Communitarianism, Populism and (In)civility: The Migrant Crisis in the European Press

Ekaterina Balabanova (University of Liverpool, UK)

It has been argued that the increasing usage of the concept of populism to describe political trends in Europe is in effect whitewashing the nativism of the radical right (Mudde 2017). However, the relationship between populist and anti-immigration ideas is not well understood. This is not just due to the well-acknowledged definitional issues around populism. It is also because in public debates over immigration there are a range of communitarian justifications for states to impose restrictions on the rights of non-citizens (Balabanova and Balch 2010). Moreover, all of these have multiple forms or versions that can be more or less civil or tolerant towards ‘the other’. We have selected specific flashpoints in the story of Europe’s 2015-2016 migrant crisis in order to test assumptions regarding the correlation between populism and incivility towards non-citizens. Drawing from data regarding press coverage of immigration in four European countries (Germany, UK, Hungary, Bulgaria) we map different communitarian arguments alongside the presence/absence of populist ideas. This allows us to consider the extent to which populism and anti-immigrationism are correlated, or can be disentangled, and to illustrate how these phenomena relate to levels of (in)civility across the European space.

If Incivility Means Everything – It Starts to Mean Nothing

Gina Masullo Chen (University of Texas at Austin, USA)

In this talk, I will argue that we need to theorize what incivility – or uncivil speech -- really is with a goal of developing a more holistic conceptualization of this construct that can be more readily adopted across an inter-disciplinary sphere. Currently, the concept of incivility is varied and, in some cases, so broadly defined that the term incivility itself is rendered almost meaningless. For example, the definition of incivility in the extant literature includes such varied attributes as impoliteness, threats to overthrow a government, lack of cooperation between political actors, disrespectful speech, hate speech, and trolling. I argue that we need to push for a stronger and narrower definition of incivility so that study of incivility can provide the theoretical contributions that are necessary to advance knowledge in this important area of inquiry.
The Weaponization of Doubt:

New Authoritarianism and Attacks on Journalism and Technology

Christian Christensen (Stockholm University, Sweden)

In this talk, using examples from the United States and Turkey, the concept of the "weaponization of doubt" is proposed to clarify and define the practice, common in neo-authoritarian and "new authoritarian" regimes, of forwarding a sustained stream of rhetoric in which the impartiality, patriotism and national allegiance of core social institutions (such as the media, judiciary and higher education) are brought into question, as well as the flooding of information flows with ‘news’ that contradicts opposition journalism. The doubt that such rhetoric engenders can, at a later stage, be used to justify organizational or even legal changes to and within those institutions, such as imposing new media regulation or the firing of judges, government bureaucrats or university staff. A second element of the weaponization of doubt is the extent to which threats leveled against institutions such as journalism lead to uncertainty and pervasive self-censorship on the part of news workers. As was the case in Turkey, this doubt can also be leveled against international technology platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube).

White Nostalgia and the Politics of Love, Nation and Memory

Mattias Gardell (Uppsala University, Sweden)

This paper investigates the affective dimensions of radical nationalist thought by analyzing contemporary cultural production in the fields of literature, music, and film. While previous research typically suggest that the radical nationalist milieu is populated by “angry white men”, activists themselves claim to engage out of love for their nation, race, and kind. This paper takes the analysis further by exploring how love and hate may coexist and reinforce each other. It further identifies white nostalgia as key to the current mainstreaming of radical nationalist thought in contemporary Swedish politics. Comparing short films produced by the LO and the Moderates for the 2018 election campaign, with recurrent themes central to radical nationalist cultural production, it discusses how the politics of love, nation, and memory has contributed to transforming the Swedish political landscape. It shows how radical nationalists and mainstream parties invest in restorative narratives built on nostalgic projections and promises to return the once good society to its original harmony. By erasing the historical presence of internal conflicts and nonwhite and non-Lutheran minorities, white nostalgia as a political concept mobilize to defend a nation that is called into existence only by declaring it lost.
Normalising Right Wing Populism?

