



When logics of party politics and online activism collide: The populist Finns Party's identity under negotiation

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Abstract

This article portrays the relationship of populist parties, far-right online action and journalistic media by analysing the consequences of a Finnish populist party mobilizing resources created in an online community of anti-immigration activists. How have the traditionally centre-left-populist *Finns Party's* attempts of utilizing the far-right-leaning online network *Hommaforum* contributed to the mediated negotiation over the party's identity? The study analyses discursive exchanges between Finnish political journalists, the party leader Timo Soini and Hommaforum activists pertaining to the party's affiliation with racism and extremism during 2008–2015. As a case study, the article discusses the implications of online action diffusing into institutionalized politics and the public sphere. The study suggests that due to the inherent publicness, connective nature and political smearing-applicability of controversial online action, the mobilization of online resources forces traditional organizations to use considerable communicative resources to compensate for the loss of centralized control over communicating party identity.

Keywords

Activism, communication, far-right, identity, Internet, journalism, mobilization, normalization, parties, populism

Introduction

European nationalist-populist parties with considerably hard stances on immigration have enjoyed significant boosts in electoral support in the last decade. As representative democracy faces increasing critique for not being appealing enough to entice citizenry, populist parties have managed to tap into people's disappointment with established party politics by catering to a wide array of grievances and by relying on a confrontational differentiation between a vaguely defined 'people' and the 'elite'

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(Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007; Pelinka, 2013). When people are not able to find meaningful political identification from established political parties, they have been observed to seek it elsewhere – not only from anti-establishment populist parties but also from contentious politics and online action (Dahlgren, 2013; Mair, 2013; Schedler, 1996). During a time when more well-established traditional political parties are experiencing increasing difficulties in securing constituencies (Kölln, 2014; Scarrow, 2014), resources accumulated in emerging online networks of politically passionate and motivated people are becoming consequently more valuable and ‘revitalizing’ for party and campaign organizations (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016).

The latest rise of European right-wing populism has coincided with the birth and growth of online far-right civic activism. The online platform *Aypixlat* in Sweden, *Hommaforum* in Finland, the *Pegida* and *Britain First* movements on Facebook and the *Gates of Vienna* communities both in America and in Europe are all examples of how the Internet has provided both the far-right and more moderate citizens sympathetic to stricter immigration policies new means of political participation (Archer, 2013; Dostal, 2015; Ekman, 2015; Horsti and Nikunen, 2013). In order to sustain effective action, political parties need assets such as social networks, resonant frames, believable candidates, and professional people to volunteer and work within the organization (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 751). Online environments provide populist parties with potential channels for connecting and mobilizing networks of voters (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016: 12–13), who regard immigration as a grievance – but as argued in this article, the provocative characteristics of anti-immigration activism also pose significant challenges for centralized party communications and public relations.

This study analyses the role of emergent online activism in the negotiation over the acceptability and normalization of far-right populism in the public sphere. What kind of mediated conflicts related to the communication of identity can arise when a traditional party organization tries to utilize resources produced within a highly controversial digitally networked civic movement? How are these conflicts reconciled and with what kinds of consequences? The questions are approached in the context of a Finnish populist party mobilizing an online network of anti-immigration activists. In the late 2000s, the Finns Party, a smallish nationalist-populist party with a centre-leftist rural tradition, started to grant candidacies to people who were active on the online immigration discussion board *Hommaforum*. The cooperation not only granted the party much needed votes and resources but also escalated journalistic scrutiny of the party’s association with prejudice and racism. The article portrays how the mediated criticism of the Finns party’s affiliation with online racism has forced the party leadership to ambivalent brokering of differences between the wider anti-racist public and the issue-driven online public – causing both the party organization and individual participants on *Hommaforum* to reconsider and adjust their political loyalties and core identities. The aim of the study is to encourage discussion on the implications of individualized online action becoming diffused into the institutional sphere of mediatized politics.

