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# INTEGRATING CONCEPTS OF COUNTERPUBLICS INTO GENERALISED PUBLIC SPHERE FRAMEWORKS: CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS IN RADICAL FORMS

**Jonas Kaiser and Adrian Rauchfleisch**

*Public sphere theory has come to an epistemic crossroads. The rise of right-wing movements in Europe and the U.S., for example, pose a challenge to public sphere theorists. This holds especially true since they make use of social media to articulate their messages, network, recruit, dissent or attack. In this conceptual paper we suggest a functionalist approach that integrates the concept of counterpublics within the public sphere based on the two generalised functions agenda-setting and identity formation. We describe how counterpublics may become regular publics, but also emphasise on how strong collective identities may lead to a vicious cycle of extremism. Based on the examples of the far-right Stormfront forum and the Generation Identity, the concept of the vicious cycle of extremism is being proposed to highlight the internet's role in the formation and radicalisation of counterpublics.*

**KEYWORDS** public sphere; counterpublics; extreme right; social media; internet; radicalisation; agenda-setting; collective identity

## 1. Introduction

Although the theoretical concept of the public sphere theory is widely used in different disciplines and with a strong focus on the internet (Rauchfleisch 2017), we fail to account for what's happening outside of our theoretical concept of the public sphere. Indeed, the rise of far-right movements in Europe and the U.S. or the recruitment and propaganda success of terror organisations like ISIS pose a challenge to public sphere theorists (e.g. Downey and Fenton 2003). This holds especially true since they make use of social media to articulate their messages, network, recruit, dissent or attack. In this conceptual paper we suggest a functionalist approach that integrates the concept of counterpublics and more specifically borrows from Fraser's (1990) differentiation of inward- and outward-oriented communication. In doing so, we highlight the requirements that constitute the "counter" in counterpublic (Asen 2000), describe how counterpublics may become regular publics, but also emphasise on how strong collective identities may lead to a vicious cycle of extremism. We suggest that the generalised functions of the public sphere also apply to counterpublics and discuss how these functions might lead to an end of a counterpublic.

We will first outline how the public sphere and counterpublics can be understood in a networked environment, to then discuss two major functions of counterpublics with collective identity and agenda-setting and how these may lead to a counterpublic's integration into the public sphere but also its radicalisation, depending on the success of their inward- or outward-oriented communication. Conceptually, we speak of agenda-setting when the political system responds to public opinion – thus a stimulus originating in the public sphere (Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016). We establish the concept of the vicious cycle of extremism to highlight the internet's role in the formation and radicalisation of counterpublics. To better understand this vicious cycle we give the examples of the extreme right in the USA and Western Europe with the cases of Stromfront as well as Generation Identity (GI; Identitäre Bewegung in German), and outline how they make use of the internet and social media, and how this usage might affect the right-wing counterpublics in turn.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

### *2.2. A Baseline Definition for Public Spheres in the Twenty-First Century*

Even though the concept of the public sphere is an essentially contested concept (Rauchfleisch 2017), we need a definition for the public sphere that represents the most common denominator of most conceptions and gives us the opportunity to integrate the concept of counterpublics in a general public sphere framework:

> The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions. (Habermas [1992] 1996, 360)

The internet, in general, fulfils most aspects of Habermas' "new" definition. Still, it has to be noted that this definition also entails some implicit normative assumptions formulated by Habermas that get lost in a functionalistic reading of the definition. For example, Habermas ([1992] 1996, 458) states as a principle that regulations can only claim legitimacy if "all who are possibly affected could assent as participants in rational discourses." The different digital divides at any time in the history of the internet prevent the fulfilment of this principle. Of course, even if all citizens were able to participate, it is questionable that a widespread fragmented discourse on the internet were to be filtered in a way that would stay true to Habermas' normative principles. However, the internet's most crucial change is the speed of communication. Because of the internet's network structure (Benkler 2006) with mostly weak-ties, the transition of communication to higher levels (such as mass media) can be more rapid than in traditional offline public spheres. Furthermore, the limits of online public spheres are not fixed, but can suddenly expand and contract again just as quickly (Koopmans and Olzak 2004).

One of our main goals is to conceptually integrate counterpublics into a generalised public sphere framework. For this purpose, we rely on the generalised of functions of the public sphere proposed by Rauchfleisch and Kovic (2016). The two generalised functions identity formation and agenda-setting, although important for the formation of publics, are even more crucial functions for the formation of counterpublics. Both functions are, as we will show in our brief review of the counterpublic literature, crucial for the evolvement of counterpublics and corresponds to the outward- and inward-oriented goals proposed by

Toepfl and Piwoni (2017). Moreover, these two functions also possibly explain why a vicious cycle of radicalisation can develop in which counterpublics get more extreme over time.

