

# Reactionary sensemaking: Mapping the micropolitics of online oppositional subcultures

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## Abstract

Internet memes used to be funny, but somewhere in the mid-2010's, a darker dimension surfaced. This editorial explores this 'reactionary turn' in digital culture through a collection of articles and commentaries on 'the micropolitics of online oppositional subcultures'. In the special theme, these range from commentaries on how misogyny and hate speech exploit platform affordances to articles tracing the growth and spread of arcane memes and anti-vaccine discourse on Reddit and Telegram. While these phenomena might elsewhere be labeled as instances of misinformation, the editorial frames them in terms of 'reactionary sensemaking', in which digital subcultures form communities in reaction to a perceived loss of meaning and out of a shared antipathy to 'mainstream' culture. Methodologically, the editorial situates these studies in terms of a broader 'micropolitical' research tradition that extends from Latour and Deleuze back to Tarde.

## Keywords

reactionary digital politics, internet memes, quali-quantitative methods, micropolitics, anti-publics, Gabriele Tarde

This article is a part of special theme on Micropolitics of Online Subcultures. To see a full list of all articles in this special theme, please click here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/page/bds/collections/micropoliticsonlinecultures>

## Introduction

Internet memes used to be funny. We might remember those early memes as inconsequential puns; witty captions on pictures of cats; shared clips of Hollywood actors and Internet personalities; inside jokes with intentional misspelling and cringy associations that dug into the profound superficiality of the Internet. At worst, Internet humor took the form of ironic pranks by the extremely online, targeted at the gentrifiers of the newly ascendant platform economy (Lingel, 2021). To be sure, the Internet has always been full of monsters and grifters as much as wholesome, progressive and liberatory ideas and structures (Tarnoff, 2022). However, somewhere in the mid-2010's, the general public encountered a darker dimension, coincident with the arrival of what many have termed the "disinformation age" (Bennett and Livingston, 2020). In the last half decade and accelerating with the COVID-19 pandemic, the intersection of fields that collectively compose 'Internet research' has become

increasingly concerned with the mainstreaming of 'fringe' online subcultures, who are typically but not always politically aligned with the far-right (e.g., Solea and Sugiura, 2023).

In an effort to make sense of the supposed fragmented public spheres of today's 'disrupted democracies', scholars

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have struggled with the limitations of the twentieth century toolkit of political mass communication theory (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). An example might be the notion of ‘propaganda’ or even certain definitions of ‘fascism’ that are more descriptive than explanatory, or that provide models of recruitment and messaging that are too linear and simplistic. About a century past the invention of television, we face another point of transformation in how we understand the public sphere. Arguably, we seem to have moved from the ascent of the distributed ‘networked public’ (boyd, 2010; Varnelis, 2008) to that of the disruptive ‘anti-public’ (Davis, 2021). The ‘anti-public’ describes a widespread project of reactionary restoration, which is becoming “increasingly normalized and indeed normative” (Mondon and Winter, 2020: 146). These processes of fragmentation and normalization “reframe conceptions of publicity itself” and create the need for new frameworks to map not only its disjointedness, but also its productive tensions (Ibid).

This special theme centers on the concept of *reactionary sensemaking*. This concept builds from Alan Finlayson’s notion of ‘reactionary digital politics’ as a new kind of political relationship emerging “at the confluence of ideology and the affordances of the technology” (2023: 39), and also from the concept of ‘sensemaking’, where a set of practical reactions form in response to a sudden loss of meaning, or a ‘cosmology episode’ (Weick, 1985: 51). Consider, for example, how the intricate set of conspiracy theories known as QAnon initially emerged from a collective process of ‘weaving’ together nuggets of arcana that had mysteriously been ‘dropped’ into the politically-fringe message boards of 4chan (Tuters, 2020). QAnon not only garnered attention and subtle approval from the 45th president of the U.S., but it was effectively merged with the interests of a large segment of the Republican party and otherwise ‘everyday individuals’, who were not previously active in extreme political groups (Pape and Ruby, 2021). Ultimately, QAnon’s project of alternative sensemaking helped propel unfounded claims of voter fraud into wide-spread public discourse, made such claims conceivable, and ultimately helped construct the ontological threat that motivated the unprecedented siege on the U.S. capitol on January 6th 2021 (Rubin and Steakin, 2021). Corporate social media platforms played a central role here, in helping to produce a new form of oppositional politics at once conspiratorial and mainstream, fringe and quotidian (Devries, 2023). At a minimum, these developments have led scholars to question the presumption that had long identified participatory media with progressive activism (Marwick and Partin, 2022). In other words, we support the observation that digital subcultural practice increasingly affords the merger of fringe and mainstream cultural politics, and that concepts centered on ‘legacy media’ leave us ill-equipped to make sense of new and radically different forms of sensemaking, including the apparent paradox of “meaningful misinformation” (Bastos and Tuters, 2023).

