Challenges and opportunities of social media research. Using Twitter and Facebook to investigate far right discourses

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Abstract

Digital footprints from social media enable us to study the far right in novel ways. In contrast to traditional methods such as interviewing, the examination of online discourse is non-reactive: the data are 'given' and as such not influenced by researchers. Social media thus allow us to unobtrusively get an insight into real-life everyday discussions among far right supporters. Social media also provides far right leaders the opportunity to circumvent traditional news channels, making their voices heard without the interference from gatekeepers and journalists. This chapter reviews the methodological opportunities and challenges of using social media as a source of data. We focus on online discourses of the far right on Twitter and Facebook. To put flesh to the bones, we apply our review to two concrete research questions. First, to what extent are there differences *between* and *within* far right parties and movements in the outgroups that their followers discuss? Second, to what extent do far right leaders moderate their ideological outlook once they become member of a government?

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Introduction

The number of studies addressing social media has markedly increased during the past decades. 'Digital footprints' from online platforms enable us to study social behaviour in novel ways (Golder & Macy 2014; Mosca 2014; Ruths & Pfeffer 2014). The examination of online discussions is non-reactive. In contrast to traditional methods such as face-to-face interviewing, the data are 'given' and as such not influenced by researchers (Bryman 2015). Social media thus allow us to unobtrusively get an insight into real-life everyday discussions among far right supporters (Cleland, Anderson & Aldridge-Deacon 2018; Klein & Muis 2018).

Far right groups were early adaptors of the Internet using forums and message boards such as Stormfront as early as the mid-1990s (De Koster & Houtman 2008; Hawley 2017). For far right groups the web serves 'above all as a public space of debate where positions can be exchanged, where exponents of different parts of the sector can support each other, and where new contacts can be made' (Caiani & Wagemann 2009, p.68). It offers possibilities for reaching their followers, connecting with like-minded groups, and spreading their message (Caiani & Parenti 2013).

They do that quite successfully. For instance, the Dutch Party for Freedom (*PVV*) leader Geert Wilders has more followers on Twitter than Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and the German *AfD* has more likes on Facebook than the Christian Democrats. Recently, far right groups have left sites that were specifically aimed at supporters and have joined discussions on social media and comment sections of major news outlets. By applying this strategy, the alt-right movement in the United States has gained mainstream attention (Hawley 2017). In contrast to previous American far right movements, the alt-right exists predominantly on social media (Hawley 2017).

Social media also provides far right leaders the opportunity to circumvent traditional news channels, making their voices heard without the interference from gatekeepers and journalists (Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier 2017). In contrast, relying on traditional media coverage to investigate far right claims is prone to selection bias (Koopmans Statham, Giugni & Passy 2005; Muis 2015).

This chapter reviews the methodological opportunities and challenges of using social media as a source of data. We limit ourselves to the online discourses of the far right on Twitter and Facebook. To put flesh to the bones, we formulate two research questions. First, to what extent are there differences *between* and *within* far right parties and movements in the outgroups that their followers discuss? Second, to what extent do far right leaders moderate their ideological outlook once they become member of a government?

Using Facebook to compare far right followers

Far right orientations seem to have shifted over time: some scholars have argued that especially anti-Semitism has been replaced by Islamophobia (Zúquete (2008). According to Williams (2010) Muslims increasingly feature as the 'other' in most far right party manifestos across Western Europe. This demonstrates that the specific enemies and

targets of the far right and how they are portrayed could change over time and vary between different far right organizations. This raises the following question: To what extent are there differences *between* and *within* Western European far right parties and movements in the outgroups they discuss?

Using Facebook, we conduct content analyses of both the posts of far right groups and the comments of their followers. We investigate the most prominent far right movements and parties in three West European countries: *Front National* and *Génération Identitaire* in France; National Democratic Party of Germany (*NPD*), *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*) and *Pegida* in Germany; and the English Defence League (EDL), British National Party (BNP) and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom.