Rise of populism, new media and the intertwining logics of political participation

Populist parties – like any new political forces wishing to gain legitimacy in a party system – have to undergo a series of discursive negotiations over their role and place in society. The disparity between right-wing populist parties’ perceived goals and what is

regarded as acceptable in Western parliamentary democracies is the main reason why the populists' relationship with the mainstream media and other parliamentary parties is often riddled with suspicion (Schedler, 1996: 303–304; Stewart et al., 2003). The mainstream media have been regarded to both benefit and hinder populist parties' chances of success. Populist parties have been regarded to benefit from the increased legitimacy and issue salience provided by the free publicity of journalistic attention (Biorcio, 2003: 83–84; Boomgard and Vliegthart, 2007; Plasser and Ulram, 2003; Wodak, 2013, 32–33). Also, the populists' strategies of provoking the media into prolonged coverage of their scandalous actions can be regarded to grant them agenda-setting and framing power by providing visibility and political weight (Wodak, 2013: 32, 2015: 19–20). Additionally, some media's overtly critical view on politics and the political establishment has been claimed to fuel the appeal of populist parties' grievance-driven rhetoric (Birenbaum and Villa, 2003: 50–51). On the other hand, in some cases, the mainstream media have been noted to provide the parties with insufficient or negatively biased publicity (Horsfield and Stewart, 2003; Jenkins, 2003) and to even intentionally boycott them (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010; Oja and Mral, 2013).

The latest rise of far-right and nationalist populism has no single causal explanation. On the other hand, it can be regarded as a reaction to globalization and to the increase of immigration and ethnic variance in European societies (Forsberg and Raunio, 2014). Also, it could be partially explained by economic crises that have decreased living standards, made the work-market more precarious and provided populist movements discursive windows of opportunity (Jupskås, 2015: 23; Taggart, 2004: 275). Also, the diminishing of traditional mechanisms of political identification has played a significant role in the newest rise of populist movements. Collective group identities based on, for example, social class, race, religion and gender have given way for more individualized political identification – driven by fundamental changes in industry and commerce, rising levels of education and personal income, opening of both national and symbolic borders, not to forget the profound changes in digital communication technologies (Castells, 2009; Howard, 2011: 69; Rinne, 2011).

Online environments' potential for political organization and identity negotiation has encouraged researchers to acknowledge that the workings of individuals' networked aggregation have noteworthy implications for the distribution of power in society (Castells, 2009; Chadwick, 2013). Some of the political implications of online action have been academically characterized, for example, by Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) 'connective action', Rainie and Wellman's (2014) 'networked individuals' and Jeffrey Juris' (2012) 'crowds of individuals'. The terms refer to the phenomenon of the web enabling people interested in the same topics to meet each other, make like-minded new contacts, organize action and most importantly deliberate on the definitions and arguments about political phenomena in ways that create a personalized basis and motivation for political participation. Michel Micheletti (2003: 25–34) has described self-produced and self-initiated action where individuals participate in non-institutionalized political action regarding topics they have personal interest in as 'individualized collective action'. Individualized collective action takes place in arenas that the participants find appropriate and fitting for their goals – and in recent years, scholarly interest has become more focused on the manifestations of individualized collective action on various social media. Scholars have been especially interested in the online promotion of grassroots political action, and to what extent online persuasions have been successful in increasing different movements' and

protests mobilizations' political impact and salience (see, for example, Bennett and Segerberg, 2011, 2013; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Horsti and Nikunen, 2013).

Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012, 2013) have presented the idea that digital communication technologies have provided not only new tools for political organization, but a whole new logic to political identity formation and group formation. Opposed to traditional *collective action*, *connective action* does not have a central organization or an ideological core which could be said to be controlling the movement. Connective action networks rely on self-motivated sharing of personalized ideas, plans, images and resources in online social networks such as blogs, discussion forums, Facebook or Twitter. In *connective logic*, taking public action or contributing to a cause is not an expression of pre-existing collective political identities, but an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions within an online community (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 752–753). In her work on protest movements and their digital support (or 'cloud protesting'), Stefania Milan (2015) has presented the notion that the inherent visibility and publicity of online action might have consequences for the internal and external dynamics of social movements. As online action movements and political parties are organizationally different and operate under differing underlying logics, the partisan utilization of provocative online communities' resources is likely to result in conflict in highly mediated political settings.