The Role of Opinion Leaders in Swedish Media Discourses on Immigration

Mattias Ekman (Örebro University, Sweden)

This paper analyses the role of opinion journalism in Sweden during the refugee crisis and onward. It argues that several key actors (editorials, commentators, opinion leaders) in mainstream newspapers are moving closer to the positions previously hold by right wing populist (and extremists) alone. The paper assesses a discursive shift on immigration and immigrants during the 2015 refugee crisis and onward – thus indicating a turn from consensual-tolerant discourses on immigration, to a more populist ones. The analysis is based on a critical discourse analysis of articles published in the editorial/opinion section, relating to topics of immigration, immigrants, integration, etc. in the largest quality/tabloid newspapers in Sweden. The paper argues that immigration and immigrants are constructed in relation to concepts of nation and nation-state, community/belonging, culture, economy, religion, crime and terrorism, and that anti-immigration sentiments and tropes – previously visible in right-wing populist discourse only – are becoming increasingly normalised by “respectable” media actors.

'Immigration, that’s what everyone’s thinking about, whether they say so or not':

The 2016 British EU Referendum in the Eyes of the Beholder

Simona Guerra (University of Leicester, UK)

While analyses generally examine the confluence of populism and Euroscepticism at the party level (Pirro and Taggart 2018), research on the public sphere, or the lack of it, and how it relates to civic attitudes towards European integration, can explain citizens’ attitudes. This paper examines the 2016 British EU referendum and the domestic debates through the media, specifically on the emotions and narratives, on The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Express, the week before the referendum. British citizens felt, in their words, ‘bullied because of [their] political correctness’ and pointed their anger and dissatisfaction against the EU (and Merkel’s) ‘obsession for open borders’. The analysis underlines that these emotions and narratives, combining immigration and sovereignty, have remained embedded in the post-Brexit days, they are characterizing the agreement to leave the EU and go back not just to Billig's banal nationalism (1995). Voting Leave represented respect towards true British values, the ‘core country’ as conceptualised by Taggart (2000), but the ‘uncivil’ narrative has also viewed a rise of hate crime events, as on the Sunday after the referendum against the Polish Social and Cultural Association (POSK), in Hammersmith, London. Powellism (Hampshire 2018)
and Wright’s ‘encroachment’ of Englishness (2017), and the analysis on the multi-dimension of the immigration narrative explain how anti-immigration and sovereignty discourse is persisting and is influencing the negotiation process, and, more broadly, the social and political engagement (Exadaktylos et al. 2017).

Un-civility and the Impossibility of Black Women’s Online Presence

Ylva Habel (Uppsala University, Sweden)

Who deserves civility? What has it come to signify at a time when the upsurge of fascist, Neo-Nazi attacks and hate-speech online ramify into, and increasingly seep into public discourse as viable political opinions among other opinions? In her recent book, Algorithms of Oppression, Safiya Umoja points to the many ways in which social media platforms are far from “benign, neutral or objective” for already socially vulnerable, marginalized groups. She claims that human-made, automatized decision-making systems in algorithms exacerbate and multiply extant structures of oppression – while being masked as enablers for socially transparent online interaction. Specifically black women social media users, who initially could be heard and mobilize resistance and/or reach-out activities through social media, increasingly find that anti-black trolling online and everyday life have become dangerously intertwined. Black Anglo-Saxon feminists and womanists with big follower accounts on Twitter testify to being exposed to unending racist harassment – what Moya Bailey calls misogynoir (Bailey 2010; Macias 2015) – and are get demonized by white followers and co-twitterers as “toxic”. I would like to address the tension that can be observed between the social reach that a selection of these women’s Twitter presence enable – simultaneously as they are exposed to real dangers multiplying infinitely online. What intellectual and creative “clap-back” strategies are used by this group, regarded as undeserving of civility, and who are, in Hortense Spiller’s words “being for the captor”?

Licensing Uncivility: How Relevant is the Journey of Interwar Fascism to the Mainstream to the Dynamics of Contemporary Populism?

Aristotle Kallis (Keele University, UK)

For a brief time, the end of the First World War was heralded as the decisive climax of a liberal experiment in building a lasting international civil society. Soon, however, the rise of fascism evinced a hyper-nationalist / exclusionary backlash, positing a radical counter-utopia to the assumed mainstream liberal teleology. Fascism’s ferocious journey from its ideological hinterland to a spectacularly successful political alternative to western
established ideologies exposed the shaky foundations of the post-WW1 liberal canon itself. The rise of interwar fascism facilitated a creeping normalisation of ‘uncivil’ ideas, discourses, and violent practices in the interstitial borderline space between a ‘normative’ (liberal) mainstream fiction and an often veiled cluster of uncivil impulses still rooted in mainstream society. A crucial part of fascism’s political success was linked to its ability to tap into (old and new) beliefs, fears, and anxieties that formed part of a volatile aggregatory mainstream even when these were not proclaimed (or assumed) to belong to the normative post-WW1 liberal mainstream. All this underlines the need to revisit any mainstream as an unstable, dynamic space vulnerable to uncivil impulses and transgressions. The fascist interwar precedent remains critically instructive to contemporary debates about populism when it comes to the very process of licensing uncivil norms that occurs in the borderline spaces. Now as then, a constantly growing disjunction between normative and aggregatory mainstream can generate volatile borderline spaces where mainstream slippages into uncivility are far easier to occur and become normalised.