### 2.2. Counterpublic Theory

From a social science perspective, the history of counterpublics is closely connected to the introduction of the printing press which enabled the creation of printed counter-speech and thus a way to (potentially anonymously) question those in power. Today the use of the term counterpublics, however, is directly connected with the student movements in the 1960s and 1970s which used the notion as a fighting term which is in opposition to the media system and its structures and functions that legitimate the contexts of power (Negt and Kluge [1972] 1993). This practice of questioning the political status quo and its legitimating and reproducing structures manifested itself in acts of activism (e.g. protests) or counterpublicity (e.g. alternative media) – i.e. acts, that seamlessly were adapted and further developed by counterpublics online (Dahlberg 2007; Downey and Fenton 2003).

The conception of counterpublics as their own specific publics is used by authors (e.g. Fraser 1990; Wimmer 2005) who propose that the public sphere is not one unified public but rather consists of numerous different publics. In this sense a counterpublic has two options: either extending to the public sphere by engaging actively and critically within the public discourse or isolating itself and forming an autonomous public that functions as a "safe haven" (Fraser 1990; Negt and Kluge [1972] 1993; Nuernbergk 2013).[1]

In a networked public sphere that is shaped by numerous publics of different size, organisational structure, societal impact, and links to other publics, counterpublics can be considered to be a specific form of these publics. As Kaiser (2017) highlights, counterpublics can be defined as: (1) structured around a specific issue that is morally or politically polarising and that has the power to shape a group's identity, (2) opposed to the dominant hegemony within this discourse, (3) marginalised and/or excluded from the dominant public discourse and (4) with its own influential media outlets or online sites/platforms.

However, there are two important aspects to consider in this context: first, the separation of counterpublics and publics and second, their normative character. The former refers both to the identification and confirmation of the "counter" in "counterpublic" (Asen 2000). Counterpublics are – quite literally – in opposition to the mainstream public sphere, are excluded from voicing their opinion and are often not represented in the mass media public sphere. As a reaction, they are forced to form outside the mainstream public sphere. Social media platforms thus are very popular with counterpublics as they give them more freedom to voice their opinions and connect with each other.

As Fraser (1990, 68) highlights counterpublics have two main functions: "On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics". They are thus both outward- as well as inward-oriented. For Toepfl and Piwoni (2017, 4) inward-oriented goals are focussed on "the invention, elaboration, and formulation of alternative identities, interests, and needs" while outward-oriented goals aim at "breaking up and shifting of consensus structures within dominant publics by engaging with wider audiences and targeting dominant publics." These forms of communication are especially important when thinking about counterpublic actors on social media and potential radicalisation.

### 2.3. From Normative to Functional Public Spheres

One major challenge of public sphere theory–both with regard to the public sphere as well as counterpublics–is the gap between the normative character that emphasises how a public sphere should be and the more empirical functional view of how it actually is. The normative character refers to the term's close connection to social movements and oppressed minorities and their struggle to find recognition in the public sphere. With regard to online communication, however, there have not only been attempts to "de-normativize" the public sphere concept (e.g. Benkler 2006; Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016) but also the counterpublic concept (Cammaerts 2009; Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). Indeed, it offers a robust theoretical framework that integrates processes of exclusion or counterdiscourses that happen online and, additionally, it allows for the integration of online phenomena such as enclaves. We thus suggest that the concept should be used carefully and only for cases in which there is a clear break or polarisation between mainstream and a marginalised faction that can be shown on several levels.[2] However, as we argue here, it should also apply to problematic or "unruly" publics that, for example, reject basic democratic principles since it is here, where the mentioned mechanisms are at work, and it is also here where counterpublics form and try to widen the public discourse through several methods.

## 3. Functions of the Public Sphere: Identity Formation and Agenda-Setting

Identity formation as a function in traditional public sphere theory is one of the least noticed functions, although this function historically played a central role in the development of public spheres (Taylor 1993). While Habermas ([1962] 1989) described public spheres as an arena for the emergence of public opinion, Fraser (1990) sees public spheres mainly as arenas "for the formation and enactment of social identities" (p. 68). Habermas ([1992] 1996) took into account the so-called *weak publics* (counterpublics in the case of Fraser), which have no connection to the political system. He agrees that collective identities can be more freely articulated in such weak publics. While all these authors certainly agree about the importance of a collective identity they did not comprehensively define it. One of the most comprehensive definitions of collective identity has been proposed by Polletta and Jasper (2001, 298):

> Collective identity describes imagined as well as concrete communities, involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries. It is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences (bystanders, allies, opponents, news media, state authorities), rather than fixed. It channels words and actions, enabling some claims and deeds but delegitimating others. It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world.