In an effort to confront this impasse, unpack its paradoxes, and suggest new modalities, this special theme gathers the work of Internet researchers working at the cross section of far-right studies, platform studies and digital methods. The issue brings together a collection of papers and commentaries that pay attention to networked and micro-processes. Importantly, this creates room for both quantitative and qualitative studies that dissect those relational processes that, while situated within self-proclaimed ‘oppositional’ political subcultures, maintain existing networks of asymmetric power and thereby social dominance. While drawing on different resources, the contributions in this issue are united by a shared cartographic sensibility towards reactionary subcultural sensemaking online. This mapping takes widely different forms, from tracing the circulation and mutation of transgressive memes to plumbing the depths of comment sections.

Underpinning each of these studies is a post-critical commitment to combining big data empiricism with theoretically wrought cultural inquiry. The contributions to this special theme reflect this commitment in different ways. For example, Ann-Kathrin Rothermel looks at how the ‘manosphere’ misuses data to appeal to a baseline misogyny in mainstream society, while Luke Munn’s contribution looks at the difference between the ‘soft surface’ and the ‘sub level’ of the vitriol that percolates in the comment sections of reactionary influencers. In a complementary fashion, Emillie de Keulenaar, Rob Topinka and Rob Gallagher, and Sal Hagen and Daniël de Zeeuw differently examine how ironic memes afford connections between different online communities and spaces, shedding light on how that dynamic has tended to benefit the far right. Finally, Eduardo Paz Díaz and Paola Ricaurte Quijano study the construction of multimodal, transmedia, and fragmented oppositional narratives in light of processes of collective meaning-making on Telegram. Considered together, these articles share the objective of tracing the topologies of subcultural practices and relations that, while dwelling in obscure places, inevitably link up with more mainstream dynamics. In what follows below, we reflect on some of the key terms in the title of this special theme, before contextualizing the various contributions its articles contain.

### Mapping

While ‘mapping’ is a common metaphor for offering context amongst humanities scholars, it has a more literal meaning here, insofar as it refers to data visualization techniques used amongst scholars working at the intersection of the ‘quali-quantitative’ (Venturini, 2024). This approach can be seen as responding to Bruno Latour’s argument that contemporary digital mapping technologies portend the possibility of a whole new way of thinking of space and of location, one that ‘bears almost no resemblance with what was called “territory” before’ (November et al.,

2010: 585). Seen from this perspective, these new digital territories are more akin to the bio-semiotic environment-worlds of ethology, in which affordances crash into each other and in their rupture produce new ways of being. If traditional cartography has generally sought to represent the real from a god's eye view, these new digital mapping practices aim to trace the contingent and highly localized practice of these multiple and incommensurable 'many ways of life' (Gibson, 1986: 128) from a micro-local point of view. We theorize that this might allow us to better identify and track those relations wherein such worlds are further stabilized.

### *Micropolitics*

Although less familiar, the term 'micropolitics' can also be identified with a cross-section of scholarship, which seeks to ground theoretical speculation in empiricism. At its core, the concept of micropolitics refers to Gabriele Tarde's 'infinitesimal revolution' in methods (Tonkonoff, 2017), which conceives of the social as an infinite array of local practices of imitation (Latour and Lépinay, 2009; Lazzarato, 2002). Broadly speaking, Tarde's conception contrasts with a Durkheimian approach that would see society as an emergent whole larger than the sum of its parts. Instead, Tarde marks those sets of relations as what composes society. Given their capacity to make these relations visible, big data methods present the possibility of investigating these long overlooked, material, formative relations (Latour et al., 2012). Accordingly, this special theme means to orient itself towards heuristics in order to understand oppositional subcultures in ways that involve both quantitative and qualitative observations. When paired, these methods get us closer to identifying and dissecting the complicated relational processes that generate subcultural worlds (Devries, 2023).