One of the primary challenges is defining the population of such a study. Analyzing online comments implies sampling bias, comparable with using responses from an unrepresentative survey (Ruths & Pfeffer 2014). Facebook pages mainly serve as communication platform for sympathizers of these groups (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández 2016). However, communication on social media represents only a partial picture of the stances of the sympathizers of these movements (Bartlett, Birdwell & Littler 2011; Puschmann, Ausserhofer, Maan & Hametner 2016).

A core question is thus how well the sample represents the members of the group or party who are not on Facebook. Interestingly, the opposite is also relevant. In their study based on an online survey of Facebook followers, Bartlett et al. (2011) note that a significant number of Facebook fans of far right parties—about one third— do not actually vote for the party. A related bias arises from 'trolling', as individuals who are opposed to the group in question may join the group in order to cause confusion, especially controversial Facebook groups such as extreme right groups (Bartlett et al. 2011). For instance, a German comedian infiltrated several far right groups, took over the role as moderator and changed their ideologies (De Haldevang 2017).

The most straightforward solution to this methodological challenge is to simply avoid any claim that online samples of Facebook followers represent the offline supporter base of these movements and parties. For instance, Bartlett et al. (2011, p.89) claim that they 'take care not to claim, at any point in the text, that our sample represents or reflects the official views of the group, or indeed of its offline membership'. All references in their study to 'supporters' explicitly refer to the sample of 'social media supporters'.

Obviously, this is not necessarily a weakness, since the opinions and statements of Facebook members are interesting in themselves. In fact, in many cases the online membership of far right organisations outnumbers the offline membership. Indeed, the amount of followers on Facebook is often larger than their formal membership, as people can show online support or become a 'member' of far right online communities with just a click of a mouse (Awan 2016).

Just as offline groups and organizations can be opportunities for comparative case studies, so too can online groups (Golder & Macy 2014). Both between-group and within-group comparisons are possible. The latter opportunity implies analyzing Facebook in order to illuminate *internal* debates within certain online communities or movements. For instance, Arzheimer (2015) concluded that the German *AfD* leadership does not qualify as

either nativist or populist, but statements of Facebook followers hint at more radical currents among *AfD* supporters. The topics that people devoted most attention to (Islam and immigration) were hardly mentioned in *AfD*'s own posts. This raises questions about the strength of affinity of online followers, and the relationship between online and offline involvement (Bartlett et al. 2011).

In any case, online hate speech and virtual xenophobia constitute a reality on their own. As Golder and Macy (2014, p.143) put it: 'The online world is not identical to the offline, but it is entirely real'. Online radicalisation could affect people's perceptions, and thereby people's behaviour offline*,* such as the party they vote for and their face-to-face contacts with ethnic minorities (Awan 2016). Thus, studying far right groups online is a valuable addition to studying them offline. Most studies still focus on attitudes expressed in surveys and interviews, but people increasingly express their attitudes and acquire their beliefs and opinions on social media.

The main advantage of using social media is that it allows for massive amounts of time-stamped data, such as posts and comments, as well as the activity of users around these posts (e.g. how often users like certain posts). The Internet is especially useful for studying prejudices and grievances of far right groups, which are often considered as difficult to reach using traditional research methods, such as surveys or interviews. Social media data is generally considered non-reactive: online behaviour is observed unobtrusively, limiting the potential for social desirability biases (Bryman 2015). Consequently, the question arises what data can be used without ethical concerns (Cleland et al. 2018).

Facebook users have not given their explicit consent to use their data. At the same time, Facebook is a platform on which people present their views out in the open. The more the setting is acknowledged to be public, the less a researcher is obliged to seek informed consent and to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of users (Bryman 2015, p. 139; Buchanan 2011, p. 95). Moreover, in practice it would also be difficult to achieve informed consent from everybody, since it involves so many people. When large datasets with anonymized data are used, ethical issues are less problematic (Buchanan 2011: 92).