This definition highlights several important aspects that are also relevant in the context of the internet. Especially on the internet imagined communities (Anderson 1983) are a central element. People are part of an imagined community if they do not personally know other members of the community, but still have an imagination of the community. The internet and social media make such imagined communities visible. Every user can, if he or she wants, make himself or herself visible and become part of the discourse. Even more passive forms of communication such as liking or sharing indicate how large

the before only imagined community is. In general, collective identity can be thought of as mostly inward-oriented communication, as it is aimed at shaping one coherent identity, i.e. an in- and outgroup.

### *3.1. Collective Identities in the Internet Age*

Identity formation as a basic function can also have adverse effects. Fraser (1990) points out that counterpublics, in which identity formation is central, can also be "explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian" (p. 67). And Downey and Fenton (2003) emphasise in this regard the need for scholars to not only look at progressive but also at problematic online counterpublics, like the extreme right. Counterpublics, as we have pointed out earlier, ultimately strive for social change. For this purpose, however, they have to connect to the mainstream public in order to influence the political system. Fraser (1990, 68) also refers to this aspect by describing counterpublics as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics". As soon as a counterpublic achieves some level of permanence in their agenda-setting to which the political system responds, it is no longer a counterpublic, at least from a functional point of view. We will return to this crucial point later.

In the case of minorities, it is evident that they as a group must first build a collective identity before they can start to successfully influence political processes. Citizens often have to adopt an abstract political identity, for example, a conservative or a liberal, before they can participate politically (Huddy 2001). Furthermore, for individual citizens to become active as a group, in most cases, a collective identity is needed (Polletta and Jasper 2001) to create a strong stimulus (e.g. public protest) that can reach the political system (Habermas [1992] 1996). The same holds true for the internet age. It is not enough to have a new simple and less resource demanding communication channel with the internet (Calhoun 1998). Only when internet users form a collective identity, and they see themselves as part of a larger community, they can influence the political system.

However, there is also the explicit view that in the internet age collective identities are no longer important for protest movements. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 757) point out in their concept of connective action that, thanks to new communication technologies, it is possible to organise loose public networks around "personalized action themes" without depending on strong collective identities. However, it must be critically argued that the protest movements (e.g. the Occupy movement) that many academics studied remained largely unsuccessful (no level of permanence with agenda-setting). There is undoubtedly the possibility to connect and mobilise more quickly and decentralised on the internet without resorting to civil society organisations (Benkler et al. 2015). Nevertheless, the question remains whether ad-hoc constellations of individuals around personalised action frames are sufficient to successfully set the political agenda. We are not the first to propose this view. Couldry (2015) also notes critically in his essay that protests originating on the internet remained largely unsuccessful. Ultimately, we believe the greatest contribution of the internet is easier networking among potential group members, as well as the rapid amplification of existing collective identities. This form of inward-oriented communication, however, can also have problematic consequences as a too strong collective identity might lead to the radicalisation of the counterpublic which, in turn, won't be successful in influencing the agenda as the relevant issues are too extreme. The difficult

negotiation between inward- and outward-oriented communication that takes place in counterpublics has to be seen against the backdrop of the mainstream public sphere. Both identity formation as well as agenda-setting are dependent on the mainstream public sphere which serves as identity defining outgroup but also as admired forum to disseminate one's ideas. Balancing outward- and inward-oriented communication thus is a complicated affair with, depending on a counterpublic's structure and size, little chance of success.

### *3.2. From Identity Formation to Agenda-Setting*

A too strong developed collective identity, which leads to an intense intergroup bias (Castano et al. 2002), prevents agenda-setting since the majority is not ready to respect or even accept the by the minority expressed opinion, which, in turn, may lead to further radicalisation (see section 4). Still, a strong collective identity is the foundation for counterpublics before achieving agenda-setting as the following quote of Habermas (1996) illustrates:

> [I]t is usually a long road, involving dogged efforts at staging public 'actions,' before such initially 'private' matters even begin to acquire the status of recognized political issues. And it is a long road until the controversial contributions on such issues-contributions that depend on competing interpretations of self and world, or on different 'visions of the good life' -adequately articulate the needs of those affected. Only after a public 'struggle for recognition' can the contested interest positions be taken up by the responsible political authorities, put on the parliamentary agenda, discussed, and, if need be, worked into legislative proposals and binding decisions (p. 314)

