Gendering Web2.0 Sociotechnical Affordances of Far-Right Metapolitics

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Abstract
This study examines the ways in which Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of far-right metapolitics are gendered. Specifically, I focus on a key Swedish far-right entity that is not only an extensive publisher of far-right intellectual output, but also organizes a political salon that unites various actors from the European transnational far-right ecosystem. My explicit interests are in the performances of far-right masculinity at work in this metapolitical project. Consequently, the article makes both empirical and theoretical contributions to the field. Empirically, the study provides a digital ethnography of the manner in which far-right performances of masculinity consolidate digital fraternities around a shared transnational far-right ethos of the underdog “us.” In so doing, they exploit Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances, presenting their capability of skillfully weaponizing the digital landscape for their metapolitical project. These performances of masculinity aim to re-naturalize the domination, hierarchy, and privilege of White cis heterosexual masculinities across such intersectional axes of inequality as gender, sexuality, race, and social class. This is underpinned by a syncretic theoretical construct, at the heart of which lies the concept of masculinity of crises, buttressed by a superordinate intersectionality perspective. This combination enables a more sophisticated analysis of Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances, highlighting the intersectional underpinnings of the co-constitutive dynamic between far-right performances of masculinity and crises.

Keywords
sociotechnical affordances, far-right metapolitics, masculinities of crises, Sweden

Introduction
A wide array of far-right views are currently seeping into public debate and gaining political currency across the world (Agius et al., 2020; Keskinen, 2018; Maly, 2019; Mulimani & Neergaard, 2019; Nissen, 2022; Norocel et al., 2020; Paul, 2021). Collectively, they promote varied “configurations of anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic, authoritarian, fascist, xenophobic, racist, ethno-nationalist, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-gender, reactionary and hierarchical agendas” (Blee, 2020, p. 416). The mainstreaming of such extreme views is in part facilitated by the systemic failures of the contemporary liberal-democratic order and the neoliberal dogma it promotes. This has given way to illiberal longings and authoritarian impulses, as well as appeals for alternative economic models as a reaction to the seemingly unending crises that when unraveled appear to adhere tightly to one another. The concept of crisis is intimately linked to “failure—whether that be of the financial system, political system, public policy, democracy, representation, masculinity, and so on—and thus the impetus to act (or make the vital decision) comes from the need to correct the failure and stem the crisis” (Moffitt, 2015, p. 197). The corrective readily identified by the far-right is that of a systemic overhaul, “a new order” brought about by an ideological project designed to gradually shift attitudes and boundaries of what is generally deemed to be acceptable democratic speech and establish their own cultural and political hegemony, also known as metapolitics (Maly, 2019, p. 4; Paul, 2021, pp. 3–4).

Far-right metapolitics are supported by a complex ecosystem consisting of inter alia: political parties and social movements, paramilitary organizations, loosely organized networks, and subcultures (Baele et al., 2020, pp. 3–4; Vandiver, 2020, p. 154). Equally, the expansive Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017) of far-right metapolitics connect a complex digital ecology (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2) of platforms, blogs, and Internet
sites that center on particular understandings of masculinity and gender relations (Blee, 2020, p. 417; Vandiver, 2020, p. 155). Although “Sweden has long been a global epicenter for white supremacist activism and ‘intellectualism’” (Askanius, 2021, p. 20), to date there are no studies examining the gendered trajectory of contemporary far-right metapolitics in Sweden. In that respect, I focus here on Arktos Media (hereafter, AM). Active since 2009, AM is an important Swedish entity in the international far-right ecosystem with a global outreach; it claims to have published over 170 titles in 16 different languages and professes to be the main English-language publisher of the European “New Right” (in French original la Nouvelle Droite). AM supports the ideological production of the Generation Identity’s (Génération Identitaire) various intellectual figures and cultivates its connections with the US-based Alt-right. It engages not only in publishing far-right books, but also in stimulating further discussions between their authors and a wider community of supporters through its Interregnum political salon, via the Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of its own YouTube channel and subscribers, the Interregnum page and connected podcast profile on its website, as well as the contributions and comments to the Arktos Journal it hosts. This study examines the means by which Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of far-right metapolitics are gendered against the background of contemporary multiple crises. Focusing more closely on the Interregnum political salon, the article addresses the following research question: In what manner are crises imbricated in the construction of digital masculinity performances that are coopted to Interregnum metapolitics?