Crucially, rather than size or scale, the concept of micropolitics should be understood as primarily referring to dynamics of organization and of movement, or what Deleuze and Guattari referred to as 'lines of flight'. From the latter perspective, all societies can be defined by their lines of flight, with modern societies tending to be more rigid than fluid (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 237). This post-structural perspective has tended to focus on the fluid 'rhizomatic' tactics of the margins. This is important since online networks do not resemble hierarchical trees, but rather chaotic rhizomes: a system of subterranean roots connecting in all directions and through multiple shortcuts. This nonlinear and nonhierarchical relational structure means that the fringes of the Internet are never far away from its core, and marginal ideas can in fact very easily suddenly find centrality, prompting the emergence of creative subcultural techniques and vernaculars that appeal both to concepts of normality and victimhood to assert their credibility. For example, in her contributions

to this special theme, Rothermel introduces the concept of 'evidence-based' misogyny — a label for the discursive strategy by which manosphere communities frame news stories, scientific, or statistical data in ways that mimic accepted methods of knowledge presentation. Here, it seems that critiques of the hegemony of 'the mainstream media' have been firmly claimed by the political right, who loudly position themselves as underrepresented and revolutionary (Griffin, 2018). We see something like this at work in de Keulenaar's commentary on the 'oppressed nation of Kekistan' as well as in the anti-vaccine narratives discussed by Díaz and Quijano. At the same time, as the article by Hagen and de Zeeuw on the slang term 'based' shows, these dynamics are also sometimes not so ideologically clear cut.

## **Overview of contributions**

### *Micro-tactics*

In focusing on micropolitics and the subcultural arrangements they generate, the contributions of this special theme draw our attention not to the grand structures of power held by corporate Internet organizations, but to the practical, if small, subcultural tactics that formulate political struggles and create pathways for participation. Notably, study of the structural effects of large organizations is important, given how they have turned the Internet dream from that of a distributed library (Berners-Lee et al., 1992) to that of a capitalist market for attention (Terranova, 2012) and surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). However, it is equally important not to downplay the agency of Internet users and their relations with technology in their own formulation of and experience with alternative political worlds (Devries et al., 2021). Humans are not platform dopes any more than they are cultural dopes (Lynch, 2012) and focusing only on digital infrastructures (Plantin et al., 2018) conceals the capacity of their users to exploit them in widely different ways that are, in the end, the mechanics behind users' political conviction (Devries, 2023). This is why this special theme and its contributions encourage more attentive investigation of the micro-tactics of online oppositional subcultures, and of how these micro-tactics interact with the larger architecture of media systems.

Everyday actions such as editing an image, stitching a video, embroidering on an existing joke can have profound political consequences (Devries, 2021), especially when they are repeated by thousands of Internet users or suddenly promoted to the attention of millions. These actions (especially when latching onto the momentum of 'reaction') can both reflect, afford, and inevitably reproduce core features of fascist worlds, in particular the naturalization of hierarchy and subsequent entitlement to domination. We might call these processes *digital microfascism*, after Jack Bratich's (2022) microfascism. Digital microfascism is dangerous not in spite of but precisely because it manifests in the most mundane forms of culture. As Bratich notes

(2022: 5), rather than being ‘apolitical’, culture is the domain of ‘micropolitics’; in contrast to the typical far-right strategic notion (Hawley, 2019), culture is here downstream from politics. We see this in Rothermel, de Keulenaar, and Munn’s articles, which together speak to the affordances of hate speech and its tactics of respectability. While reactionary free speech is as old as the Internet (Reagle, 2015), what is new is the scalability, or the free reach, afforded *by* today’s social platforms *to* digital microfascists — as the 4chan saying goes: ‘none of us is as cruel as all of us’.

### ‘Layered’ readings

As the contributions to this issue show, understanding these dynamics requires working across scales. Exemplary here is Eduardo Paz Díaz and Paola Ricaurte Quijano’s use of the concept of transmedia worldbuilding, in their study of anti-vaccine movements on Latin American Telegram, which shows how filaments connect the most local and particular instances to the aggregate, and the most erratic acts of memetic innovation to those larger infrastructures and abstractions that envelop them. The other articles in this issue are similarly interested in how such filaments connect and scale otherwise insular concatenations of weird sociality that would be impossible to register from either exclusively micrological or macrological frameworks. They juggle the close reading of the micro-practices of ‘repetition-with-variation’ (Hagen and Venturini, 2023) taking place within the borders of oppositional subcultures and the macro-dynamics that they engender through their interplay with digital infrastructures.

