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### The Affordances of Replacement Narratives

*How the White Genocide and Great Replacement Theories Converge in Poorly Moderated Online Milieus*

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## Chapter Nine

### **The Affordances of Replacement Narratives: how the White Genocide and Great Replacement Theories Converge in Poorly Moderated Online Milieus**

Emillie de Keulenaar and Marc Tuters

#### **Abstract**

This chapter takes a media studies approach to answering the question of how reactionary political opinions “meet” and converge in poorly moderated milieus, such as either entire forums, like the anonymous message board 4chan, or as specific locations of otherwise moderately moderated platforms, like the YouTube comment section. Two ideologically distinct narratives – namely, the French “great replacement” and American “white genocide” theories – and their circulation on 4chan/pol and the YouTube comment sections from 2013 to late 2018 are taken as case studies. The chapter argues that, in spite of their distinctions, they begin to merge ideologically by virtue of circulating in the same milieus. This is demonstrated with NLP and network analyses of 4chan/pol posts and YouTube comments aiming to measure ideological convergence over time.

#### **Introduction**

In the last few years, journalists and academics have decried the role of social media platforms such as YouTube as “radicalization machines” whose algorithms tend to funnel users towards more extreme political content (Tufekci 2018, Lewis, 2018). Recent quantitative research, however, has questioned this prevailing hypothesis, arguing that the problem of political radicalization online is not caused by the supply of media “radicalizing an otherwise moderate audience” but rather, and more disturbingly, that it is also a question of audience demand, previously constrained by the more limited ideological scope of legacy media (Munger & Phillips, 2020, 22). Similarly, the political scientists Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell argue that the authoritarian turn in Europe and around the Western hemisphere should not be understood as the “‘last howl of rage’ from old white men soon to be replaced by tolerant Millennials”, but rather a symptom of a “new era of political fragmentation, volatility, and disruption” (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, epub). Both examples touch upon a larger issue in the composition of the European and American public spheres, where laxer speech moderation

from social media platforms has facilitated the return of once marginal extremist rhetoric in the wider political mainstream.

In this chapter, we take a media studies approach to answering the question of how reactionary political opinion appears to emerge from poorly moderated milieus, namely the anonymous message board 4chan and the YouTube comment section. As media studies scholars, our most fundamental axiom is McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1994). McLuhan advocated for an ecological type of understanding of the systemic dynamics that each new technology creates for itself. In claiming that "[t]he effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance", McLuhan may be understood as merely pointing to the profound (and often largely unnoticed) epistemological effects of new media environments (McLuhan 1994, 40). Whereas McLuhan's metaphor of the "global village" was much celebrated by the (once) techno-utopians of Silicon Valley, what comes to the fore in our analysis is the dark side of this metaphor: the global village as a parochial and illiberal environment, which retrieves atavistic political dynamics (wrongly) considered by many to have been relegated to the dustbins of history. We thus offer this research in an effort to render visible the misunderstood effects of new media on much broader socio-political dynamics, specifically the growth and spread of racial conspiracy theories online.

Following this observation, our argument is that extreme ideologies, even if they are theoretically distinct, tend to not only subsist but also *converge* in poorly moderated milieus of social media platforms. These milieus may be entire platforms, such as 4chan, VK, BitChute, Rumble, Telegram, and other emerging "alt-tech" (Donovan et al. 2018), but also specific sections of otherwise moderated platforms, such as the YouTube comment section (R. Lewis 2018). As such, our empirical analysis looks at the role of relatively unmoderated online discussion forums in fostering extreme antagonism online, and how narratives of replacement that are ideologically distinct – namely, the French "great replacement" and North American "white genocide" variants – begin to converge by virtue of circulating in the same ill-moderated milieu. Building on past research on the role of the technical and social affordances of the anonymous messaging board 4chan (Tuters & Hagen 2019) and the YouTube comment section (Alshamrani et al. 2020) in giving rise to racist vernacular slang, this chapter makes use of a heuristic that posits 4chan and the YouTube comment section as sites of convergence for extremist ideas, which can then be disseminated and normalised in more mainstream spheres.

