

Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Axel Bruns, Ehsan Dehghan, Laura Iannelli
**Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the
Public Sphere**

(doi: 10.3270/116607)

Comunicazione politica (ISSN 1594-6061)

Fascicolo 1, aprile 2025

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Axel Bruns,
Ehsan Dehghan, Laura Iannelli

Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere

ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of «fringe democracy» as a multidimensional phenomenon emerging in the contemporary public sphere when alternative digital platforms (spaces/affordances/governance patterns), marginalized actors (groups/practices/ideologies), and heterodox narratives (contents/imaginaries/representations) challenge liberal democratic processes. Fringe democracy is not merely about the rise of non-mainstream platforms but arises from complex interactions between fringe and mainstream platforms, actors, and narratives (as shown by recent changes in mainstream platform moderation practices, which reduce fringe actors' dependence on alternative, freer spaces). While some marginalized actors may propose heterodox narratives driven by democratic values, fringe democracy functions as a form of pseudo-democracy from the margins, exploiting democratic participation mechanisms to undermine core democratic principles. This phenomenon spans ideological spectra, although far-right actors have a particularly notable power to weaken liberal democracies through disruptive communication strategies. After defining fringe democracy, the article introduces empirical and theoretical studies highlighting how interactions between mainstream and fringe platforms shape polarized narratives and amplify manipulative practices. Ultimately, the article addresses methodological and epistemological challenges in researching fringe democracy and advocates a strategy (integrating policy interventions, platform regulations, and media literacy efforts) to effectively address issues posed by the evolving digital public sphere within hybrid media systems, balancing freedom of speech with the necessity of safeguarding democracy.

Keywords: fringe democracy, public sphere, platformization, polarization, manipulation

1. Fringe democracy: A definition for a new critical perspective

Fringe democracy emerges in the contemporary public sphere when online platforms (with alternative affordances and governance), actors (groups, practices,

ideologies), and narratives (contents, imaginaries, representations) challenge democratic forms of political participation. It is not merely a shift of democracy towards new spaces but a reconfiguration of its boundaries, where dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of alternative technological affordances, heterodox patterns of governance, marginalized actors and narratives redefine the relationship between the center and periphery of public debate.

Democratization and openness are linked to the processes of inclusion of voices, topics and cultural representations coming from the margins. Today, however, their presence in the digital public space takes on more ambiguous contours. Online platforms provide new tools for expression and aggregation, but they also shape the logics of visibility and legitimacy, raising questions about the nature and implications of this «fringe» participation.

We know that «supporting democratization would consist of making the voices of margins heard so that they may take part in the definition of public policies» (Tordjman, 2011: 160). This view suggests a bottom-up model of inclusion, where the expansion of participation to marginalized actors and narratives enriches the democratic process, giving it greater pluralism and legitimacy. However, in today's reality, such inclusion is undergoing profound transformation: what happens when the «margins» can no longer be considered merely privileged vectors of political change against the status quo (*ibidem*: 166) but may be associated with forces that attack liberal democracy/or the core principles of democratic thought? And in terms of political communication, what happens when the «margins» gain voice in the context of an increasingly platformized public sphere (Fischer and Jarren, 2024), creating «illiberal public spheres» oriented to «democratic erosion» (Bennett and Kneuer, 2023)? Further, what if journalistic and social media logics (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) mean that such newly empowered marginal and illiberal actors are afforded outsized visibility in comparison to the established representatives of mainstream liberal democratic processes?

In this context, giving voice to the margins no longer represents only a genuine mechanism of democratization but can take on problematic connotations for liberal democracy. The platformization of the public sphere (with its algorithmic and monetization logics, in mainstream and alternative platforms), the practice of political incivility (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024) and the spread of polarizing content and disinformation (through the complex contemporary media ecosystem) can contribute to the amplification of marginal voices that challenge the traditional democratic values and norms of equality, liberty, mediation and representation. In other words, while supporting democratization would require listening to and including marginal voices, the contemporary digital reality risks transforming this dynamic into a hybrid process,

where participation in the public debate collides with the pitfalls of uncontrolled and often manipulated narratives by actors supporting anti-democratic extremism.

Thus, fringe democracy no longer represents merely a bottom-up inclusion process of the «margins» but becomes the battleground where forces of renewal fuel (and are fueled by) dynamics of polarization and manipulation. This transformation raises crucial questions: to what extent can the amplification of marginal voices, although theoretically aimed at more inclusive democratization, compromise the quality and legitimacy of democratic processes in an era where the public sphere is heavily mediatized and platformized? This reflection lies at the heart of the current debate, where the challenge is to reconcile the aspiration for a democracy that embraces the margins with the need to ensure the coherence and solidity of traditional democratic principles against those actors and narratives that carry out attacks against democracy itself or its values through short-circuiting between mainstream and alternative media, in the logic of a hybrid media system.