The Normalisation of Uncivility:
Discursive Shifts, Interactive Racism and Right-Wing Populism in Europe

Michał Krzyżanowski (University of Liverpool, UK & Örebro University, Sweden)

My presentation highlights political strategies of normalisation seen as a discursive process of legitimising views, ideologies and positions that, traditionally treated as radical and politically/socially unacceptable, increasingly become accepted within – rather than outside – of norms of public expression. I draw, inter alia, on the concept of normalisation used in social-psychological studies (esp. Vaughan 1996) recently reapplied to critical social research on the channelling of extreme positions into elements of now acceptable social status quo (Link 2013, Wodak 2015). I argue that normalisation often contributes to the creation of a new form of borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017) where civil, rational and politically-correct language is increasingly used to pre-legitimise (Krzyżanowski 2014, 2016) uncivil, radical and extremist positions and ideologies. I argue that their spread is fuelled by, very peculiar ‘interactive racism’ that draws on affordances of processes of politicisation and mediatisation. In my analysis, I particularly target strategies salient in forging legitimacy for European mainstream and non-mainstream right-wing populism (in Austria, Poland or Sweden) and its politics of exclusion. The latter, as the paper shows, is normalised drawing on discursive resources of,
inter alia, legitimation, recontextualization, frame shifting and conflation of various discourses that effectively help to normalise ethno-nationalist, racist and other uncivil positions.

**Mourning the Dead:**

**The Assimilatory Im/Possibilities of Black & Muslim Death in Canada and Sweden**

*Jan-Therese Mendes (York University, Toronto, Canada)*

How can one’s death be read as an assimilatory act and thus as testament to their civilizable potentiality? How can the unhappiness of mourning the death of the integrating subject affectively serve the ends of white nation-making? Drawing a comparative line between the Northern welfare states of Canada and Sweden, I seek to examine how a public grieving over the death of the assimilating Muslim woman incites a productive mourning and affirming sense of horror that enables white solidarities, in part, to be renewed and replenished upon her maimed body. Amidst the residue of a happily inconsolable grief held for the integrating, now murdered, Muslim woman I question whether such investments in rescue, assimilation and the public performance of loss are equally available to the Black body. What I am probing here are the assimilatory im/possibilities for those who often do not waver on the line of nationally integratable life but are already situated within the forsaken place of non-life—that is, as the “shadow” figures of “death zones” (Mbembe 2003). I thus inquire into the “grievability” (Butler 2009) of Black life when death is at once expected, awaited, induced, familiar, unremarkable and ultimately, dismissible. Yet, in the particular face Black woman’s “disposability” (McKittrick 2006), as the unremarkably dead, I further explore whether Black Muslim women have access to a form of social resuscitation that is barred to their non-Muslim sisters. Redemptive possibilities might then conversely invoke Black death. By this I mean a death brought about not by the hands of the so-called inherently patriarchal Muslim Father but that which is self-induced. Hereby, killing the offensive self can possibly be taken as Black Muslim women’s most patriotic act as they are re-born into the mores of Canadian or Swedish whiteness.

**The Terrorification of the Swedish Suburb**

*Irene Molina (Uppsala University, Sweden)*

During the period 1960 -2018, newspaper representations of “the migrant” and of racialised neighbourhoods have gone through a genealogical set of transformations from being the whole society problems to the current representation as dangerous No-Go-zones. Behind this process lie the political, economic, ideological and cultural transformations of the otherwise calm Swedish welfare state, at least according to international representations of the country as an
exceptionally humanitarian society. These transformations have two main peaks, one at the beginning of the 1990’s with the series of neoliberal reforms launched by a broad political consensus between the Conservatives and the Social democrats alternating periods of government since then; whereas the second peak was 9/11th. The corollary of these two peaks was firstly a partial withdrawal of welfare from the poor areas, and secondly a strengthening of militarization and securitisation in the targeted neighbourhoods. In an ongoing media analysis of newspapers, the association of the Swedish racialised suburb with terrorism, found for instance in “extremisation” discourses on the (Muslim) population (to be a Muslim is by association to be an extremist), is contrasted with the narratives – in the same media – from researchers and residents of the neighbourhoods, who denounce the use of political and systemic violence. These narratives indicate an alarming situation of welfare abandonment and mistrust towards some societal institutions, especially among the youth. Thus, the term “terrorification” operationalising the analysis in this work, refers to the two mentioned processes, the terror stigma, and the terrifying treatment of the local population of the racialised Swedish suburb.