In this respect, I make both empirical and theoretical contributions to the extant scholarship. Digital ethnography takes advantage of the theoretical versatility granted by the concept of affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Hutchby, 2001; Khazraee & Novak, 2018; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) by unveiling the sociotechnical contextual relational properties of the digital metapolitical struggle spearheaded by AM. In so doing, it provides nuance to analyses of similar metapolitical pursuits in the global North (Feshami, 2021; Maly, 2019; Paul, 2021), as well as expanding the critical analyses of the far right in Sweden (Askanius, 2021; Lundström & Lundström, 2021; Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018), by centering on the importance of gender and the normative role of masculinity within such ecosystems (Blee, 2020; Ralph-Morrow, 2022; Vandiver, 2020). The concept of masculinity of crises is combined with a superordinate intersectionality perspective (Leek & Kimmel, 2015; Norocel et al., 2020) to suggest a way past the sensationalist and asystemic vagueness of “toxic masculinity” conceptualization (Waling, 2019). Using this kind of analytical lens enables a more sophisticated analysis of the intersectional underpinnings of the co-constitutive dynamic between far-right performances of masculinity and crises.

The article will first discuss the theoretical building blocks, reviewing the existing scholarship, before proposing a novel theoretical concept to aid my analysis. Thereafter, I present the fundamentals of my methodological approach and clarify the research site for my digital ethnography and the manner of data collection. This will be followed by a detailed ethical reflection about the specificities and challenges of employing feminist ethics in the study of the far right. Finally, I focus on presenting the research findings, which I integrate into an extended conclusion that presents a wider intellectual conversation about the Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of far-right metapolitics, within the context of contemporary multiple crises, indicating potential avenues for further research.

**Syncretic Theoretical Undergirding**

The theoretical infrastructure of this study straddles two, at times discreetly overlapping, research fields. The firststrand centers on the Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017) of far-right metapolitics in various contexts (Feshami, 2021; Maly, 2019; Paul, 2021), but specifically in Sweden (Askanius, 2021; Lundström & Lundström, 2021; Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018). The second strand centers on the importance of gender, particularly the normative role that masculinity plays within the far right (Blee, 2020; Keskinen, 2018; Ralph-Morrow, 2022; Vandiver, 2020). Although my theoretical discussion focuses only on a few key elements, I am aware that these fields are presently in a continuous expansion (noteworthy here are the systematizing efforts of Baele et al., 2020; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; and the detailed ethical considerations of Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019; Suomela et al., 2019).

To clarify, the concept of affordance was initially developed in ecological psychology (Gibson, 1977) and has been deployed in communication and media studies, where it has shown substantial theoretical versatility (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Hutchby, 2001; Khazraee & Novak, 2018; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). Staking out a middle ground between (radical) social constructivism and technological determinism (Hutchby, 2001, p. 453; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 1), affordances are understood here as contextual relational properties (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 244), “which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444) within a networked social environment.

For my purposes, the interest is social media platforms, whose affordances “are fundamentally shaped by the properties of bits, the connections between bits, and the way that bits and networks link people in new ways”; while these bits not only regulate the structure of such networked social environments, this very structure “introduces new possible practices and shapes the interactions that take place” (boyd, 2011, p. 42). The materiality of these platforms, “in combination with users’ behaviors, contributes to forming a collective identity”
through “enabling, restricting, and shaping collective or networked action in the context of contentious politics” (Khazraee & Novak, 2018, p. 3). For the purpose of the present study, I follow in the footsteps of those researchers emphasizing the usefulness of four key affordances: “Persistence: Online expressions are automatically recorded and archived; Replicability: Content made out of bits can be duplicated; Scalability: The potential visibility of content in networked publics is great; and Searchability: Content in networked publics can be accessed through search” (boyd, 2011, p. 46).

Furthermore, this materiality is intimately tied to the process of meaning-making by users when conceptualizing affordances, opening for “vernacular affordances” of platforms, which are not experienced in isolation but rather “in relation to a complex ecology of other tools [such as other platforms, websites, and so on] with other affordances” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2). In addition, I augment “a socio-technical sensibility towards the distributed agency of humans and nonhumans at play” (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 249). In sum, sociotechnical affordances draw attention to the multidirectional qualities of agency and connectivity, evidencing “particular communicative practices, sociality, publics, perception” (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 240). This is brought about by the digital ecology under scrutiny, whereby each constitutive platform has specific infrastructural models that enable programming and extension into other platforms or sites in the ecosystem, as well as individual economic models for connecting diverse stakeholders (owners, content-creators, end-users, and advertisers) (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 244).

Several studies have revealed how Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of metapolitics lend a veneer of legitimacy to far-right ideologies through the ability of intellectual elites to articulate within formal political spaces, which is followed by their subsequent vulgarization by means of viral memes. In the United States (Paul, 2021), this has been mobilized by White nationalist activism to “resist racial imperilment” and also permits the cultivation of transnational solidarity across Europe via YouTube (Feshami, 2021), while in Europe, their offline and online use has been weaponized by Flemish “algorithmic activists” (Maly, 2019). In the Swedish context, some contributions have drawn attention to the way digital cultural expressions of far-right ideology complement displays of violent mobilization, contribute to the cementing of a sense of community and belonging, and soften and normalize far-right opinions. This is achieved either by means of podcasts (Askanius, 2021; Lundström & Lundström, 2021) or by using such platforms as Facebook (Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018).