## **Mainstreaming Replacement Narratives**

Since World War II, French and European far-right discourse has sought to distance itself from the racial language of Nazi and American white supremacy by embracing a strategy of “differential racism” (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991, 22). In the past decade, and with greater momentum since the European refugee crisis, these nuances are arguably becoming lost, as American “alt-right” nativism, particularly the belief that “whites” are victims of a demographic replacement, has made some inroads into the French and European political mainstream. Renaud Camus encapsulated these fears in the concept of the “great replacement”, with which he argues that mass migration, mainstream media, and national education in France are inflicting a process of “deculturation” through systematic “oblivion” of French culture (Camus 2010). The concept of the great replacement has perhaps gained more mainstream popularity with Jean Raspail’s 1973 *Camp des Saints*, which became a top-five best-seller in France in 2011 (Dupuis 2011). The book echoes Camus’ concept, telling the fictional story of how millions of Indian migrants “slithered” into France (Raspail 1975, 15) to demand First World standards of living while showing no interest in integrating with local culture. The book was later cited by Steve Bannon as an analogy of the European refugee crisis, which he described as “almost a Camp of the Saints-type invasion into Central and then Western and Northern Europe” (Bannon & Sessions, 2016, 14:20-14:52). In 2022, the presidential campaign of Éric Zemmour in France has demonstrated the inherent speciousness of “differentialist” rhetoric when he was heard approving of Ukrainian refugees for being “white” and “Christian” in contrast to “Arab” and “Muslim” (Valeurs Actuelles 2022), despite seeking to distance himself from racist terminology (Zemmour 2021).

Though originally from the United States, the concept of “white genocide” is frequently compared with that of the great replacement (Davey & Ebner 2019). Described by Wendling as “a master plan dedicated to the total destruction of the white race [...] driven by forces engaged in an active conspiracy specifically targeting the white race” (Wendling 2018, epub), the term “white genocide” was originally coined in 2006 by Bob Whitaker (Hawley 2017). Whitaker is a US Radical Right figure also known for formulating the slogan “anti-racist is a code word for anti-white”, which encapsulates the alt-right’s conjoining of anti-political correctness with white nationalism (Greene 2019). As such, the term “white genocide” can be seen as bearing a family resemblance with Camus’ great replacement theory, though it shifts the focus from “European culture” to “whiteness”. This narrative can arguably be found in

more or less explicit forms in various parts of the US media environment, with mainstream news media Fox News frequently expressing preoccupations with declining levels of “white” birth rates in the U.S. census (Mikelionis 2018), in comparison to radical spaces across social media platforms and image boards speaking more explicitly of “white genocide” (see Figure 9.1c).

It seems likely that making a distinction between the great replacement and white genocide narratives is redundant, as the concept of European civilization strongly equates – albeit implicitly – that of “whiteness”. Balibar and Wallerstein do indeed make this argument when explaining that the concept of race bears the same meaning as that of “civilization”, because they both imply that individuals are doted of an insoluble cultural quality, or “essence” (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991, 22). It is nevertheless important to note that mainstream nationalist discourse in France, particularly that of the *Rassemblement National* (hitherto *Front National*), has for decades sought to distance itself from the concept of race as a primary marker of civic, national, and other identities, in an attempt to challenge accusations of racism (Shields 2013, 191). This move does not (just) imply a strategy of obfuscation, but the development of an intellectual tradition that partly *results* from such strategies and distinguishes itself from that of its North American counterparts, which explicitly retain biological race as a primary unit of social identity. The possibility that these two concepts are conflated in online popular discourse is evidence of a problematic development in French right-wing public discourse (arguably also in some elements of the French left), in which the concept of biological race is normalised enough to return to the public sphere, against the grain of a long-standing rejection of this concept as a form of anti-racism.