Mimicking and Cloaking: Manufacturing Racism on Social Media Platforms

Christina Neumayer (IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

In this presentation, we will explore the mimicking of news and cloaked Facebook pages as forms of manipulation to (re-)produce racist discourse. The presentation is based on two case studies: a) Danish Facebook pages disguised as representing Muslim extremists living in Denmark; and b) letters to the editor mimicking clickbait news from the Danish online newspaper Ekstra Bladet. The results from these two studies highlight how antagonism between ethno-cultural identities is produced and reproduced on social media platforms by the careful manufacturing of facts, news, and user profiles that antagonize religious minorities in Denmark. We argue that content producers can construct antagonistic discourses through the enactment of political identities and the manufacturing of facts. On social media, posts, images, videos, mimicking of news, shares, and user comments continuously shape, reproduce, disseminate, and solidify antagonism. Social media corporations as well as online news media play an active role in these struggles by further transgressing the boundaries between news and opinion, truth and disinformation, trolling and political discussion. Through this interactive reproduction of antagonism, racist discourses discrediting the Muslim minority in Denmark become normalized and, by means of sharing, enter public political debate. In the process, disguised identities and the manufacturing of facts contribute to the hegemonization of the meaning of truth and
falsehood in the antagonistic relation. The constant transformation of contemporary struggles over political truths contributes to normalizing antagonism based on ethnicity and religion.

“The New Extreme Right”: Sarcasm and Displacement in the French “Re-Infosphère”

Per-Erik Nilsson (Uppsala University, Sweden)

Contemporary France is a prolific arena for radical nationalist and identitarian movements and intellectuals. Self-proclaimed alternative news-sites like FdeSouche.fr, RiposteLaïque.fr, and fr.NovoPress.info, and publishing houses like Éditions Tatamis, Éditions idées, and Éditions Ring have a wide reach and serve as forums for information and mobilization to, through various strategies, resist an alleged onslaught by enemies to the nation and its people, i.e. multiculturalism, feminism, political correctness, political corruption, and civilizational decay. In this paper Per-Erik Nilsson explores uncivility as a discursive logic within French radical nationalist and identitarian citizen journalism and literature with a focus on sarcasm and displacement. More specifically, Nilsson analyzes how sarcasm is employed to navigate the legal boundaries of free-speech and how displacement is used as a populist identificatory technique in uncivil anthropoemic nationalist discourse to articulate sameness and alterity. Nilsson discusses this type of uncivil discursive logic in the light of the French Nouvelles Droite’s meta-political strategizing in the 1960’s and 1970’s and the normalization of uncivil discourse in French politics and society.

Toxic for Whom?

Examining the Targets of Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk

Patricia Rossini (Syracuse University, USA)

Online political talk is often scrutinized due to the presence of uncivil discourse. Following a stream of research advocating for a more nuanced understanding of incivility, which considers that some forms of incivility might be acceptable in online political talk or perceived as not offensive to the public (Kenski, Coe, and Rains 2017; Papacharissi 2004), this chapter focuses on identifying the conditions in which certain people or groups are targeted by uncivil (e.g. rude remarks, name-calling, ad hominem attacks, pejorative expressions, profanity and vulgarity) and intolerant discourse (e.g. prejudice based on race, sex, gender or religion, xenophobia, incitement to violence). This study makes an important contribution to the understanding the contextual and the conversational dynamics around antinormative discourse is targeted at certain individuals or groups in online discussions. As such, it provides a framework that enables future research to distinguish situations in which online discussions are inherently toxic.
and threatens democratic values from where participants are expressing their opinions more aggressively when discussing politics. This study finds that much of the vitriol online is targeted at political actors and characterized by elaborated opinion expression, suggesting that those who discuss politics online might adopt a critical tone towards the political sphere. When comments target other participants in a discussion, they are more likely to be uncivil than intolerant, and to signal disagreement – suggesting a heterogeneous conversation environment. Finally, comments targeted at minorities are more likely to be intolerant and to emerge in homogeneous discussion threads, suggesting that the targets of these comments are either absent from the discussion, or silenced by the perception of a hostile opinion environment. Taken together, these findings indicate that while incivility is not inherently associated with interpersonal offense nor should be considered a problematic feature of online political talk, intolerant discourse emerges precisely when it may hurt democracy the most by targeting minorities and disenfranchised groups in relatively homogeneous discussions when they are the topic of a news story, contributing to further exclude their voices.