Fringe democracy is a multidimensional phenomenon developing at the margins of the traditional democratic systems, redefining modes of political participation. It does so through alternative digital platforms (de Winkel, 2023) or fringe spaces within the mainstream platform ecosystem, increasingly contaminating them through marginal affordances and governance, heterodox discursive practices involving fringe publics and extreme ideologies, and new forms of symbolic representation leveraging manipulated content and/or disinformation. It is not merely about the rise of non-mainstream platforms such as Telegram, Gab or Parler, but a complex social and cultural change in a system involving actors (groups, practices, ideologies) and narratives (contents, imaginaries, representations) often excluded from institutional circuits and operating outside the democratic values and norms of representative liberal democracy.

In examining fringe democracy, it is crucial to move beyond a static, spatial understanding of the center–margins divide and instead view them as interwoven in a dynamic process. The center – comprising institutions, mainstream media, and the prevailing norms of liberal democracy – continuously observes and reacts to the margins, while the margins simultaneously influence and sometimes infiltrate the center. In this interplay, marginal actors and ideas can be co-opted and normalized by the center, yet the center itself may adopt fringe practices – such as polarizing or populist rhetoric – to retain legitimacy. Consequently, we see a continuous tension between the mainstreamization of fringe discourse and the fringing of mainstream politics, shaped by mechanisms of absorption and rejection. Digital platforms exacerbate this oscillation by granting marginalized voices visibility, forcing institutional actors to decide whether to include or exclude them. Ultimately, the challenge

of fringe democracy lies not only in determining who remains inside or outside the established order, but in how these margins redefine the rules of the democratic game – and how the center responds to and manages this democratic instability.

In this sense, *fringe democracy* can be seen as a form of pseudo-democracy (or illiberal democracy) from the margins: it employs the language and mechanisms of democratic participation while ultimately subverting or distorting core democratic values and norms. Its rhetoric is characteristically anti-mainstream, often claiming «alternative truths» and adopting conspiratorial discourses that challenge established narratives and institutional authority. Although not necessarily fascist or explicitly anti-democratic, it challenges the foundations of liberal democracy by co-opting its tools and rhetoric for aims that can be exclusionary or hostile to pluralism. This phenomenon gains visibility in today's online public sphere through a short-circuiting between mainstream and alternative media (Boccia Artieri, 2024), where marginal discourses and practices are amplified and normalized, even as they undermine democratic principles from within. Fringe democracy's impact is not univocal: it can still drive political participation and democratic inclusion, but it can also challenge the principles of mediation and representation, promoting actors and narratives that are disruptive of the traditional democratic public sphere (Esau *et al.*, 2024).

Its communicative dimension is central: the narratives disseminated by self-marginalized groups in the digital spaces often oppose mainstream narratives, imaginaries, and representation, and question democratic processes themselves, their legitimacy and the norms of their decision-making. Affective polarization, ideological divergence, anti-democratic extremism, hate speech, and conspiratorial thinking contribute to redefining political communication dynamics, finding fertile ground on both alternative platforms at the edges of the mainstream domain and mainstream platforms which are «relaxing» their content moderation approaches and their rules of inclusion/exclusion of legitimate contents/actors. Therefore, fringe democracy is not only a reaction to the crisis of representative democracy but also an emerging configuration of the digitized public sphere, where participation from the margins takes on ambivalent and potentially destabilizing forms.

2. Rethinking political margins: The new dynamics of fringe democracy

Fringe democracy differs from previous phenomena of political participation centered around alternative media, which tended to operate in marginal or «ghettoized» spaces – such as street television (Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali, 2003) or

Indymedia (Kidd, 2013) – or to penetrate mainstream circuits, risking assimilation or co-optation to the point of legitimizing authoritarian drifts (Ben-David and Fernández, 2016). A historical example of participation which, in the past, has not been beneficial to democracy is represented by the Nazi party's alternative media, which contributed to building consent in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (Iannelli, 2016; Pajnik and Downing, 2008). Today, it is no longer a matter of gradual infiltration but rather a structural legitimization of fringe platforms' governance, actors, and narratives, facilitated by the ambivalent policies of mainstream digital platforms.

An example of this dynamic are the post-fact-checking strategies adopted by Meta and X, which mark a historical turning point: fringe groups, practices, ideologies, and contents no longer require alternative spaces to thrive, as the same hegemonic platforms – now veritable gatekeepers of the internet (Gillespie, 2018) – integrate them through engagement and virality logics.

