspectives with macro-perspectives derived from comparison and inductive reasoning (van der Veer, 2016). The articles here are admittedly only a starting point in the effort to bring these methodological perspectives to debates on online vitriol.

Similarly, the articles should also be approached as the first step in systematically documenting the design decisions, assumptions of use and platform politics of various social networking sites (Massanari,

2015) as culturally translated sociotechnological features that condition extreme speech by cutting through different political situations. This aspect of extreme speech can be advanced by seeing “technologies as cultures” and questioning technology’s neutrality as a means of communication (Mumford, 1934/1963).

The perspectives of media practice and sociotechnological features elaborated earlier are necessary to examine the relationship between extreme speech and violence. We conclude by highlighting this connection and the need to combine the analytics of practice and sociotechnological features with a critical eye on the historical conditions and convergence of specific events, crises, and developments that modulate the violent outcomes of extreme speech.

### **Extreme Speech and Violence**

The difficulties involved in identifying speech acts that pose a high risk for inciting violence have been addressed with more delimited concepts such as “dangerous speech” (Benesch, 2014) or “fear speech” (Buyse, 2014). These efforts have also played a key role in the interventionist, regulatory measures aimed at controlling speech that can cause real harm to real people. Even in situations in which calls to physical violence are not imminent, scholars have demonstrated that subtle forms of discriminatory talk can reproduce racialized ethnic hierarchies (Langton, 2018). Extreme speech emphasizes that both of these strands of scholarship that connect speech acts with violence (physical and social) need to take into account the way speech is enacted, experienced, shared, and celebrated, and, in digital times, also archived, traced, and retrieved at lightning speed. Moreover, the collection of articles here demonstrates the value of situating these speech acts within the longer historical trajectories of ideological forces, rather than seeing them only in relation to contemporaneous contexts of mediation and the ongoing controversies and moral panics around fake news and disinformation.

The articles thus share a concern for the granularity of ideological formations—of right-wing populism, racial nationalism, White supremacism, religious majoritarianism, and ethnic exclusion and conflict. Rather than approaching them as “monolithic entities of maximal ideological power” (Banks & Gingrich, 2006, p. 8), the articles have examined how structures of economic transition and mobility on a global scale; violent ethnic conflicts, historical grievances, nested social inequalities, and majoritarian belligerence within the nation space; and the entrenched structure of colonial logics frame, produce and rely on everyday practices of extreme speech. Each of these historical conditions is necessary to understand the implications of online extreme speech and what measures should be adopted in response to it.

In the transatlantic West, the rise of right-wing populism and nationalism in the last two decades has been assessed in relation to the economic, political, and social processes of 21st-century globalization, which led to new patterns of migration and a stifling consensus at the center (Mouffe, 2005). Banks and Gingrich (2006) have defined this phenomenon as “neonationalism.” Emerging in relation to transnational and global developments of the 21st century, “neonationalism is neither an isolated phenomenon nor is it internally coherent” (p. 3). Refining the concept of “integralism” developed by Douglas Holmes (2000) to denote territorially based essentialism in Europe at the end of the 20th century, Banks and Gingrich highlight the need to draw a distinction among three variants of nationalism. They suggest that “parliamentary neo-nationalism” that is still associated with legitimate parliamentary politics is distinct from regional secessionist movements often characterized by their violent and open call to break away from the existing state structures (Basque and

the Corsican movements in Spain and France) and far-right extremist movements that “favour illegal and violent means to promote openly racist causes, usually in explicit defiance of parliamentary democracy” (p. 3).<sup>8</sup> They, however, also show that there are significant overlaps among these three variants of nationalism in terms of their key ideological elements, views on history, and relationship to debates on hate speech. In some cases, they note that the violent far-right strand has grown to be identical to parliamentary neo-nationalism (as with the Lega Nord in Italy and the Vlaams Blok in Belgium). Recent electoral victories of anti-immigration parties, such as Alternativ für Duetschland (Afd) in Germany and Sweden Democrats in Sweden, testify to the growing political influence of extreme right-wing groups within the legitimate parliamentary sphere (Fuchs, 2016; Kramer, 2017). Although arrivals of refugees are seen as a precipitating moment for the simmering resentment against emerging patterns of mobility under conditions of globalization, such assessments can be more misleading than revealing. Racialized narratives about non-European migrants and assertions of cultural nationalism around the purity of the nation-state under threat cannot be seen as an isolated, knee-jerk reaction to “alien bodies” now arriving closer to “home.” They also display “dimensions of dethroned former colonial powers” (Banks & Gingrich, 2006, p. 9) and White racial consciousness as a postcolonial “metastasis” based on the epistemology of White supremacy (De Genova, 2010). This explains why even countries like Norway and Finland, with no active colonial past of their own, are drawn into the global legacies of the “Empire.” Situating Whiteness online within this far-reaching structure of postcolonial racial formation, Deem (2019) shows how extreme speech terms such as *White genocide* strategically “recode mainstream cultural values to epistemologically shift the meaning of whiteness in the post-civil rights era in North America and the European notion of the ‘Great Replacement’” in order to popularize the notion of Whiteness under siege and the rhetoric of combining non-White inferiority with ideas of deviancy and criminality.