Despite online movements being highly salient on research agendas, there has been little research on the interrelations and discursive dynamics of online movements, more traditional political organizations and the media (e.g. Dencik, 2015; Milan, 2015; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016). Research on populist parties and movements has focused especially populist actors' ideology and rhetoric especially based on analyses of parliamentary debates (e.g. Rooyackers and Verkuyten, 2012; Verkuyten, 2013), party platforms (e.g. Ruostetsaari, 2011), media appearances (e.g. Niemi, 2012), the parties' media representations (e.g. Hatakka, 2012; Herkman, 2015) and – more recently – online texts (e.g. Ekman, 2015; Sakki and Pettersson, 2015). No research – to our knowledge – has been carried out on the mediated repercussions of traditional populist party organizations adopting more extreme online anti-immigration activist networks.

Analysing the mediated reactions and counter reactions to the diffusion of emergent far-right online movements into parliamentary systems (via political parties) provides a means for trying to better understand online political participation and the discursive processes relevant to the normalization of far-right populism. In the context of European populism, the term 'normalization' has been used mostly when discussing the process in which nationalist-populist and anti-immigration rhetoric and extremist ideas are gradually becoming more salient and accepted (Berezin, 2013; Kallis, 2013: 57; Oudenampsen, 2013: 192). In some studies, normalization has been used to describe the different steps populist parties have taken in order to rid themselves of their extremist baggage (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010; Rydgren, 2002, 2005). In this article, the normalization of far-right populism is regarded as a discursive communication process involving the reactions and counter-reactions of the core party organization, the party's supporters, journalists and the general public. The public negotiation over the legitimacy of the far-right aims at defining populist parties' identities: what are the parties and their ideological factions ideologically composed of, how do they wish to change society, what kind of values and worldviews do they represent and, most importantly, should they become accepted as legitimate players in representative politics. This article participates in the discussion by asking, how have

the traditionally centre-left-populist Finns Party's attempts of utilizing the right-wing anti-immigration network Hommaforum contributed to the mediated negotiation over the party's identity and affiliation with racism?

The Finns Party and Hommaforum

The Finns Party was founded in 1995 on the ruins of Finnish Rural Party. The party's roots lie in the socio-economically centre-leftist tradition of Finnish agrarian populism with anti-elitist and conservative – but not far-right – emphases (Arter, 2010; Ruostetsaari, 2011). The Finns' only party leader, Timo Soini, is the prime example of the Rural Party's hereditary advocacy of the 'forgotten people' and the 'common man' (Raunio, 2013). The party has emphasized the protection of national culture and the preservation of a unique 'Finnishness' (Arter, 2010; Jungar, 2016; Ruostetsaari, 2011), but the party leader has prioritized European Union (EU) criticism and general anti-elitist rhetoric over portraying immigration as a threat (Niemi, 2012).

In general, Finnish immigration policy has historically been very consensual and the topic didn't become properly politicized until the late 2000s (Hannula, 2011; Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Puuronen, 2011). The very first time the Finns Party managed to gather a significant amount of anti-immigration votes was in 2003, when the party signed up an ex-boxer and show-wrestler Tony Halme to successfully run for national parliament. Apart from Halme's popularity and salience in the media (Koivu et al., 2004), immigration issues received minor attention in the party's programmes until the 2007 and especially the 2011 parliamentary elections (Elmgren, 2015; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2015; Raunio, 2013; Välimäki, 2012). After modest victories in the 2008 communal and 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections, the party consolidated its position in 2011 as one of the most popular parties in Finland, and after the 2015 parliamentary elections joined a coalition government with the Centre Party and the Coalition Party.