The Institutionalisation of Populist Political Discourse and Un-civil Society in the EU: From the Margins to the Mainstream?

Carlo Ruzza (University of Trento, Italy)

This presentation focuses on the changeable political uses of the concept of civil society in the EU political environment. It argues that, following the successes of radical right populist formations in recent years, the long-established ethos of inclusionary civil society groups, and of fostering their presence at EU level, is undergoing a redefinition. Moralised ideational constructs such as ‘community’, ‘belonging’ and ‘solidarity’ which have traditionally been associated to a cosmopolitan, tolerant conception of the role of civil society are undergoing a process of redefinition. An individualistic, localist or nationalist and socially conservative conception of civil society is emerging, which is particularly sponsored by countries where the impact of populist formations is relevant. Methodologically, the presentation examines a set of EU-level texts by conflicting civil society formations and shows the contrasts on key concepts such as the overarching functions of civil society, its political role, composition and mechanisms of legitimation. In this context, it discusses the concept of ‘uncivil society’ and relates it to the relevant literature. The presentation also uses evidence from a set of in-depth interviews with civil society representatives from inclusionary anti-discrimination organisations and examines their perception of threats coming from the successes of populist groups in several member states, their role in the Council and the European Parliament since the 2014 election, and their
impact through the public opinion of these member states. It concludes by arguing that the best way to frame the contrast between rival images of civil society is through a movement – counter movement dynamic, which it argues will characterise the debate on civil society in the near future.

„The Politically Abandoned“: Evidence from Germany and France on Right-Wing Populist Voting Tendencies in Chosen Regions

Maria Skóra (Das Progressive Zentrum, Berlin, Germany)

In my presentation, I will elaborate on the outcomes of a field study conducted among those voters, who decided to choose right-wing populist parties in the French presidential election and the German parliamentary vote. Both Front National, as well as Alternative für Deutschland, embarked on strong anti-immigrant agenda in their programmes. We wanted to explore to what extent their popularity in chosen regions resulted from this adopted rhetoric, based on sometimes racist arguments and undermining the values of democratic societies. In April 2017, Marine Le Pen achieved the strongest result in Front National’s (National Front – FN) history, gaining 21% in the first round of the French presidential elections. In the last Bundestag election in September 2017, Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany – AfD) gained 12.6% of the vote making it the third most potent force in the German Bundestag. The gains made by these right-wing populist parties were achieved in very different circumstances: in post-crisis France and Germany experiencing a massive influx of refugees. Nevertheless, the election results emphasise the unenviable common ground that exists between the two countries: a divided society. Here, often simplistic explanations are given, based on cliches of normative character. In their study, Das Progressive Zentrum aimed to demonstrate what many people who live in structurally weak regions with a high proportion of right-wing populist voters feel about “mainstream” politics. The study focused on the perceptions of challenges that the respondents faced in their everyday lives and demonstrated how they translated into their electoral decisions resulting in support for political actors endorsing nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, Euroscepticism and Islamophobia. This study uses the authentic views of the interviewees to decode how they think and explore the motives behind supporting “uncivil” political actors. 500 door-to-door interviews were conducted, what made the study the first of its kind to have been undertaken on the elections that took place in 2017 in Germany and France.