The case is different if researchers decide to reproduce social media posts in an academic publication. These have to be handled with care, especially concerning posts or tweets related to sensitive topics, such as hate speech. A simple online search could expose the identity of specific individuals (Buchanan 2011, p. 92). As Sveningsson (2004, p. 55) argues, 'if (...) the information shared is sensitive we might have to be more careful' when making our decisions about whether and how to use material from online settings.

Much on Facebook is happening in closed groups of which you need to be a member in order to access them. Studying these groups poses a larger privacy dilemma, as the data of these groups are not publicly accessible. The nature of Facebook as a mostly private network thus limits what we can learn from it (Olmstead & Barthel 2015). Although it is useful to study messages posted on openly accessible Facebook pages, and how users interact with those messages, this is only a small part of the overall activity on Facebook (Olmstead & Barthel 2015).

There are also several restrictions related to using Facebook as a data source. First, the amount of information that can be extracted is limited by the privacy settings of users and limitations set by Facebook (Rieder 2013). Profiles generally lack the kind of socio-demographic information relevant to social scientists. Finally, data are 'easiest to collect at the moment of their creation' (Bright, Margetts, Hale & Yasseri 2014, p. 24). Twitter, for example, does not make archives of tweets available, and restricts how far back researchers can gather data (Bright et al. 2014). There are less time restrictions on Facebook, but also here pages and posts can be removed and become inaccessible. This is especially the case for hate-related content, as large social media platforms are obliged to remove content that is perceived as harmful by European governments within twenty-four hours after reporting.

Data collection and operationalisation

For studying the outgroups of far right followers, we selected publicly accessible Facebook pages. We gathered data from eight pages, covering three months (August, September and October 2015).[i] The number of posts and comments gathered per page, the number of users who posted comments, and overlap between users are shown in Table 1.

Data can be gathered directly via the Facebook API using the R package Rfacebook (Barbera, Piccirilli, Geisler & Van Atteveldt 2017), or can be gathered through applications, of which Netvizz is commonly used (Rieder 2013). The sheer volume of social media data also poses challenges, especially in terms of the computational power needed to gather, store and analyse data, and sorting useful data from 'noise' (for recommendations, see Quan-Haase & Sloan 2017).

We first performed qualitative analyses, which consisted of manually reading random samples of 100 comments and posts from each page (cf. Atton 2006). Subsequently, we performed automated content analyses. In line with Caiani and Della Porta (2011), we used keywords to count how often outgroups were referred to. The selection of keywords was based on the preceding qualitative analysis.

To analyze large amounts of textual data in an efficient way, text mining — turning text into data for analysis —is a useful method. For example, it can reveal valuable insights in relation to the topics discussed by people, their views and opinions. Open source tools, such as Mallet (McCallum 2002) and SentiStrength (Thelwall et al. 2010) can also be used to automatically analyse large amounts of textual data. The statistical programming language R contains several packages, such as the widely used text-mining package (Feinerer 2017). We used the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) in Python (Bird et al. 2009). The NLTK makes it easy to pre-process textual data and analyze it by calculating the most frequently occurring words, common bigrams (two words that often occur next to each other) or trigrams (Bird et al. 2009).

Results and conclusion

Table 2 shows how often the two main outgroups —Muslims and immigrants—are discussed on the different Facebook pages. For brevity, we left out other groups that could be targeted as 'Other' (Cleland et al. 2018). Our results reveal remarkable differences

between and *within* far right movements and parties. Judging from the online discourses, the followers of both UKIP and *AfD* are much more concerned about Islam than its leadership. Islam/Muslims are only mentioned 0.15 and 0.20 times per each 10,000 words in the posts of respectively UKIP and *AfD*. The comments of followers suggest a slightly different picture, since this outgroup is mentioned 1.74 (UKIP supporters) and 1.20 (*AfD* supporters) times. Our analysis can also reveal interesting differences *between* groups. For example, both the EDL and BNP view Muslims as a more salient outgroup than immigrants. The opposite is the case for the three far right groups in Germany. Remarkably, even the anti-Islam movement *Pegida* emphasizes 'Muslims' (2.50 times) less often than 'immigrants' (3.87 times).