During the past decade, the Finns party has gradually gained ideological characteristics that have made it more similar to other European radical-right parties (Jungar, 2016). This can partially be explained by its cooperation with Finnish online anti-immigration advocacy exemplified by Hommaforum. Homma is a website and a discussion platform intended for open discussion on problems related to immigration policy and multiculturalism. According to the forum's founder Matias Turkkila (2009), 'Homma is a politically non-aligned, immigration-critical social movement of enlightened and concerned citizens'. The forum originally formed in 2008 around the blog of Jussi Halla-aho, a Finnish linguistics scholar and fervent online 'critic of immigration', who had familiarized himself with anti-multiculturalism on English-language forums predating Hommaforum. After its founding, the forum has accumulated on average 2000 new members, 8500 new discussion threads and 300,000 new posts per year (Hommaforum, 2015). Preceding the Finns Party's breakthrough, the party started to cooperate with Halla-aho and other individuals close to Homma in 2008 by granting them communal election candidacies, grooming them for parliamentary elections and allowing them to participate in the drafting of the party's policy papers related to immigration (Hannula, 2011).

Hommaforum's online discourse and ideology, which the community has titled as 'immigration-criticism' (Hannula, 2011; Turkkila, 2009; Puuronen, 2011), is not only a Finnish phenomenon, as it is rooted to the transatlantic traditions of anti-multiculturalism and anti-jihadism (Archer, 2013; Pyrhönen, 2015; Vertovec and

Wessendorf, 2009). The discourse on the forum has similar characteristics with other Western far-right online movements that have been characterized, for example, as ultra-nationalist and islamophobic (Dostal, 2015; Jupskås, 2012a, 2012b; Kreko, 2012; Meret, 2012). Hommaforum can't be classified as an online hate-group, but like many open online discussion platforms, the forum also provides an arena for the expression of racist attitudes and prejudiced discourse.

The Finns Party taking Hommaforum aboard was a matter of mobilizing readily available and emerging resources created by the online community. By cooperating with the increasingly infamous activists on the forum, the party gained access to four kinds of assets. First, the forum and its networks possessed significant bases of potential voters. The party's efforts of mobilizing new online resources favoured the party in the 2011 landslide election as 5 of the 39 Finns Party members of parliament (MPs) had accumulated most of their support during several years of active participation on Hommaforum and similar platforms. In all, 85% of the Finns Party voters regarded that a wish to limit immigration and immigrant's benefits affected their voting decision (Borg, 2012: 201). Second, the forum provided a noticeable online presence that the Finns Party was lacking (Khaldarova et al., 2012; Strandberg, 2012). Third, the forum provided human resources: a large number of the activists were well-educated, intelligent and articulate people, some of whom would later become not only party administrators and editors of the party's newspaper but also MPs and members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with significant positions within the party organization. And fourth, Homma provided the Finns Party access to new rhetorical and discursive assets: the network consisted hundreds and later thousands of passionate and politically motivated people who disseminated anti-immigration rhetoric both in online and offline environments. The cooperation was also beneficial for Homma, as they gained access to the party's organizational resources, gained legitimacy for being associated with a parliamentary party and, most significantly, got a realistic chance of obtaining legislative power. After the 2015 parliamentary elections, there have been 17 Homma members as Finns Party MPs or MEPs.

Applying Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) categorizations of collective and connective action, the Finns party's organization is very similar to an organization-centred and leader-driven (Mudde, 2007; Pauwels, 2014) traditional collective action organization. The party's actions are strongly coordinated by the core organization consisting of the party leader, the party secretary, the parliamentary group leader and few party staff. The party's goals are coordinated mostly through its own newspaper, party meetings and rallies. The party's communication strategy focuses on anti-elitist, anti-establishment and anti-political action frames provided especially by Timo Soini's media leadership and party programmes. The party organization is managed mostly in interpersonal communication between the core party organization and party politicians (Niemi, 2012).

Hommaforum, on the other hand, represents what Bennett and Segerberg call *connective action*. The online discussion portal can be placed somewhere between a 'crowd-enabled network' and an 'organizationally enabled network' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 47). The forum has little or very loose organizational coordination of action that takes place on a platform provided by the network itself. The communicating of content on Hommaforum takes place in a process of peer-production creating loose, organizationally produced or emergent action frames. The users' personal expression on Hommaforum is moderated only slightly, and the site is

connected to political parties such as the Finns Party only unofficially through individual (but in some cases salient and powerful) party members.