An additional example of these new dynamics of fringe democracy emerged when Gab decided to rely on a fork of Mastodon for its technological infrastructure (Robertson, 2019), which highlights the tensions between distributed governance and exclusion strategies adopted by decentralized platforms. Mastodon, designed as an alternative to centralized social media platforms, operates through the fediverse, an ecosystem of interconnected but autonomous servers. This model, intended to provide greater independence from the commercial logic of mainstream platforms, became controversial when Gab, a well-known far-right social network, attempted to integrate into the network. The Mastodon community responded immediately: several administrators blocked servers associated with Gab, demonstrating that decentralization does not necessarily equate to political neutrality but can be leveraged to implement exclusionary mechanisms.

This episode reflects a broader trend in fringe democracy: the actors who contest democratic norms and values do not merely operate within ideologically defined niches but navigate online platforms based on strategic opportunities and technological affordances. And this happens for far-right and far-left collective actors. On the one hand, the radical right has refined multi-platform organization strategies that allow it to avoid digital ghettoization (Ehsan and Stott, 2020). On the other hand, heterogeneous movements such as wellness, spiritualist, and anti-vax communities – often linked to populist or anti-establishment stances (Demuru, 2022) – demonstrate that the paradigm of fringe democracy extends well beyond the far right.

Recent studies on phenomena like the leftist online community known as BreadTube, for example, show that even radical left-wing groups build ecosystems of counter-narratives that construct alternative spaces for participation and representation (Cotter, 2024). However, although the fringe community of BreadTube

produces radical ideas, sustains itself through alternative funding models, advocates for a culture that silences conservative opinions, and views liberal democracy as insufficient to ensure social justice, it is guided by values of social, political, and economic equity. Even LGBTQ+ groups can be highly fringe and marginalized in certain social contexts, but through activism and «fringe democratic action», they can drive change toward a more inclusive direction in contemporary democracies. These examples show that fringe democracy involves both the radical right and the radical left and can also contribute to strengthening democratic principles in a more inclusive direction. However, this should not diminish concerns about the significant power of contemporary far-right movements to activate illiberal culture wars and weaken democracies through disruptive communication styles, since – unlike radical left movements – they are united by a common political identity, a preference for hierarchy, and successful organization around strong leaders (Bennett, 2024; Bennett, Segerberg and Knüpfer, 2017).

3. Cross-platforms dynamics of fringe democracy

The contemporary landscape of digital communication is characterized by a complex interplay of public, semi-public, and private spaces (Boccia Artieri *et al.*, 2021). These spaces differ in terms of visibility, governance, and participation, but they are interconnected through reciprocal migration dynamics between «fringe» and mainstream digital media. This interplay is central to understanding the phenomenon of fringe democracy, where marginalized groups and narratives not only find expression but also mobilize to influence public discourse on a global scale.

Fringe platforms (de Winkel, 2023) are alternative digital services that explicitly contest the ideological premises and governance structures of mainstream platforms. They provide spaces for communities with diverse ideological stances, ranging from far-right to anarchist and anti-authoritarian views, and articulate criticisms of Big Tech's policies, moderation models, and power concentration (de Winkel, 2023; Herasimenka, 2022). These alternative digital spaces – encompassing distinct technological infrastructures, shared norms, symbolic practices, and networks of people – are connected to disinformation ecosystems, the spread of hate speech, and the normalization of illiberal and extremist thought (Schulze *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, despite their potential ideological variety, some scholars highlight the existence of a relationship of co-dependency and interdependence between the rise of alternative digital spaces and the growth of discursive forms associated with the far-right (e.g., Marwick *et al.*, 2022; Törnberg and Törnberg, 2024; Urman and Katz, 2022).

These platforms, by facilitating ideological expression outside the traditional norms of the public sphere, contribute to the fragmentation of public discourse and the erosion of democratic narratives.

However, this fragmentation is not isolated but embedded in a broader system of platformization of the public sphere (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). Digital platforms, through their algorithms and engagement mechanisms, amplify fringe narratives and facilitate global mobilization. This amplification leads to the hyper-visibility of marginal discourses, creating an illusion of widespread acceptance that contributes to the normalization of illiberal and extremist ideologies (Bennett, 2024; Walther and McCoy, 2021). As a result, digital platforms not only democratize speech but also accelerate polarization and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

A key feature of fringe democracy is the strategic migration between fringe and mainstream platforms, facilitated by the hybrid nature of digital media (Chadwick, 2017). This migration is not merely a survival strategy but a tactical maneuver to exploit different affordances and maximize reach. For example, extremist groups may utilize fringe platforms for community building and radicalization while leveraging mainstream platforms for public visibility and recruitment (Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022). This turns the radicalization of public discourse and the dissemination of disinformation into a participatory effort (Starbird *et al.*, 2023).