Other studies evidence the far-right’s growing preference for audio-visual content to convey its ideology, which increases the salience of YouTube as their platform of choice, where they employ the platform’s sociotechnical affordances to crystallize digital communities around their channels and manipulate recommendation algorithms to multiply “views” and attract potential subscribers to their channels (Baele et al., 2020, pp. 10–11; Finlayson, 2022, pp. 66–69). It is worth noting that such key sociotechnical affordances of platforms as persistence and searchability (boyd, 2011) may be altered, meaning that digital impermanence (manifest as change, erasure, or even closedown and removal of far-right content) is something researchers need to pay attention to when examining the far-right ecosystem (Finlayson, 2022, p. 70; Lundström & Lundström, 2021, p. 292). Despite gender being “a central issue across the complex landscape of the far right” (Blee, 2020, p. 417), these analyses seldom delve beyond the acknowledgment of an overrepresentation of men within the far-right ecosystem.

In contrast, studies explicitly centering on gender have compellingly argued that the reason for this overrepresentation of men within the far-right is precisely because “its ideology and practices are masculine” (Ralph-Morrow, 2022, p. 27), which promises “a homosocial brotherhood of male belonging” (Blee, 2020, p. 417). Furthermore, within the far-right ecosystem, specific performances of masculinity are reified, in the sense that they confirm certain culturally marked meanings of identity to become intelligible as masculine (Butler, 1995). In turn, these normative performances of masculinity enforce “regulative ideals with far-reaching implications for the theoretical sources the movement appropriates, the discourses it articulates, and the organizational and operational modes it adopts” (Vandiver, 2020, p. 155). Under closer examination, these performances center on stereotypical “male expressions of anger and rebellion” that “rigidly embrace very traditional gendered practices and promote messages of misogyny,” unless they instrumentally “advocate limited pro-women and pro-LGBTQ+ agendas to position themselves publicly as guardians of white/native/majority-group women’s rights against what they regard as the sexist and homophobic cultures of non-white/immigrant/minority groups” (Blee, 2020, p. 417; see also, Agius et al., 2020, p. 433; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2019, pp. 224–225; Ralph-Morrow, 2022, pp. 34–36). Moreover, some researchers evidenced the intimate and co-constitutive relations between gender and race, noting that the far-right’s “gendered ideology of masculinity conditions the movement’s white nationalism—and vice versa” (Vandiver, 2020, p. 167).

The viral displays of public violence at the hands of such far-right entities as the Proud Boys in the United States, or the many guises of the Identitarian movement across Europe (DeCook, 2018; Nissen, 2022), have led mainstream traditional media outlets to label these performances of masculinity as manifestations of a “toxic masculinity.” In one sense, the concept appears to synthesize, in its own sensationalist manner, the academic discussions about the “crisis of masculinity.” In this respect, the last decades of the 20th century across the global North witnessed discussions which problematized the devaluation of the traditional “notions of masculinity bound up in self-reliance, strength and the ability to provide for one’s family” (Roos, 2017, p. 64). Put
differently, there was a growing “sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 18). More recently, this crisis of masculinity is often related to the transformation of “an arguably progressive refutation of global neo-liberalism” of the past 20 years into “a vacuous space dominated by populists and very often extremist rhetoric” (Roose, 2017, p. 58), under a wave of anger and frustration skillfully channeled by such polarizing political entrepreneurs as Donald Trump in the United States or Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom (Agius et al., 2020; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Paul, 2021).

Nonetheless, I agree with the feminist critiques of the concept that point out it merely positions “men as victims of a broader vague entity, rather than highlighting their agency in the reproduction of masculinity” (Waling, 2019, p. 363), thereby reinforcing gender and sexual inequalities by glossing over historical contingencies, social disparities, and material realities (Waling, 2019, pp. 367–370). Furthermore, I argue that resorting to such appellations as “toxic masculinity” to describe the complex performances of masculinity within the far-right ecosystem distracts from paying attention to their systemic specificities. This results in the privileging of sensationalist individualizations of such performances, centered on highly mediated acts of terror against marginalized and vulnerable communities, be they women, sexual minorities, racialized persons, or religious communities.