Materials and methods

The article's empirical part consists of qualitative and quantitative textual analyses of political journalism, party communication and online discussions. In order to provide an analytical answer to the research questions, the selected research materials had to allow textual analysis on the discursive dynamics between the three actors: journalistic media, the party leader and the online activist. The operationalization of the analysis was set to portray (1) how journalistic media framed the Finns Party's affiliation with racism after the party had become associated with Hommaforum, (2) how Timo Soini discursively responded to the mediated accusations and (3) how users on Homma reacted to Soini's responses. The selected materials consisted of news articles that quoted the party leader Timo Soini answering to racism accusations, and of Hommaforum comments discussing Soini's responses. The materials were sourced from Hommaforum discussion threads that were created between the founding of the forum in December 2008 and June 2015. During the selected research period, the Finns Party grew from a marginal parliamentary party of five MPs to the second most popular party in the country with governmental responsibility.

In order to locate the threads relevant to the study, word-searches were applied to the whole mass of over 45,000 Hommaforum threads. In the first stage, all threads were collected in which either the party leader Timo Soini or the party's Finnish language name (Perussuomalaiset and its suffixes) was mentioned in the title of the thread. Also, all threads from an area dedicated to discussing the Finns Party were collected regardless of whether or not they contained the party's or its leader's name. In the first stage, a total of 1074 threads were collected. Then, 204 threads were selected that started with a link to a news story in which the party was explicitly or implicitly accused of racism, prejudice or affiliation with extremist online elements. Out of these, 66 threads were selected that contained Homma-users' commentary on one or more news articles in which Timo Soini commented on racism accusations. From the threads, only the comments that discussed Soini's responses to the accusations were selected. In the end, the material comprised 78 news articles and 1298 individual comments. The collected materials have been openly available. Some features, such as doing word-searches and gaining access to admin-areas, are available only for registered members or administrators, but otherwise the forum can be browsed and read also without a registered account.

The different materials served different three analytical tasks. The news articles were first used to analyse what aspects in the relationship with the online community created the need for the media and political opponents to publicly scrutinize the Finns Party's association with Homma. This was done by coding the stories by evaluating the main underlying cause or impetus for the racism accusation in each article. Second, the articles were used to analyse how the party leader responded to the accusations and how he framed the party's relationship with the online activists. This was done by utilizing an existing framework of populist parties' strategies of responding to racism accusations in the media (Niemi et al., Submitted). The party leader's statement in each article was categorized based on an evaluation of the main damage control strategy used. The online comments discussing the articles were used to analyse how the users on Hommaforum interpreted the racism accusations and Timo Soini's strategies of

responding to the accusations. Each of the comments was coded for whether the commenter approved of or disapproved with Soini's statements or alternatively dismissed the accusations as falsehoods created by the media.

Journalistic anti-racist backlash

Hommaforum users sourced content from 22 well-known Finnish news organizations. The most numerous links were to the public service media *Yle*, the largest daily *Helsingin Sanomat* and the tabloids *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. Content from these four organizations comprised over 60% of the studied news articles. The main categories of why the party was accused of racism in the news were categorized in the study into three blocks: coverage on scandalous online statements (37 articles), online activists' role and position within the party (34 articles) and racist characteristics of immigration-related party platforms or suggested policies (7 articles).

There were two peaks in the media's scrutiny of the Finns Party's affiliation with Homma and online racism (Table 1). The peak in 2009 can be explained by anti-immigration candidates' success in the previous year's communal election that heightened the media's urgency to cover especially the candidacy of Jussi Halla-aho, the discursive leader of Hommaforum. Before the 2009 EP elections, Timo Soini decided not to accept Halla-aho as the party's candidate, causing contentious disapproval among Homma-users. The scrutiny picked up again following the 2011 landslide victory elections, and after new and unexperienced Finns Party parliamentarians caused several racism-related scandals with their online statements. Additionally, external events increased the salience of the far-right connections within the party, especially the mass murders in Norway during the summer of 2011 were actively linked in the media to the ideological characteristics represented on Hommaforum. Apart from individual controversies, after these two high-salience years, the media's attention on the Finns Party's racist characteristics settled down until the 2015 parliamentary elections and the party's accession to government.