This strategic navigation between platforms demonstrates a hybrid media system where fringe and mainstream digital spaces are not separate but interdependent. The reciprocal dynamics between these spaces create feedback loops that amplify fringe narratives, contributing to their mainstreaming and normalization. Scholars like Marwick *et al.* (2022) argue that this mainstreaming is not a passive process but an active negotiation of platform affordances and regulatory frameworks.

There is also an interdependence between fringe platforms and mainstream media that is complicated by the emergence of alternative networks acting with manipulative intent. These fringe networks engage in attention hacking to boost their visibility, employing tactics such as hate speech, which is subsequently dismissed as trickster trolling (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). These provocations attract mainstream media coverage, thereby amplifying the groups' messages and extending their reach.

This vicious cycle that is created between online platforms and mainstream media illustrates how fringe groups exploit the possibilities of digital communication to circumvent ideological containment, effectively challenging the hegemony of mainstream discourse. This is the antithesis of the «echo chamber» myth (Bruns, 2019): far from content with creating separate spaces where supporters can be increasingly radicalized, away from the mitigating influence of mainstream media, the ultimate aim here is to disrupt and even take over the mainstream narrative by establishing a

robust and vocal presence within it. The result is a contested public sphere in which the boundaries between fringe and mainstream become increasingly blurred.

Fringe platforms achieve economic sustainability through strategies such as digital patronage (voluntary donations, premium content) and shady deals (non-transparent financing), which allow them to remain independent from mainstream economic structures (Hua *et al.*, 2022). This economic self-sufficiency has strengthened the ideological independence of fringe platforms, allowing them to resist the content moderation policies that had traditionally been imposed by mainstream platforms, at least before the change in content review policies on platforms such as Meta and X that will enable the appearance of more harmful content there, too.

4. Fringe democracy and/as/against «free speech»

The recurrence of platform moderation practices (and other mechanisms designed to address abuse, hate speech, disinformation, exploitation, and other problematic forms of communication) as a theme in our discussion so far points to the central role that the concept of freedom of speech plays in any analysis of fringe democracy. The idea that mainstream institutions – the state, the media, digital platforms – seek to curtail their freedom of speech is one of the major factors animating such groups: this is expressed especially in their frequent complaints about «political correctness», «wokeness», or «cancel culture». Consequently, they seek the right to make offensive statements with impunity, and dismiss those who would challenge them; more broadly, this is also extended to claim the right to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, and thereby to undermine the factual basis of public debate altogether.

The fact that these concerted efforts to broaden the spectrum of what statements are generally deemed acceptable in public communication – to enlarge what is often called the «Overton Window», after U.S. policy analyst Joseph Overton – are made under the guise of «freedom of speech» necessitates a consideration of what we understand by freedom of speech in the first place, of whether such freedom should be absolute or have limits, and of where such limits might be drawn. As many fringe groups originate in or are strongly influenced by U.S. politics, and most mainstream digital platforms are based in the U.S., these considerations often proceed from a maximalist and ultimately highly simplistic American conceptualisation of free speech as an absolute good that should remain unencumbered. This starting point also provides fringe groups with an opportunity to decry any more nuanced approaches to free speech rights – balancing the right to freedom *of* speech with the right to freedom *from* speech when such speech is harmful – as an unacceptable curtailing of such rights.

Conversely, such more balanced approaches – prevalent especially in Europe – recognise that true freedom of speech, and the benefits it generates for a democratic society, are possible only when a broad range of political groups are able to exercise their right to speak without fear of marginalisation, vilification, and retribution, including from their political opponents. This, however, necessarily also means curtailing the speech of such opponents when it is used to deliberately dominate, denigrate, disrupt, and drown out other groups. In other words, fringe groups that claim a right to free speech for themselves but in doing so deny it to their opponents can forfeit their own freedom of speech.

In this understanding of «free speech», state authorities are entitled to curtail speech where fringe actors exploit their rights by engaging explicitly and persistently in speech that violates the core principles of democratic thought. In a digital environment, this curtailing might take the form of temporary or permanent content and account take-downs, for instance; more generally, it could also lead to restrictions or bans on political associations and groups. However justified they may be by a fringe group's actions, these restrictions can also serve as further evidence for a fringe group's claims that the establishment is indeed attempting to marginalise and exclude them from political participation: it is, precisely because the group poses a threat to democracy. It is incumbent on authorities to exercise their power carefully and with explicit justification, therefore, and to make cautious judgments about whether the benefits of safeguarding democracy from the harmful activities of fringe groups outweigh the consequences of emboldening such fringe groups by this demonstration of state-sanctioned censorship. Of course, this also implies that the state authorities making such calls are themselves reliably impartial and independent, defending the democratic system itself rather than the currently dominant forces within that system – which is not always reliably the case even in established liberal democracies.