Here, Habermas highlights, that permanence is important and agenda-setting cannot be achieved in the short-run. Furthermore, before the political system receives a stimulus, a struggle has to take place. This struggle for recognition can only be won if a group of people is actively fighting for this recognition over an extended period, especially if they do not have access to the political system (e.g. the women's movement, Banaszak 2001). In order to give people the opportunity to be involved in such a struggle at all, however, we have pointed out earlier the importance of a strong collective identity. Even robust collective identities into which human beings were socialised must constantly be confirmed and reproduced (Hogg and Reid 2006). This process is largely based on media- and interpersonal-mediated communication.

Despite the internet and online media, a greater diversity of opinions, and a higher volume of news due to 24/7 news cycles (Klinenberg 2005), there is still a "limited attention space" (Schroeder 2016, 4) and only few issues receive attention, which then might lead to political change. On the one hand, recipients can process only a few issues at the same time (Neuman 2016); on the other hand, a strong stimulus is needed for the political system to address new issues (Habermas [1992] 1996). Also, Koopmans and Olzak (2004, 203) point out that "the media has a finite carrying capacity at any point in time." The role of the media is therefore still relevant, and the freer the media, the greater the chance that critical issues are picked up by the mass media or political elites. If citizens have access to the internet, have sufficient civil rights to express themselves freely, and at the same time, the media freedom is given, the likelihood that the agenda-setting will originate on the internet increases. However, the more closed a political system is, the stronger the stimulus has to be and the more the outcome depends on traditional media. In cases with successful

agenda-setting which had its origin on social media in less democratic countries, traditional mass media played a crucial role as an amplifier of the issue before the political system responded to it (Jiang 2014; Kim and Lee 2007). Yet, if the stimulus is too strong, i.e. extreme, as in the case of terrorism, the political system is unlikely to pick the stimulus up. Instead the counterpublic is more likely to be more excluded from the mainstream.

Theoretically, the definition of agenda-setting (political system responds to stimulus originating in the public sphere) in this context is clear, but in practice the boundaries are fluid. Nevertheless, this clear distinction is important in order to distinguish between counterpublics and the public sphere as well as between inward- and outward-oriented communication. This idea is not new in itself but has already been expressed implicitly by Habermas ([1992] 1996) and Fraser (1990).

As shown in Table 1, we pick up on Fraser's (1990) and Toepfl and Piwoni's (2017) thoughts regarding a counterpublic's inward- and outward-oriented communication and conceptualise them within the framework of the networked publics. We want to emphasise in this context, that both inward- as well as outward-orientation also can contribute to the other goal (i.e. agenda-setting can, to some extent, also contribute to a counterpublic's collective identity). Yet, there are differences with regard to their main function (identity formation and agenda-setting) and what these functions entail: Whereas inward-oriented communication aims at creating "training grounds" (Fraser 1990) and a stronger bond between members of the community, i.e. a stronger networking, outward-oriented communication aims to extend the public sphere, at finding allies as well as recruiting new members through the higher public exposure. The internet is highly important in this context, as it offers but also indirectly contributes to both forms of communication. Inward-oriented communication can, for example, lead to the creation of alternatives to platforms like Facebook or Twitter and thus the self-inflicted isolation. Furthermore, a website's algorithm can foster the creation of so-called "filter bubbles" (Pariser 2011). These consequences may in the long run, and as we will explain later, lead to a counterpublic's radicalisation. Similarly, the internet also allows outward-oriented communication to be more effective and diverse. It allows counterpublics to create a variety of alternative media (e.g. own websites, own blogs, YouTube channels, Soundcloud channels, etc.) which are aiming at reaching the mainstream, but mainstream communication is also more vulnerable nowadays to counterpublic communication; hashtags can be captured, i.e. their meaning can be turned against the

**TABLE 1:**
Functions and dangers of inward- and outward-oriented communication for counterpublics

| Type of communication | Main function | Goal | Role of internet | Danger |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inward-oriented | Identity formation | • Training ground<br>• (Transnational) networking | • Filter bubbles<br>• Own forums/ platforms | Radicalisation |
| Outward-oriented | Agenda-setting | • Extension of public sphere<br>• Finding allies<br>• Recruiting | • Alternative media<br>• Capturing hashtags<br>• Hacking | Polarisation |

intended hegemonic meaning, and websites or accounts can be hacked. These forms of counterpublic outward-oriented communication, however, can cause the fragmentation of the mainstream, if they are successful but the stimulus is too extreme for parts of the mainstream, as we will outline below.