Table 1. Activity on far right Facebook pages in the UK, France and Germany, and the overlap between users (%).

	EDL	BNP	UKIP
English Defence League	--	9.95	6.95
British National Party	2.67	--	7.19
UKIP	3.34	12.87	--
Number of active users (N)	61,933	16,612	29,750
Number of likes (21-12-2015)	268,264	198,900	517,962
Comments (N)	164,366	54,135	116,857
Posts (N)	1,422	531	181

	Génération Identitaire	Front National
Génération Identitaire	--	3.73
Front National	11.60	--
Number of active users (N)	4,388	13,635
Number of likes (17-01-2016)	91,872	343,667
Comments (N)	7,015	43,241
Posts (N)	115	380

	NPD	AfD	Pegida
NPD	--	6.6	8.3
AfD	5.9	--	17.0
Pegida	6.1	13.9	--
Number of active users (N)	26,790	29,920	36,406
Number of likes (04-01-2016)	147,421	181,464	184,321
Comments (N)	90,964	114,299	195,841
Posts (N)	554	186	773

Note: Reading example: 9.95 per cent of those who posted comments on the BNP page also posted on the EDL page. In its turn, this group constitutes 2.67 per cent of all people who posted comments on the EDL page.

Table 2. Outgroup salience on British, French and German far right Facebook pages, absolute and relative (per 1,000 words) amount of words.

	English Defence League				UKIP				British National Party			
	Posts (n=1,422)		Comments (n=164,366)		Posts (n=181)		Comments (n=116,857)		Posts (n=531)		Comments (n=54,135)	
	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel
total islam/muslim	194	10.63	29,428	9.52	2	0.15	5,518	1.74	237	2.44	3,420	3.64
muslim(s), islam(ic)(s), islamism, islamification, islamised, islamisation, islamified, islamist(s), sharia(h)												
total immigrants/foreigners	53	2.90	4,392	1.41	31	2.34	9,148	2.90	370	3.82	2,850	3.03
invader(s), foreign, foreigner(s), alien(s), immigration, migrant(s)												

	Front National				Génération Identitaire			
	Posts (n=380)		Comments (n=43,241)		Posts (n=115)		Comments (n=7,015)	
	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel
total islam/muslim	1	0.13	512	0.62	35	6.30	211	2.15
(l')Islam, islamique, islamiste(s), (l')Islamisation, (les) musulman(s), la charia								
total immigrants/foreigners	31	3.96	2,131	2.52	39	7.02	217	2.22
les étranger(s), migrant(s), les immigrant(s), les réfugiés, les clandestin(s)								

	NPD				AfD				Pegida			
	Posts (n=554)		Comments (n=90,964)		Posts (n=186)		Comments (n=114,299)		Posts (n=773)		Comments (n=195,841)	
	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel	abs	rel
total islam/muslim	39	1.09	1594	0.85	4	0.20	3,757	1.20	172	2.50	10,046	1.95
islam(s), islamitisch(e/n), islamischer, islamist(en), islamis(i)erung, islamic, sharia(h), scharia, Muslim(s), Muslime(n), Moslem(e), Moslems, muslimische(n/r), muslimin												
total immigrants/foreigners	143	3.98	7,515	3.99	52	2.62	9,897	3.12	265	3.87	14,327	2.79
ausländer(n), immigrant(s/en), migrant(en), zuwanderer, flüchtling(e(n)												

A frequency analysis can thus already provide valuable insights in how far right groups differ from one another in which groups they target, and whether moderators differ from commenters in what topics they deem important. A downside of this method is that we leave out posts in the form of images, videos and links. While comments are mostly textual in nature, posts often contain images. Results from frequency analyses might therefore not always accurately reflect all content.