5. Fringe democracy, polarization, and disinformation

The articles that responded to our call on fringe democracy provide significant insights into the dynamics of fringe platforms, actors, and narratives and their impact on political polarization and disinformation, as well as on the interactions between mainstream and fringe platforms. These studies deepen our understanding of how digital public spaces are being reshaped, contributing to both the radicalization and pollution of public discourse. We can outline three paths.

5.1. Communication spaces aligned with fringe ideologies and political polarization

The articles by Jakob Bæk Kristensen («Platform Polarization. Do Alternative Platforms Drive Discursive Polarization?») and Toby Hopp and Pat Ferrucci («An Illustration of the Mutualistic Relationship between Countermedia Attendance and Right-Wing Extremity») analyze the relationship between alternative platforms and dynamics of polarization and extremism, focusing on the contexts of Germany and the United States, respectively. Kristensen explores how alternative platforms, characterized by minimal content moderation, attract users seeking discourses deliberately excluded from mainstream platforms, contributing to strong affective and belief-based polarization. This phenomenon shows that these platforms not only reflect existing ideologies but also amplify them, leading to significant divergence in cross-platform public discourse. Similarly, Hopp and Ferrucci demonstrate a mutual relationship between countermedia consumption and right-wing extremism in the United States, suggesting that engagement with these platforms not only reinforces pre-existing extremist views but also contributes to ideological radicalization.

Piergiorgio Degli Esposti and Laura Tirabassi («Cancel Culture, Social Media, and Polarization. Cultural Consumption as a Practice of Cultural Resistance and its Critical Issues») expand this perspective by exploring the use of Cancel Culture (CC) discourses and practices, which allows marginalized radical groups to reclaim their narratives against social elites, undermining democratic values such as dialogue, inclusivity, and fair play. The article highlights how CC – by both the far right and far left – creates affective polarization and contributes to platform capitalism, particularly when migrating from the fringe to the mainstream media arenas.

5.2. Disinformation and fringe ideologies between mainstream and marginalized platforms

Massimo Terenzi («Cryptocurrencies from Mainstream to Fringe Platforms. Media Manipulation and Deceptive Schemes on Facebook and Telegram») explores media manipulation dynamics through deceptive cryptocurrency schemes that leverage mainstream platforms (Facebook) to funnel users into fringe environments (Telegram). Terenzi underlines how cryptocurrencies embody the anti-authoritarian ethics inherent in fringe ideologies, by circumventing the institutional frameworks of states and banks. The study – which focuses on Nigeria as research context – shows how coordinated sharing behavior on Facebook amplifies seemingly legitimate ads about

cryptocurrencies to redirect users to Telegram. In this permissive and loosely regulated ecosystem, manipulative schemes such as referral systems, giveaways, and gamified tasks thrive, aiming to maintain user engagement and evade regulatory scrutiny. This analysis reveals the connections between problematic information and fringe ideologies, illustrating how Facebook's algorithmic visibility and Telegram's permissive ecosystem complement each other, facilitating digital manipulation. In doing so, Terenzi's analysis highlights the need to adapt regulatory frameworks to address the interaction between mainstream and fringe platforms, in particular given the decentralized and transient nature of the analyzed content.

5.3. Relationship between mainstream (private messaging) platforms and fringe groups

The article by Iginio Gagliardone and Nkululeko Sibiya («Anti-Migrant Sentiments in the Global South. Fringe Platforms and the Paradoxes of Exclusionary Politics in Post-Colonial South Africa») examines the relationship between mainstream private messaging platforms and fringe groups, focusing on the anti-migrant movement «Operation Dudula» in South Africa. The study highlights how the group uses WhatsApp to mobilize nativist sentiments and exclusionary rhetoric, challenging traditional explanations of discrimination based on skin color, religion, or tradition. Gagliardone and Sibiya reveal an emerging paradox: while Operation Dudula's nativism echoes global exclusionary movements, it adopts a unique position in the post-colonial South African context by mobilizing Black South Africans against other Black Africans. This case exemplifies how mainstream private messaging platforms, like WhatsApp, are leveraged by fringe groups to construct narratives of otherness that challenge power relations not only between hegemonic and marginalized groups but also among different marginalized groups. Terenzi also explores the relationship between mainstream platforms and fringe groups, highlighting how Facebook is used to direct those users who are attracted by the cryptocurrencies – and their opposition to state and bank regulations – to fringe environments on Telegram. This study emphasizes the importance of understanding how fringe groups exploit mainstream platforms to amplify their narratives and mobilize digital communities.

The collected articles provide a complex overview of dynamics between mainstream and fringe platforms (alternative affordance and governance), actors (groups, practices, ideologies), and narratives (contents, imaginaries, representations). They describe empirical and theoretical studies that reveal how mainstream and fringe platforms interact to shape polarized narratives, amplify manipulative practices and

anti-democratic ideologies, challenge traditional technical and institutional moderation mechanisms, and redefine the boundaries of public discourse for diverse types of marginalized actors.