### **The Affordances and Political Culture of 4chan and the YouTube Comment Section**

How and to what extent has the racist framing of migration by the North American “alt-right” come to resonate with the ideas of “cultural” or “civilizational” replacement from the French far-right in poorly moderated online milieus? To explore this question, we begin discussing how the design of 4chan/pol/ and the YouTube comment section afford the expression of extreme ideas, which would otherwise be moderated on YouTube videos as hateful language or “abusive behaviour” (YouTube 2019; 2020). Methodologically, we examine how great replacement and white genocide theories have spread across 4chan and the YouTube comment section, and then use a host of natural language processing techniques to assess the extent to which they converge ideologically.

### Speech affordances in 4chan and the YouTube comment section

Since roughly 2018, a host of social media platforms have taken more resolute measures to hamper the circulation of various kinds of speech that actively “[push] the boundaries of acceptable norms of public culture” (Pohjonen and Udupa 2018, 1174), as with, for example, active content moderation measures against hate speech (YouTube 2019) or “abusive behaviour” (Twitter 2022). One of the most frequently reported by-products of platform moderation is the distribution of content across platforms with varying levels of tolerance for objectionable speech. Through their governance policies and content moderation features, every platform may be understood as effectively affording and licensing certain forms of speech, which in turn provide more or less favourable conditions for the growth of different political cultures. Hateful language tied to pseudo-scientific racist “debates”, as well as conspiratorial narratives linked to COVID-19 or the U.S. elections of 2020, have been reported to migrate to platforms that can afford them, such as free speech-absolutist alternatives like 4chan, Telegram (Rogers 2020), or specific areas of otherwise actively moderated platforms, such as the YouTube comment section.

Indebted to Gibson (J. J. Gibson 2013), the term “affordances” is broadly understood in Science and Technology Studies and social media and platform studies as “what material artefacts such as media technologies allow people to do” (Bucher & Helmond 2017, 3). In our case study, this broad definition can refer to a plethora of platform features that regulate users’ speech, which we name “speech affordances”. These affordances can be “abstract high-level” content moderation policies (A. Gibson 2019) that “enable or constrain [...] communicative habits” (Bucher & Helmond 2017, 12), by, for example, forbidding the usage of specific expressions, words or ideas. There are also feature-oriented “low-level” affordances (ibid), such as reinforcement mechanisms (demotion, deplatforming, reporting, flagging), and more general “platform vernaculars”, such as the implicit rules of anonymity and free speech absolutism that govern 4chan/pol/.

On YouTube, the speech affordances of the comment section are distinct from those of videos. The ways in which YouTube videos are found and recommended on YouTube have, for the past five years, been the target of public criticism for allegedly “radicalizing” its users through personalization features (P. Lewis 2018; Munn 2020), as well as for including a sizable community of far-right or alt-right content (R. Lewis 2018). In response, YouTube has ceased

to rely solely on users to report or “flag” content, enacting instead a series of new measures to remove hate speech, “misleading statements”, and other types of objectionable information (YouTube 2019). These measures are enacted through its content moderation policies, which have since 2019 been repeatedly updated to capture new kinds of hate speech, such as the more conspicuous discriminatory vernaculars of biological or “scientific” racist beliefs (de Keulenaar et al., 2021). It is under the enactment of its hate speech or “abusive behaviour” policies that YouTube has removed thousands of channels and videos tied to far-right extremism in June of 2019 (Waterson 2019), and introduced more sophisticated techniques to downrank or “demote” objectionable videos in search and recommendation results (De Keulenaar et al., 2021).

Despite these changes, the YouTube comment section still bears a reputation for toxicity. As research tends to highlight the generally “uncivil” behaviour in this section of the platform (Alshamrani et al. 2020; Goode et al. 2011), the platform has tested various techniques to address this problem (Alexander 2018). In 2015, it launched a “ranking system” akin to Reddit’s, where comments can be up or downvoted by users or be automatically ranked on top of a comment list if it is posted by someone the video uploader follows (Alexander 2018). With modest results, it tried in 2016 to give more moderation affordances to video uploaders, who were granted the ability to appoint specific moderators, blacklist undesirable slurs, or automatically filter inappropriate content with the assistance of hate speech detection algorithms (Shao et al. 2018, 279). Then, in 2017, creators were allowed to altogether turn off their comment sections in specific videos (Alexander 2018). The problem of toxicity has however persisted, partly because the comment section relies for the most part on users to report inappropriate language, based on the assumption that (human) moderation is best equipped to judge what is and is not permissible in context (Munn 2020, 2).