In contradistinction to this, I suggest a more appropriate concept: a masculinities of crises. This conveys the co-constitutive dynamic between certain masculinity performances and far-right ideologies. It captures the metapolitical struggle that emphasizes an inescapable “revolutionary social transformation” (Paul, 2021, p. 3) of the present liberal-democratic order and the “tempo-spatial phases and intensities” of neoliberal crises of late modernity (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2020, p. 11), which impacts the outcome as either embedded chronicity (stasis) or impetus for renewal (katharsis). Arguably, it reverberates with the concept of “white border guard masculinity,” which centers on “[p]olicing gendered, sexualized and racialized borders” (Keskinen, 2018, p. 158). In an effort to account for the systemic aspect at play, I further augment this concept with a superordinate intersectionality perspective (Leek & Kimmel, 2015; Norocel et al., 2020), which is alert to the overlapping systems of difference and inequality in the following ways: “masculinities (for gendered hierarchies), heterosexuality (for sexual hierarchies), elites (for class systems), and whitenesses (for racialized and ethnic structuring)” (Norocel et al., 2020, p. 428). This enables an intersectional parsing of the most recent crises as they are portrayed within the far-right ecosystem: the 2008 global financial crisis morphing into a global conspiracy of Jewish grand-finance; the 2015 humanitarian crisis creating a space for the imperative to defend White populations from racial miscegenation and from becoming minorities in the global North; and the looming environmental crisis reinforcing counter-claims to return to traditional consumption-heavy lifestyles (Agius et al., 2020; Baele et al., 2020; Berntzen, 2020; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Keskinen, 2018; Nissen, 2022; Tuters & Hagen, 2020). I center this on the Web2.0 sociotechnical inequality, whereby uneven Internet infrastructure and digital literacy overlap with intense gendered and racialized social stratification, which provides a fertile ground for far-right metapolitics (DeCook, 2018; Finlayson, 2022; Maly, 2019).

Methodology, Research Site, and Data Collection

This study draws upon a digital ethnographical approach (Hine, 2012, 2015; Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016; Rambukkana, 2019), supplemented with a methodology of tactical resistance (Gruwell, 2020), solidly anchored into the feminist ethics concerned with marginalized and vulnerable communities (Haraway, 1991). I argue that the chosen methodological approach is the most appropriate to distill and make sense of the coded and subtle forms of language employed within the far-right ecosystem (Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018). It also permits an ethically sustainable approach to navigating potentially harmful far-right research sites (Gruwell, 2020, pp. 98–100; Massanari, 2018, pp. 5–6) while maintaining my commitment to the feminist methodological goal of being accountable for one’s knowledge claims (Gruwell, 2020, p. 93; Mckee & Porter, 2010, pp. 144–145).

A digital ethnographic approach sheds light on the process of meaning-making in a digitally networked society (Castells, 2009), paying attention to the ways in which the technological properties of the digital world (impermanence, searchability, replicability, scalability, algorithmically construed reality) impact and shape people’s digital interactions (boyd, 2011, p. 49; Maly, 2019, p. 2). It is closely related to ethnography in its “iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study) [. . .] that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and that views humans as part object/part subject” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 3). In so doing, it bypasses simple techno-deterministic explanations, which assume that Web2.0 technologies are the cause for the emergence of new forms of political organizing (Hjorth et al., 2017, pp. 408–409). Put differently, digital ethnography helps researchers query how “the multiplicity of the internet [. . .] comes to mean different things in different settings among different people. Once again, this is because technology in itself does not have any pre-defined or given settings of use” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 306). With minor modifications, I follow in the footsteps of researchers postulating five key principles of digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016, pp. 8–14): the way to engage with the digital is dependent on the research project, and the interdependence between digital media and organization of everyday life (multiplicity); the digital aspect is
understood as part of a wider web of social relations (non-digital-centric); it is a collaborative process (openness); it engages seriously with the subjectivity of encounters on the research site (reflexivity); it demands attention to alternative forms of communication (unorthodox).

A clarification with regard to taxonomy here will be helpful. I employ the term “research site” as the umbrella appellation reuniting a specific digital ecology (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2), which brings together the AM YouTube channel, the Interregnum page on the AM website, and contributions to the Arktos Journal page hosted on the same website. The first component, the YouTube channel, contains a video playlist which continuously expands with new uploads of both Interregnum videos and other videos (music videos of affiliated music bands; trailers for far-right movies; standalone interviews, etc.). The playlist totaled 60 videos in December 2021 and encouraged direct responses to the uploaded content (like/dislike and comments) from registered YouTube users, thereby strengthening the effort of community-building (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 2; Finlayson, 2022, p. 68; Lewis, 2018, p. 20). The channel registered over 6,250 subscribers. In comparison with other far-right channels, it had fewer subscribers than the Swedish White nationalist known as “The Golden One” (111,000 subscribers), or even the far-right party Alternative for Sweden (Alternativ för Sverige) (13,800 subscribers), but it is larger than the channel of the Swedish-language far-right podcast Antidote (Motgift) (4,760 subscribers). Notwithstanding this, the channel maintains an exclusively English-language presence, thereby serving as an intellectual bridge between various far-right political entities in Sweden and their international brethren, among whom the most assiduously courted were the Identitarian movement and various rising international far-right intellectual figures.