These studies enrich the debate on fringe democracy by showing how the platformization of the public sphere amplifies anti-democratic marginalized voices and creates new forms of political participation, raising critical questions about the future of digital democracy and the risks of increasing polarization and disinformation.

6. Challenges for research on fringe democracy

Research on fringe democracy faces several significant challenges that need to be addressed in order to advance the field and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how fringe platforms, their actors and narratives are shaping public discourse, and how they relate to the dynamics of political polarisation and disinformation processes. These challenges are both methodological and epistemological, requiring a rethinking of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms to account for the complex and evolving nature of digital public spheres.

6.1. Moving beyond U.S.-centric and Eurocentric analysis

One of the primary challenges is overcoming the dominance of U.S.-centric analyses in the study of fringe democracy. Much of the existing literature on fringe platforms, actors, discourses tends to focus on American contexts, where the dynamics of political polarization, disinformation, and extremist illiberal ideologies are often shaped by the country's unique media system and political culture. However, this narrow focus risks overlooking the diverse manifestations of fringe democracy in other sociopolitical contexts. Articles by Kristensen, Gagliardone and Sibiya, and Terenzi effectively illustrate the importance of examining fringe platforms in non-U.S. settings, such as Germany and Africa, providing valuable insights into how local political cultures and historical contexts shape the use and impact of these platforms. Furthermore, including perspectives from the Global South, Gagliardone and Sibiya, and Terenzi broaden the geographic scope of fringe democracy research to non-Western countries, showing the complexities of post-colonial political realities.

6.2. Expanding methodological approaches: beyond big data and surveys

Another challenge lies in the over-reliance on quantitative methods such as big data analytics and surveys, which, although valuable, offer only a partial view of fringe democracy. Big data approaches, including the use of Large Language Models (LLMs), are useful for analyzing vast amounts of digital content and detecting patterns in online discourses and practices, as demonstrated in articles by Kristensen and Terenzi. Surveys, on the other hand, help capture the relations between individual attitudes toward media and political orientations, as seen in Hopp and Ferrucci's article. However, these methods often lack the contextual depth needed to understand the underlying social dynamics and to explore the processes of meaning-making involving fringe actors.

To address this limitation, it is essential to incorporate more qualitative approaches that allow for a deeper exploration of the communicative practices within fringe platforms. The article by Gagliardone and Sibiya, for example, underscores the importance of ethnographic content analysis for studying how the users of the WhatsApp group dedicated to the anti-migrant movement «Operation Dudula» gradually become aware of divergent opinions and negotiate identity, sense of belonging, and political meaning. Ethnographic content analysis is necessary not only to reconstruct the construction of collective experiences but also to understand how these processes occur in private group settings, that is, intimate digital spaces that are less accessible to traditional data scraping methods.

Additionally, Terenzi's article highlights the need for a qualitative analysis of active links on Telegram to unravel the complex strategies employed to engage and manipulate users about crypto scams. Moreover, Degli Esposti and Tirabassi's article advocates for a theoretical-reconstructive approach that integrates empirical findings with theoretical frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of fringe democracy. This approach emphasizes the importance of developing explanatory theoretical models that account for the power dynamics, ideological structures, and communicative affordances that shape fringe political ecosystems.

6.3. Addressing platform-specific dynamics and cross-platform interactions

An additional challenge is the need to account for platform-specific affordances and the increasingly complex cross-platform interactions that characterize political communication in the fringe democracy. Fringe platforms, such as Telegram

and Parler, are often designed with minimal content moderation, attracting users who seek to engage in discourses excluded from mainstream social media. However, these platforms do not exist in isolation; they interact with mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter in complex ways, influencing and amplifying each other's narratives. This cross-platform dynamic challenges researchers to develop new analytical frameworks that can capture the fluidity of digital communication across different digital environments.

As illustrated by Terenzi's work, fringe platforms often serve as staging grounds for strategic manipulation and deceptive schemes, leveraging the visibility algorithms of mainstream platforms to attract users and redirect them to less regulated digital spaces. This interplay between mainstream and fringe platforms necessitates a multi-layered analytical approach that can trace the movement of users and narratives across the digital ecosystem. It also underscores the importance of understanding how the diverse platform affordances shape users' (disinformation) practices, (polarized) ideologies, and (anti-democratic) discourses.

Moreover, the recent post-fact-checking strategies adopted by Meta (embracing the «community notes» model already adopted by X) encourage scholars to analyze how mainstream social media affordances can affect political communication in fringe democracy. What happens when fringe actors and narratives no longer require alternative spaces and are integrated into the mainstream platforms' logics of engagement and virality?