The worrying rise of exclusionary politics and growing aggression toward minorities, however, are by no means only Western phenomena. In India, the political force of Hindu majoritarianism has historically asserted the idea of Hindu-first India, combining the cultural pride of a glorious civilization and aggression against religious minorities with new articulations of India as an emerging global power free from government corruption (Udupa, 2015). Online abuse is seen among diverse ideological and political interest groups as it proliferates across the blurred practices of comedy, insult, and ad hominem remarks, but right-wing extreme speech is distinct in its gendered intimidation and aggression aimed at religious minorities and public figures characterized as “pseudoliberals.” Hindu majoritarianism is driven by extreme speech practices of prominent political leaders of the movement with online celebrity power and enthusiastic online volunteers who largely come from the middle class and affluent classes, and upper caste and intermediary caste groups. In Chile, Haynes (2019) draws attention to the economic and political marginalization of communities in the borderland. These communities engage in cultural proprietorial nativism, subjecting immigrants from Bolivia to discrimination and physical violence. Analyzing the situation as “nested inequalities,” she shows how memes’ popularity reflects “the historical processes that have led Bolivians to be racialized in Chilean discourses, as well as the ways that northerners themselves must continue to struggle to be included in the imagining of the Chilean nation.” In Syria, a violent and militarized warfare has led to the deaths of thousands of civilians, creating severe

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<sup>8</sup> Banks and Gingrich (2006) note that there has also been a legacy of “left nationalism” in Europe. Most pointedly illustrated by the extreme-left European Maoism of the 1960s and 1970s (Basque ETA and the Irish IRA), traces of left nationalism are also evident in the postcommunist PDS in eastern Germany influencing new incoming EU members from East Central Europe.

conditions for media practice (Al-Ghazzi, 2019). Media representations have become the most fraught terrain for the warring factions to claim or dismiss authenticity of suffering and consequent moral outrage. Pro-regime Russo-Syrian military campaign factions, Western-backed groups, and Islamist groups have manipulated the circumstances of “witnessing” human suffering through media images, thereby reducing the complexity to a fetishized voice or image. In Myanmar, the state has been conducting a long-standing campaign of violence and extreme speech against the Rohingya minorities, using the new media landscape in recent years to further perpetrate this aggression (Lee, 2019). Sharpening the focus on the role of the state in the production of extreme speech, Lee (2019) shows that historical marginalization and state actions have created a political environment where anti-Rohingya speech is made acceptable and rights abuses excused. He argues that “the actions by state actors using official media ought to be a concern for critical scholarship because the consequences of extreme speech by authorities can be grave, particularly for minority groups.” Across these diverse historical-political contexts, online extreme speech has become a vehicle for and symptom of violent forms of exclusion from the political mainstream and for cultural shaming that erodes the conditions for a dignified life for many.

As a concept, extreme speech is open-ended to acknowledge its potential as a resource for both agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2005) and dominance via exclusionary logics, reflecting the “ideological flexibility and moral neutrality of the rule of transgression” (Deem, 2019). However, the current constellation of factors as a global conjuncture points to the prominence of exclusionary extreme speech, twice empowered with the digital culture of “cultivated rage” (Mazzarella, 2018) and translocal convergences on digital networks. Taken together, the articles collected here reveal that extreme speech plays a key role in producing and consolidating communities of support for violent ideologies. Insidiously folding into the new normal of everyday speech and political action, extreme speech is immensely productive of identity—of assertions, affects, and affinities—that tests the limits of civility while simultaneously drawing, on another axis, the limits of communities through the profound prosaics of online user cultures.

The moral vantage point of extreme speech, emerging organically from the contributions collected in the special section, emphasizes a joint commitment to reducing violence (as opposed to normalizing violence), the shared reality of facts (as opposed to ritual expression of belonging), and social inclusion (as opposed to hierarchies of race, religion, or national identity).<sup>9</sup> As a definite departure from a predetermined moral framework where critique precedes knowledge, extreme speech thus calls for a situated reading of online vitriol, focusing on the actual rather than abstract conditions of possibility for action against it (Parr, 2015).<sup>10</sup> It thus allows for the moral charge to emerge from an understanding of user cultures, technology, and specific historical-political contexts within which the pleasure and pressure of incivility have now violently erupted into the mainstream.

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<sup>9</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

<sup>10</sup> Although spelling out concrete steps of action is beyond the objective of this article, our approach highlights the need to work with local communities to recognize emerging vocabularies, practices, justifications, and networks of actors around extreme speech.

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