Previous research has described how YouTube did not prevent comments from expressing conspiratorial narratives linked to COVID-19, despite its “deplatforming” of numerous related videos (de Keulenaar et al. 2021). The same could be hypothesized for conspiracies linked to demographic replacement which, due to their xenophobic, Islamophobic, racist, and antisemitic components, could arguably be classified by YouTube’s hate speech policy as bordering on “conspiracy theories saying individuals or groups are evil, corrupt, or malicious” (YouTube 2020). While a considerable number of channels spreading such conspiracies have been terminated since 2019 (de Keulenaar et al. 2021), comments claiming the veracity of

replacement conspiracies in otherwise “authoritative” content, such as a *Deutsche Welle* feature on migration in Europe, were as of February 2022 still online (DW News 2019).

4chan, on the other hand, is regimented by a largely vernacular speech moderation enacted under a “free speech absolutist” philosophy of public debate (Phillips 2015). Since 2003, the imageboard has been governed by a relatively lax moderation policy, as founder Christopher Poole chose to delegate 4chan’s moderation practices to its own community. 4chan’s high-level “Rules” and a small group of about 20 senior and junior moderators only “provide a general framework” for moderation (Schwartz 2008). Junior moderators, or “janitors”, are tasked with deleting posts and images, or recommending seniors to ban users that violate any of 4chan’s 17 Rules (4chan 2022) – though what gets deleted and why is reportedly up to the volition of a few senior counterparts (Arthur 2020). Since 2016, for example, 4chan’s moderation has reputedly favoured content on the (extreme) right – despite the site officially prohibiting racist content (Arthur 2020).

4chan’s exertion of free speech-friendly moderation policies is especially visible in its communication affordances. The key affordance to facilitate the propagation of racist and otherwise openly transgressive speech is its anonymity: users cannot (and should not, as per 4chan’s policies) reveal their identities. A notable effect of this affordance is the isolation of speech from the moral oversight of public identity, the absence of which facilitates the usage of ambiguous and ironic language typical of “alt-right” communication (Tuters 2019). Similarly, the ephemerality of 4chan board feeds – i.e., the relative speed with which user posts appear and disappear in a feed – is described as a factor in the board’s constant concoction of conspiratorial narratives, by virtue of users weaving arbitrary connections from a stream of unrelated posts (Tuters et al. 2018).

Due in part to these unique affordances, the 4chan/pol site has been the home of many memes, vernaculars, and tropes that have characterised the nascent “alt-right” during the online culture wars of 2015-2018: Pepe the Frog, Kekistan (Tuters 2019), conspiracy theories like *QAnon* (Zeeuw et al. 2020) and Pizzagate (Tuters et al. 2018), as well as various hateful slurs (de Keulenaar et al. 2021; Peeters et al. 2020). Sites like this have also been an important resource for users versed in replacement narratives. In March of 2019, for example, Christchurch terrorist Brendon Tarrant posted a manifesto on 8chan, the sister website of 4chan, entitled *The Great Replacement: We March Ever Forwards*, in which he advocated the use of “edgy humour



and memes in the vanguard stage” of a global war to defend Western culture from Islamic and Jewish influence.

While this kind of extreme speech usually gets removed from social media platforms, we observe that the relatively unmoderated milieus of 4chan/pol and YouTube comments often function as a sort of growth medium for toxic ideas (**Figure 9.1a, 9.1b and 9.1c**). They form a passage through which such ideas may disseminate more or less explicitly across more mainstream (and more moderated) platforms. The language used in each platform may change depending on the amount of moderation in place, with the YouTube comment section being arguably mid-way between the free speech-friendly brand of moderation visible on 4chan/pol/, and the more proactive, human-rights-based philosophy of moderation that regiments YouTube videos. While on 4chan/pol/, replacement narratives may be explicit and mingled with a variety of other extreme ideas (for example scientific racism, as seen in **Figure 9.1c**), on the YouTube comment sections users allude to the great replacement narrative in a more formal, and acceptable, tonality (**Figure 9.1b**). However, searching for videos that mention the great replacement or genocide reveals a much higher degree of moderation: one sees instead a promotion of counter-speech (for example, videos debunking these narratives showing on top of search results) – and videos that were once popular, such as Lauren Southern’s *Great Replacement* (2017), have now been removed or become private (**Figure 9.1a**).