6.4. Ethical and epistemological considerations

Finally, research on fringe democracy must confront ethical and epistemological challenges related to studying politically sensitive and potentially harmful content. The ethnographic study of private messaging groups raises ethical concerns about user consent, privacy, and the potential for researcher bias. Furthermore, analyzing extremist content and manipulative strategies requires a careful balancing act between academic inquiry, threats to the researchers' mental health, and the risk of amplifying harmful narratives. Researchers must develop ethical guidelines that ensure responsible data collection, interpretation, and dissemination of findings. Epistemologically, the study of fringe democracy challenges researchers to rethink traditional notions of public sphere and political participation, and even the notion of free speech and tolerance (towards speech and actions that threaten liberal democracies). The rise of fringe platforms has blurred the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media, public and private communication, and political activism and

extremism. This complexity demands an interdisciplinary approach that combines political communication, media studies, political philosophy, and sociology, to construct a more holistic understanding of contemporary political dynamics.

By addressing these challenges, future research can move beyond conventional frameworks and methodologies to provide a more nuanced, context-sensitive, and ethically responsible understanding of fringe democracy. This endeavor not only contributes to political communication studies but also informs public policy and digital governance strategies, highlighting the need for adaptive regulatory frameworks that can effectively address the challenges posed by the evolving digital public sphere.

7. Conclusions: Practical implications of the fringe democracy framework

This framework of fringe democracy offers critical insights into the evolving dynamics of political communication within hybrid media systems. By analyzing the interaction between fringe platforms like Telegram and mainstream (social) media, we observe that fringe democracy is not merely a digital phenomenon but a socio-political and cultural process that influences public discourse, mobilization, and even policy-making.

The entanglement between fringe spaces and mainstream narratives necessitates nuanced policy interventions. Regulatory frameworks should move beyond content removal to include transparency mandates on algorithms and monetization practices. Additionally, platform governance must be rethought to balance moderation with the protection of freedom of speech. This could involve differentiated approaches for mainstream and fringe platforms, recognizing their unique affordances and user practices.

While curbing disinformation is crucial, interventions must respect freedom of speech to avoid reinforcing anti-establishment sentiments. This balance can be achieved by promoting self-regulation mechanisms and enhancing digital accountability, mandating platforms to engage in dialogue with civil society actors.

Addressing fringe democracy requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates policy interventions, platform governance, and media literacy efforts while safeguarding democratic values. Future research should continue to explore the socio-cultural underpinnings of fringe narratives, the economic incentives behind their monetization strategies, and the role of hybrid media systems in amplifying their reach.

In conclusion, recognizing fringe democracy as more than a digital phenomenon calls for collaborative action involving policymakers, platforms, educators, and civil society to navigate the complexities of contemporary political communication.

Acknowledgement

Giovanni Boccia Artieri acknowledges the project «Countering Online Radicalization and incivility in Italy: from fringe to mainstream – CORIT», cod. P202293P5P_001 (CUP: H53D23009660001) funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, within the framework of PNRR Mission 4 – Component 2 – Investment 1.1 under the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) programme «PRIN 2022 PNRR».

Axel Bruns's research is funded by the Australian Research Council through the Australian Laureate Fellowship project Determining the Drivers and Dynamics of Partisanship and Polarisation in Online Public Debate and the Discovery project Evaluating the Challenge of «Fake News» and Other Malinformation.

Giovanni Boccia Artieri

University of Urbino Carlo Bo

Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies (DISCUI)

Via A. Saffi 15, 61029 Urbino (Italy)

Email: giovanni.bocciaartieri@uniurb.it

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1398-7823>

Axel Bruns

Queensland University of Technology

Digital Media Research Centre

Brisbane, Australia

Email: a.bruns@qut.edu.au

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3943-133X>

Ehsan Dehghan

Queensland University of Technology

Digital Media Research Centre

Brisbane, Australia

Email: e.dehghan@qut.edu.au

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3139-5298>

Laura Iannelli

University of Sassari, Department of Economics and Business

Via Muroni, 25 - 07100 Sassari (Italy)