### *3.4. The End of Counterpublics*

Yet the question remains of where a counterpublic starts and where a counterpublic ends. Indeed, the conceptual end of counterpublics is, to our knowledge, a rather overlooked point within public sphere theory. Based on the generalised functions of the public sphere, we suggest that the consistent potential for agenda-setting can be seen as deciding criteria for making this distinction. If counterpublics form around the structural exclusion or marginalisation from the mainstream public sphere they have, per definition, no or little say in the public agenda as this would inherently contradict the idea that counterpublics are being treated differently by the mainstream. So, then, when counterpublics achieve to consistently influence the agenda, they cannot be considered to be counterpublics anymore as they have been able to access and influence the public agenda.

Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 2017) present an interesting case in their work to discuss this aspect: They are taking a closer look at the user comments of members from the German right-wing and differentiate between inward- and outward-oriented communication. Toepfl and Piwoni's (2015) analysis is noteworthy as the question whether supporters of a rising political party can be considered to be members of a counterpublic, is both instructive and debatable. One argument in favour of that view would be that the communication networks in comment sections are very far from the centre of the public. Yet, in the short term, if one wants to refer directly to Habermas (1996) and Peters (1993), the routines of the political centre can be broken through, even by weak publics. When the political system then changes to the extraordinary problem-processing mode, the locks open up to concerns which originate in the periphery. In the case of Toepfl and Piwoni's study, the right-wing party AfD and its supporters were back in 2013/4 a counterpublic, but since their success on national level they have become part of the mainstream public. In the German case the refugee crises lead to an extraordinary problem-processing mode which gave the AfD the discursive opportunity (Koopmans and Olzak 2004) to enter the mainstream. However, even though this seems like a sudden event, the ideological forces behind the AfD were planning to set their agenda for years, but only under today's circumstances there was a realistic window of opportunity. Two outcomes are possible. Agenda-setting might lead to an integration of the counterpublic into the general public sphere if claims are evaluated as legitimate by the political system and eventually recognised. However, it is also possible that the agenda-setting fails while weakening the public sphere. For example, one of the major goals of the extreme right is to push the so-called Overton window; i.e. push the boundaries of what is acceptable to say in public through provocations and scandals (e.g. Russell 2006).

In conclusion, for a counterpublic to lose its status as a counterpublic two main aspects need to be fulfiled: (1) they need to be integrated within the wider mainstream public sphere in the sense that members of the counterpublic have the opportunity to voice their opinions and share their perspectives and are not marginalised. And (2) they need to be able to have the potential for a recurring agenda-setting. In a next step, we

will now show, how a vicious cycle of extremism can develop if agenda-setting as a function cannot be reached.

## 4. The Vicious Cycle of Counterpublics and the Public Sphere

In the last step, we now put together all the pieces from the previous sections and show, how a vicious cycle of counterpublics can develop. We propose a theoretical model that explains how protest cycles can turn into a vicious cycle of counterpublics which is fuelled by a lack of moderate outward-oriented communication, i.e. agenda-setting on the one hand and an inward-oriented communication, i.e. radicalisation on the other hand (see Figure 1). Many movements started rather peaceful with moderate aims. However, if they were not successful, they started to use more radical protest tactics (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). We will adapt this idea to the internet and counterpublics.

(1) First, we argued that counterpublics will try at some point to change from a weak and only loosely – if at all – organised public to a strong public in order to set the agenda. To create a strong enough stimulus that will provoke a response of the political system, a counterpublic relies mainly on their own alternative media, but more importantly the mass media as a major part of the mainstream public sphere. (2) The media can take up a weak stimulus and amplify it which then increases the likelihood that the political system will perceive the stimulus and respond to it. Because the media and its audience, as well as the political system, have a limited attention space, the stimulus has to be strong enough initially. The more extreme the stimulus, the higher the likelihood that the media will amplify the stimulus. (3) If a stimulus is taken by the media, but eventually the political system is not responding to it, no agenda-setting took place. Still, as we have argued, presence in the media strengthens the collective identity. So, outward-oriented communication can potentially achieve the goals of inward-oriented communication. Yet, it can also lead to problems as for some the topics that are being discussed are to tame or watered down. A