*Figure 9.1a. A simplified diagram showing the effect of speech affordances on the spread of objectionable language across platforms (focus: YouTube videos). Source: authors.*

*Figure 9.1b. A simplified diagram showing the effect of speech affordances on the spread of objectionable language across platforms (focus: YouTube comments). Source: authors, YouTube.*

*Figure 9.1c. A simplified diagram showing the effect of speech affordances on the spread of objectionable language across platforms (focus: 4chan/pol/). Source: authors, 4plebs.*

## **Method**

With such considerations in mind, our method is designed to explore the dissemination of French and US replacement conspiracies across the less moderated spaces of 4chan and the YouTube comment section, and examine the extent to which these relatively distinct narratives

of demographic replacement begin to converge ideologically by virtue of coinciding or “meeting” in the same spaces. In short order, we first collected relevant data from 4chan/pol and YouTube using “white genocide” and “great replacement” in French and English as queries. We then set out to measure the extent to which both concepts are mentioned in the same spaces at similar times, from platforms (4chan, YouTube) to specific comment sections, by using keyword frequencies – that is, we sought to find evidence of *spatial convergence*. Having established that the YouTube comment section is a space where the two concepts converge, we then sought to measure the extent to which they are mentioned by commenters interchangeably – i.e., whether there is evidence of *semantic convergence* – using a host of natural language processing techniques.

*Figure 9.2. Method pipeline. Source: authors.*

### **Data Collection**

Our 4chan data was collected using 4CAT, a data collection and analysis tool (Peeters et al. 2021). 4CAT relies on 4plebs, an online archive of nearly all of 4chan/pol/ from 2013 to the future. We used it to collect all posts that mentioned the queries “white genocide”, “great replacement” or “grand remplacement” (the equivalent in French), in any time period. This resulted in 4,427 posts dating from 2013 to late 2018.

Our YouTube comments originate from an archival dataset compiled by Dimitri Tokmetzis, a Dutch journalist specializing in online political extremism for the Dutch news outlet *De Correspondent* (Tokmetzis 2019). Tokmetzis used the YouTube API v.3 to capture the videos and comments of channels belonging to right-wing European and US political parties, media organizations, NGOs, and think tanks identified on Wikipedia, right-wing extremist forums (4chan/pol/, 8chan), or by academic literature and reports of NGOs such as *HOPE not Hate* and *Kafka* (Kafka 2021). The dataset contains 36,065,106 comments from 175,553 transcribed videos dating from 2006 until the end of 2018, many of which were eventually removed by content moderation (de Keulenaar et al., 2021). To harmonise our 4chan/pol and YouTube datasets, we limited them to posts ranging from 2013 until 2018.

### **Filtering processing**

To verify the prominence and spread of great replacement and white genocide conspiracies across our datasets, we first needed to determine how users phrase these concepts. While some

users may mention “white genocide” or “great replacement” as stand-alone concepts, others may rely on other terms that are synonymous, complementary or vernaculars of the former. Altogether, synonymous, vernacular or complementary expressions constitute a larger lexicon around the concepts of white genocide and great replacement, even when other terms are not intended to mean exactly the same thing as these concepts. The notion of “mass migration”, for example, is used in far more conventional spaces and speech registers than “white genocide” is, but it belongs nevertheless to a broader lexicon that describes, critiques or observes the intersections between migration, politics and identity.