The second component, Interregnum’s own Podcast page on the AM website, displayed a selection of the YouTube videos mentioned above, all presented as video-podcast hybrids and embedded in the page. In addition, the latest video was usually embedded as a podcast episode on the podcast platform Speaker, which curated all Interregnum videos as podcasts. Finally, the term research site serves to co-locate the contributions on the Arktos Journal page on the same website, which contained articles formatted as blog entries that were open to moderated commentary from registered users. This page was presented by AM as a place for research, reflection, and analysis of political, social, and cultural contemporary events.

To provide a comprehensive, albeit somewhat static, ethnographic snapshot of the issue at stake (Kerrigan, 2019, p. 276), I have intensively explored the research site and collected several types of data during the period between May and October 2020. I returned at irregular intervals to monitor whether the selected videos had gathered more reactions until December 2021. Specifically, I have collected 10 videos from the YouTube channel, published under the Interregnum name between August 2018 and September 2020; they last between 1:09:30 hr and 2:20:13 hr, totaling 16:44:44 recorded hours. The videos were selected for the diversity of topics approached, such as discussions with authors of newly published books by AM, political commentary in the aftermath of 2018 Swedish Parliamentary elections, panel debates with recurrent guest spots from established far-right figures, and interviews and discussions with other influential YouTubers from the European identitarian New Right. To gauge the sociotechnical affordances of AM, I have supplemented the collection of videos with direct responses to their content (likes/dislikes and comments) during the period of data collection. In addition to this, from the AM website, I have collected the data from the Interregnum page, as well as the article-cum-blog entries from the Arktos Journal and their accompanying comments.

The methodological tools and techniques of digital ethnography (Hine, 2012, 2015; Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016) are used in combination with methodological pragmatism (Lindgren, 2017, p. 283) to elicit the insight of podcast ethnography (Lundström & Lundström, 2021). As such, my exploration, engagement, and examination of the research site were accompanied by careful note-taking to enable retrospective reflection (Hjorth et al., 2017, p. 26), making use of “the researcher’s embodied and embedded experience as a source of methodological insight” (Hine, 2015, p. 16). The thematic organization and interpretation of the data, including my field notes, followed a rigorous coding procedure (Caplan & Purser, 2019, p. 426; O’Reilly, 2005, pp. 184–188). It was embedded in the study’s theoretical focus on the sociotechnical negotiation and reconfiguration of gendered hierarchies within far-right ideology: the construction of far-right masculinities in relation to other masculinities and femininities against the background of crises of late modernity. Although this research site arguably accounted for the sociotechnical manifestations of a political salon that was supposedly open to so-called ideological discussion and development, quite early in the exploratory phase of my ethnography, it became apparent that the veneer of politeness could hardly disguise reactionary and harmful far-right appeals, which necessitated a specific ethical approach.

Ethical Considerations

I have adopted a “methodology of tactical resistance” (Gruwell, 2020, pp. 98–100). This provides a situational and, whenever necessary, a subversive solution to the navigation of a potentially harmful far-right digital landscape (Conway, 2021; Gruwell, 2020; Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019) while taking seriously the feminist methodological principles of reflexivity, reciprocity, and transparency. This entailed embracing a feminist epistemology, which enabled “important questions [to be posed] about context, change, interrelatedness, relationships of power, boundaries, and embedded epistemology” (Ackerly & True, 2008, p. 696).
This helped to identify those power relations at play on the research site that constitute a challenge to feminist research practices and to navigate its polymorphic and fluid sociotechnical configurations while acknowledging “the responsibility of the feminist researcher to resist the systemic disempowerment of women and other marginalized groups” (Gruwell, 2020, p. 99).

These principles informed my continuous evaluation of the various ethical aspects encountered during the project. They were anchored further into the ethical guidelines of “respect for persons, justice, and beneficence” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 4) and the self-reflection on my situatedness within the power dynamics of epistemology, disciplinary boundaries, and human relations (Ackerly & True, 2008, p. 698). I am nonetheless aware that these values are unlikely to be upheld within the studied context, and consequently, I could become exposed to far-right surveillance and retaliation attempts (Conway, 2021, p. 369; Massanari, 2018, p. 4; Rambukkana, 2019, p. 317). Consequently, I have integrated a research ethics perspective of capacious reflexivity (Gruwell, 2020, p. 93). This allowed the adaptation of the project to circumstances as they arose (Lindgren, 2017, p. 285), to weigh continuously such notions as privacy, consent, trust, and authenticity, and to apply consistently an ethics of care for marginalized and vulnerable communities (here I have in mind women, sexual minorities, and racialized persons, rather than self-victimizing groups of White cis heterosexual men) (Conway, 2021, p. 370; Ess, 2014, pp. 233–235; Franzke, 2020, p. 65; Suomela et al., 2019, pp. 9–11; Svedmark, 2019, p. 113).