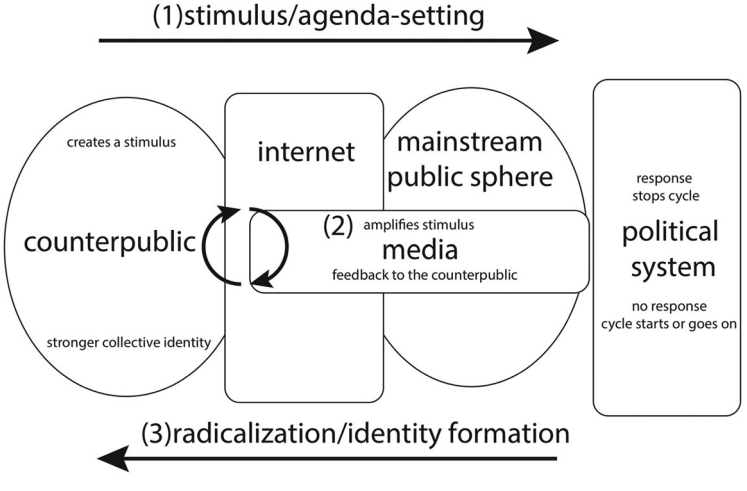


**FIGURE 1:**
Vicious cycle of counterpublics

prominent case is the right-wing violence described in the Koopmans and Olzak (2004) study in which the authors identify visibility and resonance as discursive opportunities that foster more radical actions in the future. The new stronger stimulus then has a higher probability to reach the media again and provoke a response of the political system. However, if a stimulus becomes too extreme, i.e. if the too radical inward-oriented communication becomes public and a counterpublic turns away from legitimate protest to illegitimate actions (e.g. violence, hate speech, terrorism), both the mainstream public sphere as well as the political system cannot react anymore to the originally legitimate concerns. Violent attacks on immigrants by Neo-Nazis, for example, may make the news but it is more than doubtful that this will also resonate with the mainstream public sphere. If such a point of no return has been reached, a vicious cycle starts to develop. And although more extreme and illegitimate activity may lead to more presence in the media and strengthens the counterpublic's collective identity, it decreases the probability of an integration into the mainstream and a response from the political system.

## 5. The Extreme Right in Western Europe and the USA

It has to be reiterated that counterpublics cannot be thought without the mainstream public sphere that marginalises them. Reaching the mainstream public sphere via social media or mass media is thus eminent for counterpublics. In this section, we will briefly outline the extreme right in Western Europe and the U.S. and then present the example of the older and more traditional extreme right forum Stormfront and the more modern and intellectual extreme right GI to highlight how these counterpublic make use of the internet and social media to showcase what role the internet plays in the identity formation of these organisations.

Although Fraser (1990) mentions that counterpublics can be anti-democratic and Downey and Fenton (2003) suggested to understand and research the extreme right from a counterpublic perspective, this has barely happened theory-wise. In recent years, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 2017) understood the supporters of the German right-wing populist party AfD as members of the counterpublic. In contrast, Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann (2012), as well as Caren, Jowers, and Gaby (2012), analyse the extreme right through the lens of social movement theory whereas Koster and Houtman (2008) and Bowman-Grieve (2009) understand members of the extreme right forum Stormfront as virtual communities. We argue, that by conceptualising the extreme right as a number of counterpublics, we account for sophisticated cases like social movements and virtual communities but also for cases that are more loosely connected and spontaneous like the so-called ad-hoc publics which are especially prominent on social media (Bruns and Burgess 2012).

As several authors have pointed out the extreme right is neither a collective transnational nor one cohesive national public but is rather fragmented into several different publics (e.g. White Supremacists, Neoconfederates and radical Christian in the U.S.; Zhou et al. (2005); see also Caiani and Parenti (2013) for a comparison of USA, Germany, Spain, Italy, UK, and France) that may or may not be connected online. In this context, we understand the extreme right as "ideologies of inequality on the one hand, such as exaggerated nationalism, racist denigration, and totalitarian views of the law, are associated with varying levels of acceptance of violence on the other" (Heitmeyer 2003, 401). This definition not only shows the far right's opposition to the mainstream but also their openness to illegitimate

forms of dissent like violence. As the right-wing counterpublics in West Europe and the U.S. differ notably in the extremeness of their positions on issues, their opinion on violence, and their usage of the internet as a communication and network tool, we will now present two examples that exemplify the role social media plays for right-wing counterpublics and that can be located in different stages of the vicious circle of radicalisation.