Overall, our goal was for the papers in this issue to contribute to methodological advances for the empirical identification, analysis, and interpretation of micro-scale processual phenomena in the otherwise ‘Big Data environment’ of social media. These methodological contributions might also be called a layered reading of social media texts (in the broadest sense), whereby different approaches are fielded to arrive at ever more complicated levels of interpretation. This implies a new division of labor between methods and techniques, where computational methods that identify patterns at large scale are paired with interpretative and/or immersive approaches that can better get at the quality of these culturally formative relations. Finding fruitful configurations between these two modes of reading can be challenging, yet it is also a requirement of a more thorough understanding of these processual, multi-faceted and widely scaled political phenomena. In terms of methods, the paper by Gallagher and Topinka engages directly with combining ‘distant’ and ‘close’ reading. Likewise, Hagen and De Zeeuw present a quali-quantitative, cross-platform analysis; co-word analysis and contextual analysis (at scale). In a similar vein, de Keulenaar approaches questions of semantics via word2vec, comparing the different contexts in which ‘Kekistan’ is used and the different meanings that

accrue within those contexts. On a higher, epistemological level, this goes to the question of ‘evidence’, which is reflected in the paper by Rothermel. On a conceptual level, this stratified approach is fleshed out in the contribution by Munn, who demonstrates that social media can be marked by ‘surface’ hate (i.e., ‘moderate content that is highly visible and easily accessible’), and ‘sublevel’ hate (‘explicit content that is more marginal and less discernible’).

### Affordances

An important topic across this special theme is its attention to relational dynamics, by which we understand subcultural practices and their practical environments as dually informed and dialectical. To that end, our theoretical intentions broadly build on J.J. Gibson’s concept of affordances, also a relational concept. Although it has become relatively commonplace across a range of fields, notably human computer interaction design, the concept of ‘affordance’ is also a ‘deceptively complex notion’ with ‘profound existential stakes’ for the ways that it marks the precarious position of some oppositional communities and technologies to shift towards anti-democratic politics or antisociality altogether (Busbea, 2020). In de Keulenaar’s and Munn’s commentaries, we see how the affordances of lightly moderated comment spaces function as a figurative ‘growth medium’ for kinds of speech that are at once ‘extreme’ yet also ‘ironic’. Relatedly, in both Topinka and Gallagher’s as well as Hagen and de Zeeuw’s piece, shared affordances create connections for language games between and across different digital milieus. Importantly, what we also learn from these same pieces is how the ‘meanings’ of these subcultural practices cannot and should not be generalized across these changing contexts.

The process of ‘creating ambiguities’ and ‘spreading images, apparently without purpose’ has been theorized as ‘pre-propaganda’, a bottom-up precursor to propaganda which in effect prepares the ground for the latter (Ellul, 1965: 15). The papers in this issue illustrate how the strategic as well as the unintentional exploitation of ambiguity can advance reactionary political agendas. Importantly, affordance theory’s relational orientation allows scholars to empirically trace how ambiguous micropolitics can congeal into dangerous movements and insidious political trends. If, as Alan Finlayson argues, ‘digital spaces are the primary terrain of ideological contestation today’ (2023: 44), then we hope these papers may offer readers a map by which to navigate this contested terrain and to observe it in the making.

### Overview of this special theme on oppositional subcultures

This special theme focuses on what we can loosely consider the political ‘fringes’ of the Internet. In particular, it

investigates how these fringes become habitats for a thriving diversity of reactionary ‘anti-publics’. Such anti-publics now compose a series of political subcultures that, far from embracing the progressive and liberal ideas commonly associated with the Internet utopias, have developed and promoted ultraconservative ideologies that carry forward and normalize entitlement to domination. We believe that as repellent and absurd as one may find them, these reactionary subcultures demand scholarly attention. While important, moral condemnation is not enough to counter these ideas; they need instead to be theoretically unfolded and empirically surveyed. Scrutinizing different case studies with different methodological approaches and conceptual frameworks, the contributions to this special theme are all exercises in this political micro-mapping. By analyzing qualitative and quantitative data about online oppositional subcultures, they inquire into the apparently minor practices and tactics employed by these communities. By focusing on these micropolitics, this theme hopes to shift some attention from the grand strategies and structures of power enacted by large Internet organizations and corporations to the scale of what we have called the micropolitical. This does not mean, to be sure, that we intend to leave online platforms and their algorithmic infrastructures off the hook from critical analysis. Through a layered reading, the papers gathered on this theme combine the observation of minute forms of online fanaticism with the interrogation of the economic and technological macrostructures that empower them. It is through such an empirical and painstakingly attentive venture that, we believe, we can advance further in our collective development of effective countermeasures against digital microfascism.


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