More clearly, throughout the entire process, I have carefully balanced the integrity of the research with the complete anonymization of all aspects of research (such as changing the name of the research site, altering the names/usernames of data authors, and removing metadata information to ensure their anonymity, modifying quotes to prevent findability, and even deleting part of the data collected) and a partial anonymization (maintaining the name of the research site, the names/usernames of data authors, but cleaning metadata information, not altering direct quotations; for detailed discussions, see Conway, 2021, pp. 374–376; Massanari, 2018, p. 5; Rambukkana, 2019, pp. 317–319; Suomela et al., 2019, p. 14). As such, given that the research site is in the public domain and easily searchable, I chose to name it in full; notwithstanding that, in the process of thematic organization of data, I deleted the transcriptions after the direct quotes had been rephrased from the examined videos. In addition, I deidentified the data (Kirilova & Karcher, 2017) by anonymizing the usernames of data authors in the comments section, rephrasing their comments to the videos, and removing metadata information across the research site to ensure their anonymity. I am nonetheless aware of the digital impermanence that characterizes the research site, as noted in the theoretical discussion above.

### Cementing Fraternities behind Digital Potemkin Facades

This section is structured in two parts. In the first, the variable contours of the Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances across the research site are considered, while the second focuses more specifically on their ideological content. To begin with, the skewed distribution of engagement between the digital platforms and the website becomes quickly apparent. Concerning scalability and searchability (Boyd, 2011), the greatest level of engagement is registered on the YouTube channel, which plays a key role in the process of building a digital community (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 2; Khazaee & Novak, 2018, p. 3), which is best described as a fraternity (given the heavy gender imbalance) around Interregnum video-podcasts. The collected videos gathered over 37,800 views in total, although some had as little as 850 views, while others received as many as 12,240 views. The viewers appeared to identify themselves with the far-right ideology writ large, given that among the like/dislike reactions the majority was overwhelmingly positive, with a total of over 1,670 thumbs up and only a bit more than 70 thumbs down.

The level of engagement, in the sense of authored comments posted under each video, was nonetheless more modest—as few as three comments and as many as 140 per video, and a total of just over 280 comments. Nevertheless, these engagements can be interpreted as indicative of a process of coalescing within a digital community, creating a sense of a quasi-homogeneous in-group around a shared far-right ethos of “us” characterized as underdog, which was sharply differentiated from the out-group menacingly identified as “them” (Askanius, 2021, p. 25; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017, pp. 1437–1438; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016, pp. 167–168; Tuters & Hagen, 2020, pp. 2228–2232). In comparison with previous studies of other influential entities within the far-right ecosystem, it appears that the relatively sophisticated level of discussion of Interregnum political salon is less successful in building digital solidarities than the more vernacular repertoire of digital capabilities, such as memes, viral activist videos, seemingly neutral hashtags, and coded hateful expressions (DeCook, 2018; Maly, 2019; Tuters & Hagen, 2020).

Despite this, the home-made character of these videos (as the participants to these recordings connected from different locations, with varying Internet infrastructures), testified by the recurring technical shortcomings (uneven image quality and even screen freeze, fluctuating quality of sound, and so on), contributes in my view to their “performances of the ordinary” (Askanius, 2021, pp. 29–31), which blurs the public and private distinction (Boyd, 2011, p. 52) and helps to give a mundane face to the far-right. Users are also encouraged to engage in the discussion by posting their views on the relevant matter, while the speakers attempt to address the sudden technological failures. I argue that this effaces the
temporal gap between the (glitchy) recorded video and accompanying live comments. It thus crafts an impermanent palimpsest, documenting the contours of their digital fraternity whereby users post their comments in reaction to specific interventions of the participants at certain times in the video, comment on each other’s posts, or delete previous comments in reaction to the direction of the overall conversation. In comparison, the AM website provides barely any room for engagement, giving the impression of a mono-directional and static communication channel. Indeed, the articles-cum-blog entries on the Arktos Journal page only collect a handful of comments and those just in reaction to one of the articles. The Interregnum page was introduced with a byline specifying it contained discussions on literature and philosophy, as well as metaphysics at a time in between “orders,” which can be interpreted as the political salon’s ambitions to provide the far-right mobilization with the intellectual consistency needed in its metapolitical struggle. At the same time the phrasing of a time between “orders” is more ambiguous, with the suggestion that watching/listening and commenting on these podcasts could either mean spending one’s time purchasing AM’s various merchandise or preparing to usher in a new world order. Given that in various videos vigorous critiques against consumerism are voiced, particularly as it has developed in the US context, there is good reason to incline toward the latter interpretation.