### *5.1. (Transnational) Networking and Validation*

One of the oldest and most prominent online platforms for the extreme right is the U.S. website *Stormfront* (the site had 321,866 members in March 2017). The site which has been around for over 20 years offers their members to discuss topics ranging from politics, collective action to romance (Bowman-Grieve 2009). As Stormfront brings together a variety of different extreme right-wing positions and stages of extremism, Koster and Houtman (2008, 1171) call it a "stage for the display of extreme right identities." And although users occasionally bring up the topic of violent action these threads are usually taken down by moderators since it violates the site's policy (Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012). Stormfront thus functions for its members as a point for discourse and exchange, information, planning, recruiting, refuge but also entertainment. It is, indeed, a "training ground." As it is its own platform, there are no dissenting voices or counterspeech, and thus members mostly validate and confirm each other's opinion. All communication that takes place on Stormfront thus is inherently inward-oriented. Caren, Jowers, and Gaby (2012, 188) thus suggest that Stormfront "likely increases the collective identity of members." Consequently, Stormfront can be considered to be almost at the end of the vicious circle of radicalisation: they are not interested in reaching the mainstream, but rather in forming an international collective identity. In addition, their stimuli would also be too extreme to be picked up by the mainstream. Based on the literature on Stormfront, we want to highlight two major aspects that showcase how the internet is being used by the extreme right to strengthen their collective identity: (transnational) networking and radicalisation.

Although Stormfront is first and foremost a U.S. platform, it also has a strong international presence. Its international section lists 15 country or region specific sub-fora like Europe, Australia or South Africa (last checked 14 August 2018). And in the case of the Netherlands, the Dutch country forum on Stormfront can even be considered to be the biggest Dutch right-wing forum (Koster and Houtman 2008). But Stormfront does not only connect members of right-wing counterpublics transnationally but also in a national context. A hyperlink study, for example, by Zhou et al. (2005) shows how Stormfront connects the White supremacy/Neo-Nazi cluster with the Christian identity cluster. This shows, then, how the website connects members of the extreme right both nationally as well as transnationally and thus gives marginalised voices a forum to speak up. Stormfront thus makes use of the internet's power to network between individuals with similar interests. Stormfront is not only a hub that connects different actors with another but also only consists of inward-oriented communication and is thus a place that strengthens the collective identity and, in turn, may lead to a radicalisation of its userbase if they are being ignored by the political mainstream. In the world of Stormfront, this radicalisation has its own term that goes back to Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke's book about his personal "awakening" (Bowman-Grieve 2009). Bowman-Grieve (2009, 999) describes how a "community of like-minded individuals has developed a network of support for themselves and others that

gives them legitimacy and allows them to further justify their ideological beliefs and actions both on an individual and group level." She highlights in this context the importance of literature, first-hand stories of personal experiences, and the internet. Coming from a counterpublic perspective, this practice has to be emphasised as it basically describes the recruitment and radicalisation of members over time, thus strengthening the collective identity.

### 5.2. Re-enforcing Collective Identity and Recruiting

The *GI* is a relatively new movement, based on the French *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1960s, that is especially prominent in France, Germany, and Austria (Hentges, Kökgiran, and Nottbohm 2014). One of the organisation's core idea is that a nation's identity has to be preserved and protected from foreign influences. However, they claim that they stand for a third way that is neither left or right and thus one of their slogans is, for instance, "100% identity, 0% racism" (Leggewie 2017, 392). This shows an interesting aspect of the GI: they position themselves in contrast to other right-wing organisations like skinhead and hooligan counterpublics both in their more intellectual way of phrasing their nativism, racism and xenophobia as well as in the way they communicate it. This modern and more intellectual approach is targeted at a younger and more educated audience, and that is not necessarily in opposition to a certain race but rather to the religion of Islam which they consider to be incompatible with the European occident (Hentges, Kökgiran, and Nottbohm 2014; Leggewie 2017). To do so, they combine real-life events like flash mobs and protests with their social media activity on YouTube or Facebook where they attempt to make the real-life event look cool and appealing (Hentges, Kökgiran, and Nottbohm 2014) but also to influence the agenda. Their activity can thus be considered to be both be targeted at potential recruits as well as members of the GI counterpublic that feel validated in being part of the GI by the eventisation of the videos and the Facebook and Twitter posts. Their communication strategy is thus both inward- and outward-oriented.