Email: liannelli@uniss.it

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1679-0647>

References

- Ben-David, A. and Fernández, A.M. (2016). Hate speech and covert discrimination on social media: Monitoring the Facebook pages of extreme-right political parties in Spain. *International Journal of Communication*, 10 (27), 1167–1193.
- Bennett, W.L. (2024). *Communication, Citizenship and «Culture Wars» in Divided Democracies*. Keynote speech at the Mediaflows Conference «Citizenship in the Digital Media Sphere», University of Valencia, 18–20 September.
- Bennett, W.L. and Kneuer, M. (2024). Communication and democratic erosion: The rise of illiberal public spheres. *European Journal of Communication*, 39 (2), 177–196, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231231217378>.
- Bennett, W.L., Segerberg, A. and Knüpfer, C.B. (2017). The democratic interface: Technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21 (11), 1655–1680, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1348533>.
- Bentivegna, S. and Rega, R. (2024). *(Un)civil democracy: Political incivility as a communication strategy*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Berardi, F., Jacquemet, M. and Vitali, G. (2003). *Telestreet: macchina immaginativa non omologata*. Milano: Baldini Castoldi Dalai.
- Boccia Artieri, G. (2024). *La sfera pubblica come piattaforma: dalla disinformazione alla Fringe Democracy*. Milano: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 25 June, <https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/scopri/fringe-democracy/>.
- Boccia Artieri, G., Brilli, S. and Zurovac, E. (2021). Below the radar: Private groups, locked platforms, and ephemeral content – Introduction to the special issue. *Social Media + Society*, 7 (1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988930>.
- Bruns, A. (2019). *Are filter bubbles real?*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cotter, K. (2024). Practical knowledge of algorithms: The case of BreadTube. *New Media & Society*, 26 (4), 2131–2150.
- Dehghan, E. and Nagappa, A. (2022). Politicization and radicalization of discourses in the alt-tech ecosystem: A case study on Gab Social. *Social Media + Society*, 8 (3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221113075>.
- Demuru, P. (2022). Qanons, anti-vaxxers, and alternative health influencers: A cultural semiotic perspective on the links between conspiracy theories, spirituality, and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Semiotics*, 32 (5), 588–605.
- de Winkel, T. (2023). *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*. Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University.
- Ehsan, R. and Stott, P. (eds.) (2020). *Countering the far-right: An anthology*. London: The Henry Jackson Society.

- Esau, K., Choucair, T., Vilkins, S., Svegaard, S.F.K., Bruns, A., O'Connor-Farfan, K.S. and Lubicz-Zaorski, C. (2024). Destructive polarization in digital communication contexts: A critical review and conceptual framework. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127>.
- Fischer, R. and Jarren, O. (2024). The platformization of the public sphere and its challenge to democracy. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 50 (1), 200-215.
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hangen, S.I. (2009). *The rise of ethnic politics in Nepal: Democracy in the margins*. London: Routledge.
- Herasimenka, A. (2022). Movement leadership and messaging platforms in preemptive repressive settings: Telegram and the Navalny Movement in Russia. *Social Media + Society*, 8 (3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221123038>.
- Herf, J. (2006). *The Jewish enemy: Nazi propaganda during World War II and the holocaust*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Hua, Y., Horta Ribeiro, M., Ristenpart, T., West, R. and Naaman, M. (2022). Characterizing alternative monetization strategies on YouTube. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6 (CSCW2), 1-30.
- Iannelli, L. (2016). *Hybrid politics. Media and participation*. London: Sage.
- Kidd, D. (2013). Indymedia.org: A new communications common. In M. McCaughey and M. Ayers (eds.) *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (pp. 47-69). London: Routledge.
- Marwick, A., Clancy, B. and Furl, K. (2022). Far-Right online radicalization: A review of the literature. *The Bulletin of Technology & Public Life*, <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11>.
- Pajnik, M. and Downing, J.D.H. (2008). Introduction: The challenges of «nano-media». In M. Pajnik and J.D.H. Downing (eds.) *Alternative media and the politics of resistance: Perspectives and challenges* (pp. 7-16). Ljubljana: Peace Institute.
- Robertson, A. (2019). How the biggest decentralized social network is dealing with its Nazi problem. *The Verge*, 12 July.
- Schulze, H., Hohner, J., Greipl, S., Girgnhuber, M., Desta, I. and Rieger, D. (2022). Far-right conspiracy groups on fringe platforms: A longitudinal analysis of radicalization dynamics on Telegram. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 28 (4), 1103-1126.
- Starbird, K., DiResta, R. and DeButts, M. (2023). Influence and improvisation: Participatory disinformation during the 2020 US election. *Social Media + Society*, 9 (2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943>.
- van Dijck, J. and Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication*, 1 (1), 2-14, <https://doi.org/10.12924/mac2013.01010002>.
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T. and de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Tordjman, S. (2011). Margins of democracy: From dissidents to civil society activists. In I. Filibi, N. Cornago and J.O. Frosini (eds.) *Democracy with(out) nations? Old and new foundations for political communities in a changing world* (pp. 159-179). Leioa: University of the Basque Country.
- Törnberg, A. and Törnberg, P. (2024). *Intimate communities of hate: Why social media fuels far-right extremism*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Urman, A. and Katz, S. (2022). What they do in the shadows: Examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25 (7), 904-923.
- Walther, S. and McCoy, A. (2021). US extremism on Telegram: Fueling disinformation. Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15 (2), 100-124.