To find synonyms, complementary or vernacular expressions, we first relied on running word2vec (Goldberg & Levy 2014) on both our datasets to find terms synonymous with white genocide and great replacement in French and English. Relevant results included “white erasure” (in French, “*génocide des blancs*”), “Muslim invasion” (“*invasion musulmane*”), “population replacement” and more conventional terms like “mass migration”. Other examples include “hybrid” keywords, i.e., terms that refer both to the great replacement or white genocide conspiracies. Some examples are “Kalgari”, “mass migration”, “demographic replacement” or “dieversity” (a pun on “diversity”), as well as slurs like “race mixer”, “rapefugee” or “Amerimutt”, which refer to both conspiracies in colloquial, Internet slurs (see, with discretion advised, Know Your Meme, 2017; Urban Dictionary, 2023c, 2023b, 2023a for vernacular definitions of each term). The latter vernaculars were selected from a list of racial and other slurs collected from 4chan/pol and Reddit by Peeters et al. (2020).

Our total list of synonymous, complementary or vernacular keywords contained 23 terms (see **Figure 9.2**). This list included 3 terms related to the white genocide conspiracy theory (labelled as “white genocide”), 8 terms related to “great replacement” (2 of which were in French), 5 terms related to either conspiracy (labelled as “hybrid terms”), and 7 terms from Peeters et al.’s (2020) list of slurs (labelled “extreme speech”). Using these keywords to further filter our datasets (particularly our YouTube archive), we narrowed results down to 3,127 4chan posts, 58,387 comments and 2,881 video transcripts. In anticipation of our analyses, we find that it is not specific conspiracies that are most mentioned – with the exception of “white genocide” – but complementary concepts or vernaculars (see **Figure 9.2** below).

*Figure 9.3. List of queries divided by the categories and frequency of resulting 4chan posts, YouTube comments and videos (in the form of video transcripts). Source: authors.*

To find any evidence of ideological convergence between the French and American concepts of demographic replacement, we first needed to establish that they appeared in the same online spaces observed in this study. This was done by counting the number of times any of our 23 keywords were mentioned on 4chan, YouTube videos and YouTube comment sections, using two datasets. To trace the dissemination of the two concepts across platforms, we counted the number of times that 4chan posts, YouTube comments, and YouTube video transcripts mentioned any of twenty keywords related to the great replacement and white genocide queries over time (**Figure 9.4**). We then looked at whether any of these queries were mentioned in the same comment sections of the same YouTube channels (**Figure 9.6**).

Further, we attempted to measure the extent to which YouTube commenters mentioned the great replacement or white genocide conspiracies interchangeably – i.e., whether these two concepts began to converge ideologically. This implied measuring the *semantic* similarity of these concepts in YouTube comments. Technically, this meant finding words synonymous and frequently collocated to any of our 23 keywords, using two natural language processing techniques: word2vec and bigrams. While word2vec works to find words that are semantically similar to a given keyword, bigrams find terms that are frequently mentioned in the same context as these. Results were displayed in a network graph that shows the words that users tend to mention frequently or synonymously to great replacement and white genocide (**Figure 9.7**).

### **The Cross-platform Dissemination of the Great Replacement and White Genocide Conspiracy Theories**

Due to each platform's affordances, we find different levels of conversations around the white genocide and great replacement theories over time (see **Figure 9.4**). On 4chan/pol, white genocide is a concept far more prominent than great replacement, due to the fact that it is an English-speaking and largely American-centric forum. One important exception that illustrates the cross-platform dynamics of semantic diffusion is when mentions of the great replacement increase in June 2017 because Canadian far-right YouTuber, Lauren Southern, posts a video where she extols and explains Renaud Camus' theory in layman's terms. The video generally increases mentions of the latter concept across all platforms.

