

Responding to socio-political challenges online through radical or extreme narratives and alternative forms of collective identities

Guest Editors: Theofilos Gkinopoulos (Behavior in Crisis Lab, Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University), Malgorzata Kossowska (Behavior in Crisis Lab, Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University), Ana Guinote (University College London), Jesper Strömbäck (University of Gothenburg)

In the face of major socio-political crises - such as climate change, migration, or military conflicts - the role of digital and social media has become increasingly vital (Zhang, 2023). These platforms offer unparalleled access to information, providing real-time updates and direct communication from both official and unofficial sources (Kumpel, 2021). While this empowers individuals to share and receive information, it also accelerates the spread of diverse, radical non-mainstream narratives, misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda (Gago-Ja'afaru & Asemah, 2024). In a world marked by ongoing upheaval, the digital space provides fertile ground for the creation of alternative communities that challenge traditional political systems and mainstream media. Digital platforms act as sorting mechanisms that promote the formation of microidentities characterized by their narrow and emergent nature, marked by distinct epistemic realities, unwavering internal support for their ideology and activities, and in-group self-determination at the expense of the broader society (Kossowska et al., 2023). These identities may range from fragmented narratives that create echo chambers and isolate individuals from the broader societal discourse contributing to polarization (Fukuyama, 2019; Kossowska et al., 2023) to grassroots activism, providing marginalized groups with a platform to campaign for fairness, increased participation, and better representation (O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2023). Thus, social media can encourage a host of non-traditional identities and shared realities that can challenge social integration and existing power structures. Although significant research has explored how social media shapes attitudes, identities and behaviors (e.g., Baldauf-Quilliatre et al., 2017; Gerbaudo & Trere, 2015; Wang et al., 2021), many crucial dimensions remain unexamined. The alarmingly increased levels of misinformation and ideological extremism in the aftermath of recent crises (e.g., COVID-19) or amidst ongoing crises (e.g., climate crisis, wars and military conflicts) necessitate revisiting the dynamics of identity in digital environments and the emergence of alternative identity forms, captured by terms such as the *micro-identities* in online environments as responses to socio-political, economic and other challenges that contemporary societies face. These highly specific, nuanced, and situational aspects of an individual's identity constitute newly emerging forms of identities as responses to socio-political challenges, which are more fluid and dynamic than other forms of identity and more tied to specific contexts compared to other broader identity forms that encompass a general sense of self.

This special issue seeks to address these gaps by gathering empirical evidence on the formation of identities that arise as precursors or consequences of the spread of ideologically extreme and radical narratives in digital environments. Firstly, it will explain and furnish strategies to grapple with the spread of extreme narratives in various digital realms and mainstream or alternative social

media environments which, in turn, initiate and/or exacerbate social segregation and alienation. By gaining a holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of what leads to the emergence of alternative identities in digital environments, we can begin to envision creative ways to use digital and social media, bringing to the foreground many of the upsides and untapped opportunities of digitalization. To this end, our special issue also aims to focus on contexts and examples of radical and propagated narratives in online environments that stem not only from polarized societies or not only constitute manifestations of a segregated society, but also reflect the weaknesses and inequalities of otherwise democratic societies. Secondly, our special issue invites different types of contributions - *empirical articles*, *conceptual and theoretical papers*, *systematic reviews*, *meta-analyses*, and *policy briefs* that report theory-solid and evidence-based recommendations (relevant to, for example, mitigation strategies for spreading extreme and propagated narratives in online environments). To this end, it aims to be open to varied submission formats in an effort to reach a wider academic and non-academic audience. Our special issue will center on the emergence of alternative identities and narratives in digital and social media as responses to: 1) major political and societal changes and also 2) structural hierarchies within democratic societies. Thus, it will be in a position to reach out to and engage with audiences from the Global North to the Global South, especially given that recent crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, war and military conflicts) and ongoing emergencies (e.g., climate change) unsettle societies worldwide. Additionally, by proposing a topic that concerns societies across the globe, and calls for interdisciplinary perspectives, this special issue aims to ensure a diversity of authors across gender, geographical location and discipline.

Potential research questions that our special issue aims to address, include the following:

- How does social media use affect forms of identities relevant to socio-political topics?
- What are the contextual, psychological, social or political factors that lead to the spread of radical, extreme and propagated narratives in digital and social media?
- Which forms of political participation take place in the digital environment and either precede or follow forms of identification with online groups?
- Are there any differences in political participation forms and in manifestations of identification with online groups between mainstream and alternative media outlets?
- What are the motivational mechanisms and needs (e.g., need for power, security, and/or significance) that drive spread of radical, extreme and propagated narratives in media environments or precede the formation of alternative identities as responses to socio-political, economic and other challenges?

These are some questions that the special issue aims to shed light on, but the list is not exhaustive.

The timeline for this special issue will be: Submission of proposed papers (outlined with abstracts/short summary): **15th April 2025**; Decision on selected proposals and invitation of full submissions in consultation with the journal's editorial team: **15th May 2025**; First full papers submission: **10th October 2025**; Decisions following first review: **30th December 2025**; Final decisions following second review: **30th May 2026**.

If you would like to propose a paper for the special issue, please provide a title and abstract or short summary, by 15 April 2025, to the guest editors: Theofilos Gkinopoulos (email: theofilos.gkinopoulos@uj.edu.pl); Malgorzata Kossowska (email: malgorzata.kossowska@uj.edu.pl); Ana Guinote (email: a.guinote@ucl.ac.uk) and Jesper Strömbäck (email: jesper.stromback@jmg.gu.se).

Scholars from all relevant fields, including Communication/Journalism, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology are welcome.

Authors invited to participate will submit their papers through the *Political Psychology* manuscript submission system and undergo the regular peer review procedure.

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