A closer look of the AM digital ecology provided somewhat surprising insights into the varying scalability (boyd, 2011) across the research site. Out of six links to various platforms on the Interregnum page, only two were active (to its YouTube channel discussed above and its Speaker profile, respectively), while the others to similar podcast services (such as iTunes, Spotify, and Stitcher) and to its RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed connected to its Speaker profile were all inactive/deactivated. This fluctuating scalability shows that these links do not serve a practical purpose (of taking interested users to their most convenient platform to access the Interregnum content); rather, they function as props in AM’s attempt to project a masculine image of digital prowess. On the one hand, this projection feeds on the “materially and symbolically powerful relationship between men and technology” (Mellström, 2003, p. 18), which in the Web2.0 sociotechnical context manifests as a “masculinization of digital technology” (Ottemo, 2020, p. 344). Indeed, the fact that both the hosts and invited guests in the examined videos could only be read as cis men indicates that the Interregnum political salon provides the setting for a far-right interpretation of “geek masculinity” that “at once resists, reaffirms and ironizes hegemonic masculinity” (Bell, 2013, p. 77) for ideological ends. On the other hand, and emphasizing its ideological use, this projection of potential affordances feeds on the quasi-mythological descriptions of far-right entities as skilled users of the visual and narrative capabilities of digital media, capable of weaponizing the sociotechnical affordances of the digital landscape for their ideological purposes (Lewis, 2018, p. 30; Matamoros-Fernández, & Farkas, 2021, p. 206).

A closer examination of the ideological content of the Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of the Interregnum political salon elicits clearer contours of the far-right performance of masculinity of crises. It positions itself at the junction of several systemic crises of the contemporary liberal-democratic order. First, the demographic crisis is alleged to have reached its zenith, whereby the White nationalist theory of “the Great Replacement” (le grand remplacement) which warns against the demographic and cultural replacement of White populations with immigrant populations from North Africa and the Middle East, as well as South America, is asserted to have already materialized in most polities in Western Europe and North America (Berntzen, 2020, p. 93), which are de facto multiracial, with dwindling White native populations. Somewhat surprisingly, Eastern European polities are in turn praised for managing to resist this demographic replacement, a result of their staunch social conservatism (manifest as explicit misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, and racism) and the strong illiberal tendencies of leaders, for example, in Hungary and Poland. This, however, builds on a purposely insufficient understanding of wider demographic trends, whereby Eastern Europe is rushing toward demographic collapse as polities across the region are continuously shrinking, with growing numbers of their citizens willingly moving to Western Europe or North America (Cipőes & Norocel, 2020, pp. 55–56). The far-right performance of masculinity here is intimately connected to the restoration of White supremacy in an ethnopluralistic context, which carefully celebrates and enforces racial borders (Keskinen, 2018).

Second, and closely connected to the above, is the acute societal crisis caused by the misguided pursuit of equality and denial of alleged natural hierarchies determined by gender and sexual hierarchies (privileging cis heterosexual men), racial hierarchies (privileging White native populations), and class hierarchies (privileging conservative-minded elites). In this regard, feminism, deemed to be one of most dangerous ideologies of equality, is accused of having manipulated the rule of law and perverted democracy to favor the rule of women’s elites—here the recorded utterance was a composite juxtaposition of the Greek words for woman (gynos) and nobility rule (aristokratos). The accusation goes unchallenged, both podcast guests and YouTube users joining in and accusing women of having deserted their biological, social, and symbolic destiny, thereby endangering the very existence of the social fabric of the majority’s societies in the global North. This, evidently, is a willful misunderstanding of the Nordic model of “women-friendly welfare states,” which pursued the dismantling of gender hierarchies and social inequalities through the common effort of both women and men in some of the most homogeneously White societies (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2019, pp. 223–224; Norocel et al., 2020, pp. 426–427). The far-right performance of masculinity in this
context is built around the idea of restoring the public sphere to be the realm of men and convincing women to embrace their emotional and physical subordinate status. Women’s failure to comply, they warn, may in extremis lead far-right men to anti-feminist separatism, consequently embracing the MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) communities.

Finally, the democratic crisis of increasingly normalized far-right politics in right-wing populist clothing across much of Europe and Northern America (Agius et al., 2020; Moffitt, 2015; Muliniari & Neergaard, 2019; Norocel et al., 2020; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) is played in a slightly different key. On the one hand, there is manifest frustration that the parties responsible for this normalization are prevented from overthrowing democratic control mechanisms altogether, while, on the other hand, right-wing populist parties such as Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) or Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) are heavily criticized for abandoning their anti-systemic agenda and softening their ideological profile to gather more mainstream votes—further entrenching the present democratic stasis. At the same time, there is substantial irritation that the White working class across the global North does not support parties that pursue “real far right politics.” To sum up, the hegemonic liberal-democratic world order seems ripe for a cathartic change, and the far-right performance of masculinity is positioning itself to usher in a new order. However, somewhat surprisingly, it is playing tunes in a distinctly nostalgic key, one in pursuit of the re-naturalization of domination and hierarchy across the intersectional axes of inequality.

