

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE CULTURE WAR: THE DIGITAL THREAT TO THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY (CICUW)

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ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of far-right discourse has irrevocably affected the ability of cultural institutions to promote pluralism and democracy. In Sweden, the growing influence of the far-right has turned cultural institutions, such as museums and public libraries, into political symbols in an escalating ‘culture war’ (Harding 2022; Hanell *et al.* 2023). Librarians are urged by politicians and the public to cancel LGBTQI-themed or multicultural events, and cultural institutions have undertaken such measures to mitigate the risk of encountering hate speech and harassment from far-right sympathizers. This presents a democratic challenge.

The purpose of CiCuW is to produce new knowledge about far-right attacks on public cultural institutions and their democratic consequences. Existing research shows how the pervasiveness of far-right discourse is facilitated by the capabilities afforded by digital technologies. The aim of the project is thus to understand the interplay between the far right’s antagonistic information activities online and on-site attacks on cultural institutions. While existing research has often studied these aspects separately, cultural institutions and the online culture war discourse offer a compelling starting point for exploring the interrelatedness of on-site experiences and hostile online information activities. To this end we apply an innovative interdisciplinary approach that draws on perspectives from Library and Information Science, Digital Humanities and Linguistics, combining data-driven methods and the text analytical capabilities of large language models with qualitative approaches. Through this novel mixed methods approach, a key component of the project is to further methodological development necessary for understanding the interplay between online discourse and offline events. This contribution presents tentative results from a pilot study and the design of the proposed project.

The pilot study explored user comments on online news websites as instances of digital interaction (Landert 2014), applying a data-driven approach informed by sentiment analysis and topic modelling testing both conventional lexicon-based sentiment scoring and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling, and more recent Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) modelling. An ongoing analysis suggests that the frequency and temporality of comments and

upvotes provide a window into the processes shaping far-right digital discourses (Ihrmark et al. 2023). The main pattern of interest is whether the connection between certain topics and expressed sentiment can lead to, or reinforce, negative engagement with said topic over time. The combination of these techniques will also allow for exploration of the connection between online and offline interactions by answering questions such as whether a topic which is connected to more frequent expressions of negative sentiment will lead to real-life incidents in which said sentiments are echoed. In order for this to be established, recurring topics and their distribution within the dataset will be identified using topic modelling, and the sentiment of user engagement using sentiment analysis. The ability of sentiment analysis to quantify sentiment in the engagement will also allow for insights regarding the level of expressed sentiment before an incident occurs offline, if such a connection exists, and the development of sentiment regarding a topic in the discourse. In the proposed project, we leverage the insights derived from this study to advance methodological development by combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Methodologically, the project is underpinned by an interdisciplinary approach, clearly articulated in the project objectives, and realized through three interconnected project parts. The interdisciplinary endeavor is theoretically unified through the adoption of a joint theoretical framework: practice theory (Shove *et al.* 2012). This framework is suitable for the proposed project as it provides an analytical tool for approaching discourse and action, as well as knowledge, meaning and material artefacts, as a composite analytical unit of interconnected elements: practice. By analytically framing public cultural workers' experiences of hate and threats and the online information activities of the far-right as distinct yet interconnected manifestations of a singular practice, we can elucidate the various forms of interconnectedness between online discourses and physical events within cultural institutions. The project is divided into three subprojects, each structured to address one research question respectively.

The first subproject consists of three ethnographic case studies, focusing on-site experiences, designed to produce in-depth knowledge of public cultural workers experiences of hate and threat. The second subproject is focused on exploring and classifying far-right interactions online to explore the connection to real-world events. Through collecting online interactions, categorized according to the expressed sentiment and the topic of said sentiment, connections between sentiment, topic and any physical space mentioned within the digital interaction can be made. In the third subproject, results, and insights from the two previous sub studies will be further explored and synthesized in a series of workshops. The workshops will focus on producing recommendations for interdisciplinary methodological advancement with regards to studying the entangled processes of online and offline interactions, based on the project's findings.

The project will move beyond the state of the art by providing a systematic and interdisciplinary investigation into democratic implications of the pervasiveness of far-right discourse, focusing on a previously neglected empirical field: public cultural

institutions. Besides furthering our knowledge on democratic implications of far-right influence, this new knowledge will feed a valuable knowledge exchange with the public cultural sector on how to preserve and foster their democratic leverage in politically turbulent times. To this end, a reference group with experts from cultural institutions will be formed as part of the project. Through the development and implementation of an innovative mixed methods approach this project will contribute to the ongoing efforts in methodological advancement aimed at understanding the relations between online discourse and offline occurrences. Last but not least, the project will provide new knowledge essential for scholarly endeavors that aims to safeguard democratic governance.

Keywords: cultural institutions, democracy, far-right discourse, digital methods

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