The mediated challenge rarely focused on particular immigration policy proposals or party platforms that had been influenced or drafted by individuals from Homma. Very few racism accusations were based on policy suggestions, whereas journalists focused extensively on criticizing the rhetoric and analysing the acceptability of the affiliated online activists' ideological background (Table 1). Therefore, in the media, the flammability of the Finns Party's association with Hommaforum and online racism wasn't related to the nature of suggested immigration policies but especially to the manner of delivering the message and to a perceived breach of liberal democratic and humanitarian values.

Table 1. Causes of racism accusations in news articles shared on Hommaforum by year.

	Totals	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Statements or actions	37	7	0	14	5	3	1	7
Relations and cooperation	34	18	4	5	3	3	0	1
Policy or political agenda	7	1	2	4	0	0	0	0
Total	78	26	6	23	8	6	1	8

Most of the racism allegations were related to party members, candidates or other representatives' controversial statements made on Hommaforum or their personal blogs

or Facebook pages. The individual cases that gained most responses on Homma and also forced the party organization to take disciplinary measures were related to the statements of MPs Jussi Halla-aho, James Hirvisaari and Olli Immonen, who were among the most popular Finns Party politicians on Homma. Also, numerous more low-profile local politicians' online statements were interpreted by the media as inappropriate, uncivilized and racist.

The party and its leader were repeatedly challenged by journalists without them singling out particular statements or actions that could be interpreted as racist. In many cases, merely the party's cooperation with individuals associated with ideologies visible on Hommaforum was enough to scrutinize the activists' standing and future role within the party. The Finns Party's more far-right-populist faction emanating from Hommaforum was framed by journalists as an unknown threat that posed to jeopardize values of liberal democracy. And when provided with the possibility, especially political opponents would frame the party's connection with online extremism to the most extreme capacity – defining racism as an inherent part of the party's core identity.

Online activists' reactions to party leader responses

When both low- and high-profile Finns Party politicians affiliated to Homma were repeatedly in the news for statements portraying poor taste or straight-out racism, it was a challenge for Timo Soini to convincingly assure the public that his party was not tainted by undemocratic or far-right forces. Soini utilized seven different types of discursive strategies (see Niemi et al., Submitted) in responding to the accusations: distancing the online activists from the Finns Party in rhetoric (26 occurrences), distancing by promising or carrying out disciplinary actions against troublemakers (20), avoiding from answering to the journalists' questions (12), justifying or defending statements causing the controversies (9), reversing the accusations (7), excusing statements by referring to mitigating circumstances (2), and claiming that the accusations are false (1).

Niemi et al. (Submitted) make a distinction between *confrontational* and *submissive* strategies that the representatives of nationalist-populist parties use when responding to racism accusations in the mainstream media. Confrontational strategies are intended to communicate that there is no controversy and that the party has done nothing wrong. These strategies include avoiding from answering, justifying, reversing and denying accusations. Submissive strategies are intended to admit that some social norms have been breached. They are used to reconcile negative attention by distancing individuals under accusation both in rhetoric and in action, by giving excuses for statements, and by apologizing (which Soini didn't do).

Table 2. Main party leader responses to racism accusations and Hommaforum reactions.

	Occurrences of strategy	No. of comments	Approval %	Disapproval %	Conspiracy %
Submissive strategies	48	956	13.4	69.4	17.2
Distancing by rhetoric	26	521	12.3	78.3	9.4
Distancing by disciplinary actions	20	429	14.7	58.5	26.8
Excusing	2	6	33.3	66.7	0.0
Confrontational strategies	29	342	40.4	8.7	50.9
Avoiding from answering	12	157	24.8	8.3	66.9

Justifying	9	88	53.4	6.8	39.8
Reversing	7	84	57.2	9.5	33.3
Denying	1	13	30.8	23.1	46.1

The Hommaforum users' reactions to party leader responses were categorized into three groups according to whether the comments approved or disapproved of Soini's statements in the media or whether they expressed refusal to believe or accept what was stated in the articles (conspiracy-category). The analysis shows that certain response strategies caused significantly more conflict between the Finns Party and Hommaforum users than others (Table 2). Whereas Soini's use of submissive strategies resulted in overwhelming disapproval (69.4%) on Hommaforum, applying confrontational strategies caused either expressions of approval (40.4%) or dismissal of the coverage as politically motivated and gratuitous persecution on behalf of the media (50.9%).