In 2016, for example, German members of the GI climbed on the Brandenburger Tor in Berlin and presented big posters in which they protested against being supposedly overrun by foreigners and safe borders (Welt.de 2016). As this protest is part of their social media strategy, they filmed their activities and shared them afterward via social media. Both the video in German and with English subtitles has been viewed around 40,000 times till March 2017. In addition, several mainstream news outlets covered the incident. In this case, the political system obviously ignored their protest, but the media attention helped them to strengthen their collective identity. This example is only one of many that demonstrates how the GI is trying to appeal to online publics as well as the mass media public and thus to reach the mainstream public sphere. Indeed, their acts of dissent are not necessarily and only secondarily directed at the people who are witnessing their protest live but rather at their old and potential new supporters all over the world and the mass media. It is thus outward-oriented communication and aimed at agenda-setting.

However, flash mobs and protests are only one way the GI is attempting to recruit new members and strengthen their collective identity. Another way is the crowdsourcing campaign for the mobile application *Patriot Peer* by one of Austria's prominent GI members. The app's goal is, according to their crowdfunding page, to connect like-

minded people with each other and thus to show the supposed silent majority that they are, indeed, not alone (Patriot-Peer.com 2017). It works similarly to dating apps where the app shows you the people in your area that also use the app. It can thus be considered to be a continuation of sites like Stormfront that do not only offer to connect virtually but also in real life. From a counterpublic perspective, this step makes sense as it not only makes the imagined communities more visible but also strengthens the in-group's collective identity. Indeed, the potential to connect virtually on a closed social network of like-minded users and then meet up in real life offers the GI counterpublic a way to avoid potential disruption by the mainstream public sphere (e.g. counterspeech or surveillance). However, a closed backchannel may also backfire when people realise that they are, in fact, not the silent majority and are not able to locate other users in their area.

The GI's step to develop their own meet-up app and thus circumvent public discourse can be understood as a further part of the vicious cycle of identity formation which we outlined above: since they are not able to influence the agenda but are also mostly ignored in the mainstream public sphere they decide to detach even further from the mainstream which may, in turn, lead to a radicalisation of the GI. Yet, in contrast to Stormfront they still attempt to reach the mainstream and thus balance inward- and outward-oriented communication.

## 6. Using the Framework in Future Research

In this paper, we set out to conceptualise online counterpublics and their relationship to the mainstream public sphere with regard to their potential radicalisation. We proposed that problematic actors from the extreme right and their online activity can be understood within the framework of the public sphere and discussed how successful agenda-setting has the potential to lead to an end of a counterpublic. We then developed a model that takes the vicious cycle of the public sphere into account: i.e. the phenomenon that loose publics that are not being heard or represented in the public sphere slowly radicalise themselves to a) strengthen their collective identity and b) create a stronger stimulus directed towards the political system in order to set the agenda. This, however, can, in turn, lead to an even more radicalised counterpublic if the stimulus is being ignored in the mainstream public sphere. If a too strong stimulus, however, is accepted within parts of the mainstream public sphere, this might lead to a fragmentation or even polarisation of the mainstream. To illustrate this phenomenon, we presented the case of the already quite radicalised extreme right in Western Europe and the US. We used this case to highlight how the internet and social media is being used to strengthen the extreme right's collective identity through inward-oriented communication and what stimuli they use in their outward-oriented communication to influence the agenda.

Future research should thus focus more on anti-democratic and extreme counterpublics. Our conceptual model raises a few noteworthy research areas. First, counterpublics and their forms of communication should be observed and analyzed before they achieve agenda-setting. Usually, it is a long road before a group achieves recognition or becomes too radical. Therefore, we suggest researchers should closely follow counterpublics and their development. Also in its pre-political stages. We believe identity formation deserves more attention from public sphere scholars. Especially the case of the far-right shows that for many participants the first contact with the political dimension often takes place

more in a pre-political sphere and/or through conspiracy theories (e.g. Kaiser and Puschmann 2017). The boundaries between the cultural sphere and the (political) spheres seem conceptually clear but are in reality quite fluid. Second, own networks become more and more important in protest movements. For example, FireChat as a mesh network was an important tool for the umbrella movement (Shadbolt 2014). This development can also be observed in right-wing counterpublics as the development of the Patriot Peer app has shown.

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## NOTES

1. Communication in this context also includes participation in marches or the visiting and organising of counterpublic spaces like theatres or centres but also user participation in social media (Kaiser 2017; Nuernbergk 2013).
2. In general, there are two schools of counterpublic theory: one that is focussed on a more functionalist and structural definition that focuses on empirical signals for exclusion/marginalisation and one that, in addition, also emphasises the importance of the feeling of exclusion for a counterpublic's identity (Asen 2000). In this paper, we follow the functionalist line of thinking.

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