Framing of outgroups could be further investigated through for instance visual representations – wordclouds – of the most frequently used words (see Awan 2016) or word co-occurrences (see Klein & Muis 2018). However, these do not provide an in-depth view of sentiments (Ceron, Curini, Iacus & Porro 2014). It remains difficult to detect sentiments using automatic content analyses, as words can be interpreted in different ways. Word counts show that *peaceful* and *happy* occur frequently on the Facebook page of EDL, but these terms are often used in a sarcastic way. Note for instance the difference between: *"Not all Muslims are terrorists just like not all Germans were Nazi. I'm sure the majority of Muslims are peaceful",* versus: *"Muslims fighting Muslims, such a peaceful religion or should I say cult?"* Obviously, a dictionary-based sentiment analysis —assign a text to a certain opinion category if some pre-determined words appear in the text—has difficulty to correctly classify the sentiment of the second sentence because of the expression 'such a peaceful religion'.

Other methods have been developed to better measure sentiment. Ceron et al., (2014), for example, use a two-stage method, in which researchers manually code Tweets first, on the basis of which an algorithm is trained to detect sentiment. Considerable progress has been made in automatic sentiment analysis (Giachanou & Crestani 2016). It is possible to assess whether the tone of the text is negative, neutral or positive towards a certain topic. Accuracy of sentiment increases with length of the text, and when different texts are combined for the same user.

Another difficulty arises when comparing the discourses of far right groups in different countries. In comparative political research, language analysis becomes increasingly important (Lucas et al. 2015). Lucas et al. (2015) developed a package to directly translate texts into English before comparing them, but words might have different connotations in different contexts and across time periods. Koopmans et al. (2005) for example argue that the dominant vocabulary for the word 'foreigner' is characterized by specific constructions on the relation between migrants and the receiving country (e.g. immigrants in France, foreigners in Germany, and ethnic minorities or racial groups in the UK).

Using Twitter to assess far right party stances

Our second research question is under what conditions far right leaders radicalize or moderate their ideological outlook over time. The so-called inclusion-moderation thesis holds that far right parties moderate their stances after taking up government responsibility (Akkerman, De Lange & Rooduijn 2016). One of the difficulties of research on this issue is the lack of comprehensive time series on far right party stances. It is pivotal to reliably tap positions over time. Three different sources are often used: (expert) surveys, party manifestos, and media coverage. All three approaches have merits as well as deficiencies.

First, (expert) surveys have been criticized for the ambiguity about of the time period for which measurements are valid and about the precise understanding of parties as collective actors. What 'party' is exactly being judged: the voters, the party organization, or the party leader? The second method, coding political texts, has the advantage that the time series can be extended backwards as long as manifestos are available. However, coding party manifestos has also important weaknesses. Few people actually read manifestos. Most individuals perceive political parties' stances by what they read in the media instead. A second limitation is that manifestos are generally only delivered during election times. Finally, both expert surveys and manifestos tend to reflect the standpoint of leaders, concealing internal ideological and political differences.

These caveats are addressed by content analysis of media coverage (Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal & Bornschier 2008). However, this method also has significant drawbacks. There might be bias concerning both the selection of topics and the accuracy of content that is reported (Helbling & Tresch 2011). Far right parties sometimes hardly achieve media attention and at other times receive disproportionally large amounts of publicity (Muis 2015). Relying on traditional media, one overlooks persistent forms of far right activism that simmer underground.

For instance, the sudden rise of the alt-right is not surprising for those who closely studied the far right. Long before Trump's election and their arrival on the national public stage, white supremacists withdrew from public realms and 'found sanctuary on the Internet, embracing concealment as a savvy survival strategy' (Futrell & Simi 2007, p. 76).

Ideally, estimating ideological positions relies on a source that is directly and frequently produced by far right parties or movements themselves, and at the same time reaches a large audience (cf. Caiani & Della Porta 2011). With the rise of social media, such sources are increasingly at hand. For example, Twitter has become an important platform for politicians (Spierings & Jacobs 2014). In search for quotes from politicians, traditional media have increasingly picked up messages posted on Twitter. Exploiting Twitter data can fruitfully complement other methods to assess where far parties stand.