Submissive strategies were intended by the party leader to convey the message that racism or extremism would not be tolerated within the Finns Party, and they received nearly twice as many comments when compared to stories in which confrontational strategies were used. When Soini verbally distanced, downplayed, mocked or disciplined party members close to Hommaforum who had been targeted with racism accusations, the comments tended to express contentious – even mortifying – disapproval:

Now everything clicks in place. -- He's [Soini] a lapdog of the elite and a fake option for protest --. The real opposition and dissidents are chased and struck down by the machine. (Hommaforum, 29.3.2009)

The most severe conflicts surfaced when the party expelled MPs who were respected discursive leaders on the forum. In these cases, the uproar of angry messaging on the discussion board started to gain characteristics of organized mutiny against Soini's leadership that was often regarded as autocratic and dictatorial. The forum users often expressed that the party leader had abandoned their issue and let them down by not defending respected forum members and by covering in front of the corrupt leftist media's demands. The fact was that the Homma-activists' emergent 'immigration-critical' identity did not derive from the Finns Party's rural-populist tradition, did not make the party leader's job of handling damage control while bridging the two groups' identities any easier:

Wasn't Soini supposed to be a great friend to the immigration critics and the patriots? -- There's no reason to take this clownery and flip-flopping seriously any longer. -- it's about time we ditch Messiah-Soini and his rural rednecks and gather our ranks -- and found a real party of the people into this country. (Hommaforum, 15.9.2011)

When Soini was confrontational in his responses to racism accusations, the forum threads were nearly void of discontent (Table 2). Discursive strategies that involved justifying statements, avoiding questions and reversing the media's accusations tended to encourage the users of Homma to express their sense of fellowship with the Finns Party and its leader. The most powerful and resonant damage control strategy used by Soini was to either refuse from commenting all together or to frame the accusations as a politically motivated witch-hunt. Especially in these cases, Homma-activists expressed their appreciation for the party leader's efforts of not playing along with the

liberal left-wing media's terms, binding Homma and the Finns Party together as ostracized freedom fighters fallen victim to the mishandling of a biased elite enemy:

Reporters' mass psychosis and obsession with Homma seems to worsen. They still haven't gotten over from our great electoral victory, and the symptoms are getting heavier. Thanks YLE [the Finnish broadcasting company], the people have already called your bluff. (Hommaforum 28.7.2011)

Conclusion

According to Andrew Chadwick and Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2016: 3–4), political parties are undergoing a process of adaptation to post-material political culture brought on by the affordances and uses of digital media. Due to the increasing interaction between partisan and civic online engagement, traditional parties are claimed to renew 'from the outside in'. Vaccari and Valeriani (2016: 13) have presented that social media are rejuvenating parties, for example, by helping 'new digital foot soldiers to emerge' and by allowing 'existing members to expand their repertoires'. For the Finns Party, cooperating with the network of politically passionate individuals of Hommaforum did aid the party in securing new constituencies and obtaining resources, but it also created conflict in the public negotiation of the Finns Party's collective identity. For the Finns Party, trying to mobilize Hommaforum increased the risk of a vast array of individualized political interpretations and means of action to be recognized to bear the party's political insignia and to be regarded as manifestations of the party ideology in the public sphere. As argued in this article, the logics of party politics and online activism are not always harmoniously compatible.

The main cost of the Finns Party mobilizing resources accumulated on Hommaforum was that the party's core organization lost some of its control over communicating its identity. In other words, allowing more people to participate in the public negotiation over what the party stood for decreased message discipline. For a populist party wishing to broaden its base of supporters and aiming to solidify its position as a legitimate and responsible actor in a Western democratic parliamentary system, keeping a clean public image untainted by extremism or anti-democratic ideology is of utmost importance. While this expectation was mostly valued within the Finns Party's professionalized core organization, people participating online were not bound by the mediatized logics of public relations and politically viable rhetoric. Party members active on Hommaforum exhibited on numerous occasions lacking partisan loyalty – which is understandable as their motivations for participating in political action can be regarded to derive from their personal and individualized experiences and interpretations of the political issues they were passionate about. Connective action networks like Hommaforum, emancipated from the traditional gate-keepers in society, can also be regarded as emancipated from the political guidance and control of their political affiliates.