Conclusion

Against a background of contemporary and multiple crises, this article explored the way in which Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances of AM far-right metapolitics are gendered. It was explicitly focused on the imbrication of masculinity and crises that are played out in the Interregnum metapolitics. The article makes both empirical and theoretical contributions to the field. Empirically, the digital ethnography has evidenced how far-right performances of masculinity in the Interregnum political salon cement digital fraternities, which coalesce around a shared far-right ethos of the underdog “us.” Importantly, it was revealed how they make use of Web2.0 sociotechnical affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017) to present themselves as capable of skillfully weaponizing the digital landscape for their metapolitical struggle. On closer inspection, these performances of masculinity are defined through simplistic nostalgia, which seeks to re-naturalize domination and hierarchy in ways that privilege White cis heterosexual masculinities that cut across intersectional axes of inequality in terms of gender and sexuality, race, and social class. Consequently, the study adds greater nuance to previous analyses of other metapolitical projects in the global North (Feshami, 2021; Maly, 2019; Paul, 2021). In this respect, it underlines the strategic location of AM as both a significant ideological hub for the European “New Right” network and its primary place among other far-right entities in Sweden (Askanius, 2021; Lundström & Lundström, 2021; Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018). These findings were intrinsically connected to theoretical developments which allowed particular phenomena to be critically discerned and understood—specifically, the concept masculinity of crises, which was underlined with a superordinate intersectionality perspective (Leek & Kimmel, 2015; Norocel et al., 2020), which I would argue allows the move beyond the sensationalist and asysemblage impression of the “toxic masculinity” concept (Waling, 2019).

The methodological and ethical aspects are also noteworthy. The study employed a digital ethnography (Hine, 2012, 2015; Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016) supplemented with a methodology of tactical resistance (Gruwell, 2020) and pragmatism (Lindgren, 2017), solidly grounded in a feminist ethics concerned with marginalized and vulnerable communities (Ackerly & True, 2008; Haraway, 1991). This enabled me to discern the coded and subtle uses of language in the Interregnum political salon, in a manner similar to other entities in the far-right ecosystem (Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018). At the same time, a “methodology of tactical resistance” was employed (Gruwell, 2020), which allowed the navigation of a potentially harmful far-right digital landscape (Conway, 2021; Gruwell, 2020; Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019; Suomela et al., 2019). By definition, this study provides a somewhat narrow ethnographic snapshot (Kerrigan, 2019) of a specific entity of the far-right ecosystem (Baele et al., 2020), albeit with meaningful findings. This could be expanded by further research to map out the larger far-right ecosystem by including a significantly larger data set, which could be analyzed through a more capacious mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives (Hjorth et al., 2017, p. 75; Lindgren, 2017, p. 280). Such studies would need to carefully parse the ethical challenges of studying the far-right, in terms of complying with the growing, yet still diffuse, set of ethical guidelines in the field; the potential dangers this may posit to the researcher; and the pursuit of an ethics of care for marginalized and vulnerable communities that the far-right actively militates against.

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Notes

1. This so-called “community of work and thought” crystallized around Alain de Benoist, with the intention to coalesce an intellectual nexus for the French far right (Berntzen, 2020, pp. 32–33; Maly, 2019, p. 4).

2. Tellingly, Michael Salter’s contribution in The Atlantic (27 February 2019) provides a critical, albeit inexact, overview of the instances in which English-language “newspaper and magazine articles have blamed toxic masculinity for rape, murder, mass shootings, gang violence, online trolling, climate change, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump” (https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/toxic-masculinity-history/583411/). It is worth noting that the concept has found its way in other languages as well.

3. As data collection took place in several stages, I was also able to document dislikes/thumbs down, before YouTube removed this information from public access in late 2021.

4. Being an early-career critical gender scholar, a cis man of Eastern European heritage, working at a prestigious university in Sweden, and culturally identifying myself with the Swedish-speaking community in Finland provides me with legitimacy to analyze the far-right ecosystem in this study and present my findings to lay audiences both internationally and in Sweden, but it also renders me vulnerable to far-right reprisal.

5. I subscribe to the deontological imperatives specific to Northern European approaches to Internet research ethics, triangulating the existing EU GDPR legislation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679, pp. 16–21) and Swedish legislation (Lag (2003:460), the guidelines for Internet research of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2019), and the most recent guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al., 2020).

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