To illustrate our argument, we investigate the Dutch Party for Freedom (*PVV*) headed by Geert Wilders. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, it became the second-biggest party, receiving about 13 per cent of the vote. Wilders uses Twitter as his main source of communication. The party manifesto only consisted of a few bullet points on a single page.

The *PVV* is an interesting case to test the inclusion-moderation thesis, because it was in a pact with a minority government, consisting of the moderate right *VVD* and *CDA*, from October 2010 until April 2012. Wilders typically pits the allegedly corrupt elite against the 'common Dutch'. After taking up government responsibility, this stance seems difficult to uphold, since he became part of the political establishment.

Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) dismiss the received wisdom that populist parties have inherent problems with assuming power. Likewise, Akkerman et al. (2016) conclude that there is no trend towards mainstreaming of far right parties on their core issues immigration and integration, European integration and authoritarianism – they uphold their radical rhetoric.

Interestingly, however, the Dutch *PVV* seems to be an exception. According to Akkerman et al. (2016), providing support for the minority coalition had a moderating effect.

This is a striking finding. It contradicts the *communis opinio* that Wilders' ideas about Islam and the EU became more extreme over time. In their study, radicalism was measured by coding pledges in two party manifestos at different points in time on a cosmopolitan-nativist dimension (i.e. restrict immigration and assimilationist integration policies versus open borders and cultural pluralism). We will cross-validate this finding of Wilders' moderation (Akkerman et al. 2016) with another data source: tweets.

Data collection and operationalisation

We manually gathered and hand-coded all tweets posted by Wilders between 2010-2013.[ii] Retweets and replies to others are excluded from the analysis. Subsequently, we excluded tweets that have no link whatsoever with politics. This yielded in total 756 political tweets (N=756). Based on its status as opposition party or not, three periods can be distinguished: (1) 1 January 2010 – 13 October 2010: *PVV* in opposition; (2) 14 October 2010 – 22 April 2012: minority government supported by Wilders; (3) 23 April 2012 – 31 December 2012: the *PVV* in opposition again after the fall of the minority government.

      To measure issue salience and issue positions, first, a list of 16 different issues was created. Of the total amount of 756 tweets, 550 mention at least one substantial political issue. Tweets sometimes also contain multiple issues. Second, in line with media coding procedures (Kriesi et al. 2008; Koopmans et al. 2005), we coded Wilders' issue position. For each issue, a positive (1), negative (-1), or neutral or ambiguous stand (0) can be taken. Using three categories indeed masks much of the nuance of party positioning, but tweets are less rich in detail as compared with manifestos, where more fine-grained scales are more common. However, note that we rely on average scores of many measurements (tweets).

      Unfortunately, studies on the far right that analyse texts often lack information about the reliability (i.e. dependability) of coding procedures. Since an important goal of content analysis is 'to identify and record relatively objective (or at least intersubjective) characteristics of messages, reliability is paramount. Without the establishment of reliability, content analysis measures are useless' (Neuendorf 2002, as cited by Lombard, Snyder-Duch et al. 2002). We recommend that researchers report a statistical measure of the amount of agreement among coders, such as the widely used Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff 2007). Our coding process proved reliable. A random selection of 50 tweets was coded independently by two authors. We calculated Krippendorff's alphas for each dummy variable indicating whether the tweet contained the respective issue or not. The alphas for these issue salience-dummies are 0.90 (for 'European Union') or higher. Concerning the agreement on issue positions, the alphas are 0.71 (for 'Finance') or higher.

Results and conclusion

Table 3 shows the development in issue positions and issue salience over time. We highlight the four most important issues. Our results clearly refute the claim that the PVV moderated its political stance when it supported the minority government. To the contrary, the outspoken nativist stance is remarkably consistent. The overall average position on integration and immigration approximates -1.00, which indicates that the *PVV* is very consistent in its

opposition to immigration and the view that minorities should assimilate into the dominant Dutch culture. In fact, all 173 tweets Wilders sent about these topics were scored nativist (-1), except one. The slightly less nativist score (-0.92) is due to one single tweet with an ambivalent position (0). In October 2010, after an attack on a mosque, Wilders tweeted: '*the less mosques in the Netherlands, the better. But violence directed at existing mosques is unacceptable and should be severely punished*'.