Following the analysis, public-mediated scrutiny on the relationship between the Finns Party and Hommaforum created two kinds of mediated pressure: external and internal. External pressure refers to the party's conflict with the mainstream media and political opponents, who suspected the party of trying to legitimize racist or undemocratic sentiments and ideology. For the Finns Party, the scandal-prone activists could not be feasibly regarded as 'reliable agents of party principals' (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016: 14) – even quite the contrary. Internal pressure on the other hand

refers to the conflict between the party's core organization and the online activists, who were discontent with the party leader's lack of dedication in opposing immigration and defending individuals under accusation. The Finns Party leader Timo Soini reconciled the two kinds of conflicts by adjusting his party's communication to consider not only the logic of public relations but also a newer logic emanating from the more connective (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) dynamics of online action. Instead of cutting ties to Hommaforum, the Finns Party leader chose to partake in the delicate discursive act of trying to hang on to Hommaforum's controversial resources while not trying to lose the general public's support.

Because of the inherently public nature of connective action and how online publics have become incorporated into journalists' and other political commentators' sourcing practices (see Milan, 2015), it can prove difficult for a traditional political organization to selectively utilize assets of an online movement without having to deal with the repercussions of becoming associated with the online community's potentially controversial elements. Additionally, because provocative or offensive online statements can easily be used for political smearing by opponents and due to their scandalous nature they possess high journalistic value and viral potential, it is the most extreme or polarizing aspects of online movements that could tend to become most salient in the public sphere. Still, by communicating the issue well enough, populist parties may gain more than lose from some kind of cooperation or affiliation with controversial far-right networks. Therefore, the position of the journalists covering the relationship of populist parties and extremist online activism can be regarded almost as tricky as the populist leaders' trying to walk the tightrope of discursive damage control.

We have a limited understanding of how public scrutiny of populist parties' racist characteristics and utterances affects these parties' chances of success. The question is bound to the larger theme of whether widespread attention on the institutionalization of the far-right wards against the proliferation of racist rhetoric or contributes to its normalization in the public sphere. If populist parties are honest in their wish of ridding their ranks of extreme or far-right elements, it would be advisable for them to take clear and decisive disciplinary measures when reacting to public accusations of racism or extremism. But for populist parties that have already gained enough legitimacy to gain significant electoral success, it might not even be necessary to become excessively normalized – even quite the contrary.

For successful populist parties, normalization could prove to be a detrimental process, as it can lead to losing their edge as alternatives for established party politics. Hence, it is not surprising why, for example, the Finns Party – after gaining access to government – has intensified their attempts of framing mediated racism accusations as a consequence of the party's unfair and biased persecution by the media and political opponents. The analysis given in this article suggests that adopting a confrontational stance in responding to racism accusations – and thus communicating a party identity that is more ambivalent and ambiguous towards its relationship with racism – allows populist-party leaders to not lose support among online publics that are fervently against immigration. This suggests that increasing the journalistic salience of populist parties' racist characteristics – without forcing the parties to take decisive distancing actions – does not significantly contribute to the demobilization of the alliance between institutionalized populism and online far-right movements. Especially, excessive journalistic nitpicking, clickbaiting and the oversimplification of populist parties' relationship with racism could only provide discursive fuel for the implementation of a shared victim identity – tying populist parties and online extremism closer together.

The emerging and constantly developing relationship of far-right online action, the media and party politics requires more research. How does increasing interaction with institutionalized politics affect online far-right movements' internal dynamics and communication? Does the hybridization of campaign activities and cooperation with political parties eventually mediatize and professionalize connective action movements? Also, how and with what kind of effects does connective online resistance to the normalization of far-right populism feed into the relationship of the media and institutionalized populism?

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