Edward Shils and the Paradoxes of Civility

Daniel Strand (Uppsala University)
Towards the end of the 1950s, American sociologist Edward Shils published several essays stressing the importance of civility in modern society. Civility, Shils argued, entailed acceptance of existing political institutions, firm (but not too intense) attachment to the nation, moderate interest in politics, and respect for the individual. Writing just after the crimes committed by fascism and Stalinism, Shils presented civility as an alternative to the passionate and dogmatic politics which he called ideology. Indeed, he even predicted that the “age of civility” would replace the old “age of ideologies”. In this paper, I offer a sympathetic, yet critical review of Shils’ concept of civility. On the one hand, I argue that his plea for civility should be understood as rooted in a genuine fear of the transgressions caused by totalitarian and chauvinistic movements during the first half of the twentieth century. As a Jewish person stationed in Europe for most of the Second World War, Shils was well aware of the dangers caused by a breakdown of civil society. On the other hand, I demonstrate how Shils’ conceptualization of civility seems to contain inherent contradictions. By consistently equating civility with consensus, social cohesion, tradition and unity, Shils seems to end up in a conservative legitimization of the prevailing social order in which all political dissent and disagreement are repressed. In so doing, Shils’ version of civility might paradoxically draw people towards the political extremism which it was designated to prevent.

**Free Speech, Postracialism and the Networked Public Sphere**

*Gavan Titley (Maynooth University, Ireland & University of Helsinki, Finland)*

In the public imagination, free speech is celebrated as a fundamental freedom, central to modern emancipation, self-expression, and democratic vitality. In contemporary western societies, it has also become fundamental to a powerful cultural politics that is re-shaping how racism is expressed in public culture. This contradiction fuels recurrent public controversies and media spectacles, where the right to express racist ideas and circulate racist discourse is increasingly marked out as what is most at stake in relation to freedom of speech. Over the last years, far-right activists have generated a seemingly inexhaustible string of scandals held to attest to a ‘war on free speech’. Across Europe, best-selling books promote a resurgent repertoire of racist ideas by claiming to courageously ‘break taboos’. In a media economy where attention is the scarcest resource, high-profile columnists recycle racialized narratives while warning that they are always on the cusp of ‘being silenced’. While the strategic appropriation of ‘free speech’ is relatively straightforward to explain, in providing an indicative genealogy of free speech controversies, this lecture examines why controversies as to what can be said about
race so disproportionately feature in considerations of freedom of speech, over and above powerful, material threats to expression. It contends that what is principally at play in these disputes is not a legal right to speak, but the public legitimacy of what is being said, and who is doing the speaking. In ‘postracial’ contexts where there is intense disagreement as to what constitutes racism, and who gets to define it, it examines how free speech has come to be adopted as a primary mechanism for validating and amplifying racist ideas and racializing claims.

Assessing the Quality of Political Talk Across Different Spaces: Evidence from Italy
Cristian Vaccari (Loughborough University, UK)

This paper sheds light on how Italian citizens perceive the quality and civility of political talk by both elites and other citizens across three different important public spaces: face-to-face conversations, news coverage of politics on television and newspapers, and social media. Drawing on data from a unique, custom built survey on an online panel representative of the voting-age Italian population with internet access, I estimate levels of perceived civility based on four different indicators. Descriptive analyses illuminate the extent to which respondents attribute different quality traits to political discourse in face-to-face, social media, and mass media environments. Multivariate regression analyses highlight how different factors (related to socio-demographic characteristics, political attitudes, and traditional and digital media use) help shape the extent to which Italians assess the levels of civility and incivility across the different spaces on which they encounter, and participate in, political discussions.

The Death of the Ideal Speech Situation
Simeon Yates (University of Liverpool, UK)

In discussing Un-Civility “on-line” there is an excess of media coverage, and some academic literature, that focuses on the “failure” of digital media to deliver on ideas of deliberative democracy and a well-functioning “public sphere”. This paper explores what it is that many writers expect from digital media – how and why digital media fail these expectations – and what if anything can be done. At the heart of this are hard empirical questions about underlying assumptions about the functioning of our contemporary public sphere – in particular the idea of the ideal speech situation (ISS). The history of the study of interaction via digital media has been replete with contradictions from the start. Many case studies describe highly functional online communities with supportive debate and integration (e.g. Rheingold’s (1993/2000) description of the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link or WELL). At the same time some of the earliest work on
digital interaction pointed out the polarisation that can arise in online debate – described then as “flaming” (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). Other early work provided examples of the intersection of power and technology to stifle debate (Zuboff, 1988). Contemporary work continues to oscillate between these opportunities and threats. Though, both socio-linguistic and social-psychological work repeatedly points to (im)politic and de-individuated behaviours as the norm in the context of relatively anonymous on-line interaction. Overall this history can be seen as an empirical test of the ISS as a foundational model for the functioning of a public sphere. I will argue that on this evidence base the ISS has failed this test and that recent experience of the use of digital media, especially in politics, requires that we reconsider the importance of power and regulation in the maintenance of debate within the public sphere.