Table 3. Salience and position of four most important issues in Wilders' tweets 2010-2013 (number of tweets between parentheses).

	Period 1: Opposition		Period 2: Inclusion		Period 3: Opposition		Overall	
	%	Mean score	%	Mean score	%	Mean score	%	Mean score
Integration & Immigration	39.5 (17)	-1.00	30.1 (55)	-0.92	31.2 (101)	-1.00	31.5 (173)	-0.97
European Union	11.6 (5)	-1.00	26.2 (48)	-1.00	36.4 (118)	-1.00	31.1 (171)	-1.00
Finance & economy	9.3 (4)	-1.00	6.6 (12)	0.36	21.0 (68)	-0.41	15.3 (84)	-0.29
Public order, security and justice	25.6 (11)	0.86	13.1 (24)	0.90	9.3 (30)	0.96	11.8 (65)	0.92
Total number of issue tweets	43		183		324		550	

Note: Position scale: Integration/immigration: nativism (-1) vs. cosmopolitism (1). European Union: anti-EU (-1) vs. pro-EU (1). Finance & Economy: state regulation (1) vs. free market (-1). Public order: authoritarianism (1) vs. libertarian (-1).

The PVV's anti-EU stance is also strikingly unequivocal: the mean position on issues concerning European integration is always -1.00. Furthermore, the *PVV* did not tone down its stance in favour of harsher punishments and strict laws. The position concerning public order, security, and justice is again quite constant and approximates 1.00.

In addition to issue positions, we can also focus on issue salience (Helbling & Tresch 2011). Moderation could imply that Wilders diversified his political agenda and became less focused solely on nativism. Table 3 shows that the most important issue for the *PVV* is immigration and integration: overall, about one third of Wilders' tweets mention this issue. The issue of European integration is a close second with 31.1 per cent. A closer analysis of the tweets reveals that immediately after the *PVV* withdrew its support from the minority coalition, this topic received much more attention than immigration and integration. During that period, almost 70 per cent of the tweets address the European Union. One could perhaps consider this stronger emphasis on the anti-EU stance (compared to anti-immigration statements) as moderation. If so, it again contradicts the inclusion-moderation thesis: this shift towards more tweets about the issue of European integration took place *after* Wilders withdrew his support for the minority government (see 'Period 3: Opposition' in Table 3). This proves the added value of relying on time series of tweets: the timing of such shifts is much harder to discern when we rely on expert surveys or manifestos.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter we reflected on the use of social media to study the far right. More specifically, we discussed the investigation of Facebook and Twitter as means to explore far right discourses. All in all, it showed that social media are fruitful sources for analyzing statements of both leaders and supporters of far right parties and movements. More generally, at stake is whether we experience 'fundamental change in the nature of political life as a result of the disruptive influence of digital communication' (Chadwick 2017, p. 3-4).

   A possible avenue for future research is Marshall McLuhan's (1994) famous phrase that 'the medium is the message': do tweets or Facebook posts of the same parties and movements yield similar positions as 'traditional' outlets, or do new social media imply more provocative and radical position-taking? People need to adapt to the requirements and restrictions of the medium. Thus, it may be necessary to untangle to what extent communication is actually platform-driven (Ruths & Pfeffer 2014). Not only between old and new media, but also between different social media platforms, the medium influences the message. Marwick and Lewis (2016, p. 25) show that new platforms, such as Gab.ia, Voat and Discord, were designed specifically for 'discussions that are banned on more mainstream social media'. Whether they express themselves on popular platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, or whether they create their own social media platforms, the Internet will most likely remain a central space for far right activists to connect with each other and express their grievances.

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ENDNOTES

[i] More details on our study can be found in Klandermans et al. (2016).

[ii] For more details on our study, see Muis & Dijkstra (2014).