*Figure 9.4. Number of YouTube comments, videos and 4chan posts that mention “great replacement”, “white genocide”, and related terms, 2008-2019. Source: authors.*

The substance of relevant posts on 4chan/pol on white genocide is primarily antisemitic, racist, and preoccupied with an idea of racial identity, where, in the eyes of users, interracial relations threaten to dissolve the uniqueness of various ethnicities. As an example, we can look at a selection of two images pertaining to two posts with the most engagement, in the form of post replies (see **Figures 9.5a** and **9.5b**). The image on the left includes the antisemitic “Happy Merchant” meme, who in this image grinds individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds into a mass-produced mixed-race “Amerimutt” (see Hagen, 2018). The antisemitic twist of the white genocide narrative may be attributable to the influence of the work of Kevin MacDonald, whose book *Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Political Movements* (2002) is one of the most mentioned references in 4chan/pol/ (de Keulenaar & Kisjes 2019). MacDonald’s antisemitic argument is that Jews use their disproportionate influence as cultural gatekeepers to dilute “white culture”, in an attempt to prevent racially cohesive nations from expelling them.

*Figures 9.5a and 9.5b. The Happy Merchant and Amerimutt memes, and an infographic on the “Kalergi plan” found on 4chan/pol/. Source: 4chan/pol/.*

YouTube’s speech affordances arguably bore an impact on the kinds of language being circulated around the white genocide and great replacement conspiracies. Despite not having been as actively moderated as it is in 2013, YouTube videos were by 2017 already subject to demonetization practices, if found to have uttered language not friendly to advertisers (Dunphy 2017). This may be one of the reasons why conventional words such as “mass migration” were more prominent than “white genocide” or “great replacement”. At first sight, this may suggest that more extreme variants of concepts may be expressed in the comment sections and are otherwise concealed by the more polished language of video uploaders (for an example, see de Keulenaar et al. 2021). Still, mentions of “white genocide” did at times exceed that of more conventional terms like “mass migration”. One such instance was in June 2018, when Donald Trump echoed Tucker Carlson in claiming that “white farmers” in South Africa were victims of “land seizure” and “large-scale killing” (Wilson, 2018).

In contrast, YouTube comments – with comparatively less content moderation – contained far more mentions of white genocide, extreme speech, and mentions of the great replacement. There, we find evidence that the white genocide and great replacement conspiracies are mentioned in similar frequencies, at the same times, and, as well find later, in the same channels and comment sections (see **Figures 9.6** and **9.7**). Frequent mentions of the “Kalergi plan”, in particular, are in themselves evidence of convergence between the white genocide and great replacement theories. The “Kalergi plan” evokes *both* the question of a systematic invasion of European lands via mass migration, and of the replacement of a specific demographic rather than culture. It alleges that the European Union is a Jewish and Bolshevik project to “undermine the white race through mass immigration” (Orofino et al. 2023, 252; see also **Figure 9.5b**). Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972) was an early advocate of European unification and founding president of the Paneuropean Union, an organization opposed by Nazis on the basis that it was allegedly under the control of Freemasonry. In the early 2010s, a conspiracy theory developed in the far-right concerning the “Kalergi Plan”, accusing the European Union of conspiring to intentionally encourage mass immigration into Europe in order to replace its original population. This theory was even aired within the European Parliament, in a speech in which the British National Party MEP Nick Griffin referred to Kalergi as the “godfather of the European Union” and spoke of Kalergi’s plan as the “biggest genocide in human history” and a “breeding-out” of “indigenous Europeans” via “the encouragement of mass non-white immigration” (Thorpe 2018, 227).

When looking closer at how the great replacement and white genocide conspiracies converge in comment sections, we find that these concepts coalesce in videos by a handful of English and North American far-right YouTubers preoccupied by both American and European affairs: Tommy Robinson, Stefan Molyneux, Millennial Woes, Lauren Southern and Paul Joseph Watson (highlighted in red in **Figure 9.6**). These channels, particularly Lauren Southern, arguably act as “bridges” for the “great replacement” and “white genocide” conspiracies, as she introduced the French theory to her largely American and English-speaking audiences. Another factor is that most of these YouTubers partook in a broader effort to “internationalize” the American and European far-right through debates on issues common to both continents, particularly migration (HOPE not Hate 2018). Some far-right European politicians in Hungary, Italy, and the Netherlands have since been heard echoing such ideas more or less implicitly through an understanding that migration causes European culture to “dilute”, i.e., to lose its “purity”, through interracial relations and multiculturalism (Kaval 2023; Peacock 2017; Walker & Garamvolgyi 2022).

On the other hand, we also find evidence of comments where “great replacement” and “white genocide” are distinct. This is the case in comments under videos by channels of European political parties or movements, like the Irish branch of the originally French *Génération Identitaire* (in yellow). Dissolved in 2021, *Génération Identitaire* pruned a form of identity based on culture and “ethnicity” rather than “race”, particularly under the guise of “ethno-differentialism” as opposed to racial superiority (Spektorowski 2003). The same can be said about the term “white genocide”, which is mentioned in comment sections of a majority of North American or British channels (in green).

*Figure 9.6. Channel comment sections where users commonly mention “white genocide”, “great replacement” and related terms. Edges in green represent comments that only mention “white genocide”; in red are those that mention both “white genocide” and “great replacement”; and in orange those that only mention “great replacement”. Source: authors.*

Looking closely at terms mentioned by commenters that refer to “great replacement” and “white genocide”, we find that the two conspiracies converge around equivalences of “Europeans” as “ethnicities” or “whites”. Words mentioned in combination with both concepts include allusions to a given culture (“Western”, “European”), race (“whites”, “ethnic”), reproduction (“women”, “children”) and government conspiracies (“left”, “plan”, “real”).

A slight distinction should be made with comments in French, which allude not to race but to ethnicity (“*épuración ethnique*”, “*asiatiques*”, “*congolais*”, “*blanches*”) and culture (“*paganisme*”, “*occidentale*”). Content in French bears little connection to that in English, and that words like “white genocide” and “great replacement” only converge around English-speaking conversations. In this sense, we deduce here that convergences between “white genocide” and “great replacement” mostly occur in English-speaking comment spaces, where we see equivalences between the concept of “white” and “European”.

*Figure 9.7. Terms frequently mentioned next to “great replacement”, “white genocide” and related keywords in YouTube comments. Source: authors.*

### **Conclusion: Countering Mainstreaming**

As the French philosopher and commentator on the French New Right Pierre-André Taguieff argues, the primary “ideological achievement” of the French New Right has been the “reformulation of ‘racism’ in the vocabulary of difference” (Taguieff 2001, 5). On the right, this strategy has had the effect of seeming to undermine the arguments of anti-racist activism, which is mocked for sometimes inaccurately mistaking newer “alternative” forms of right-wing Western supremacy with old-fashioned biological racism. In fact, it is crucial that to moderate whichever of these ideological traditions out of the public sphere, one needs to discern these narratives and their intellectual history, even in the most general forms of counter-speech. The resurgence of these narratives takes place in a moment of significant transformation of deeply contentious concepts (“race”, “ethnicity”, and “heritage”) whose meaning, if conflated, continues to fuel the deeply problematic aspects of racial political language in Europe – a continent that has formed anti-discriminatory ideas and traditions distinct from that of the United States.

The media theorist Neil Postman described a medium as “a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture’s politics, social organisation, and habitual ways of thinking” (Postman 2000, 10). If we apply Postman’s biological metaphor to our empirical analysis, it would appear that the speech affordances of 4chan/pol/ and YouTube comments constituted a hospitable environment for a variety of racist discourses that would be otherwise distinct. This becomes even more urgent with the convergence of politically extreme content in the poorly moderated “fringe” spaces of public debates, such as 4chan, the YouTube comment section and various alternative (“alt-tech”) platforms that seek to operate as “counter”



public spheres. We note how the convergence of the white genocide and great replacement concepts functions on the basis of specific speech affordances. In studying them, we observe how extreme speech is not necessarily concentrated in a handful of extreme forums like 4chan/pol, but *distributed* as more-or-less explicit language in more-or-less moderated public spheres. This poses a problem for counter-speech and speech moderation as strategies whose fundamental goal is to demote extreme language out of the public sphere in order to facilitate long-term social change. To what extent does “deplatforming” an extreme idea guarantee that it is no longer thought, or felt? To a lesser extent, perhaps, insofar as long as speech moderation focuses merely on the surface of public debate – be it mainstream social media platforms rather than the whole of social media ecology, or the personal aesthetics of political ideas rather than their substance.

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