ARENAS

ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

Defining Extremist Narratives:

A review of the current state of the art.

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Evolution of political extremism and its influence on contemporary social and political dialogue

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01 INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The recent rise of disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories has often been noted (e.g. Fowler-Watt & McDougall [eds.] 2022). It comes as no surprise that "bad information" has the power to shape *extremist narratives*, which in turn can play a vital role in mobilising potential adherents towards violence (see Berger 2018). Indeed, it is fairly obvious that narratives of various kinds are at the heart of extremist movements and ideas. But as soon as we set out to study extremist narratives in more detail, definitional issues arrive, such as: What exactly counts as extremist narratives?

This entails several follow-up questions, including: What exactly is a narrative? And: Where does extremism begin, and where does it end? The goal of the present document is to develop an operational definition of extremist narratives based on existing literature on extremism on the one hand, and on the concept of narrative on the other.

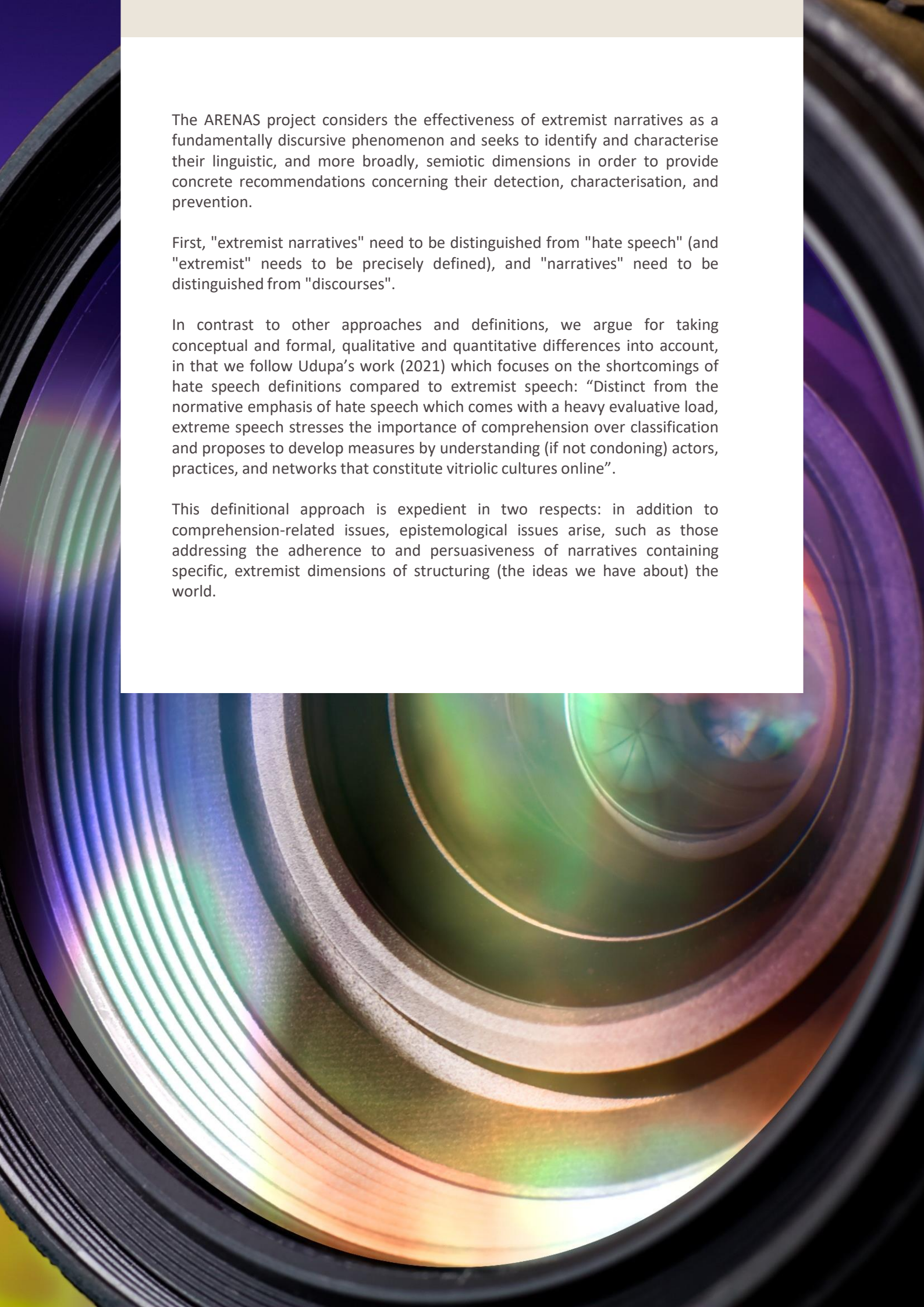
Extremist narratives reflect a complex intersection of spatial and temporal contexts where narratives are constructed, consumed, and reproduced – and where they circulate between members of a community that is often difficult to identify and determine. From a spatial perspective, it can be argued that political culture, democratic experience, strength of and public trust in institutions, level and appreciation of education, perception of civil rights, and standard of living, diverge in different regions in Europe and provide a different breeding ground for extremism. For example, Nordic welfare state societies, such as Finland, differ considerably from e.g. Eastern European countries such as Poland or Hungary in terms of their history, their culture, and their economic conditions, which can be expected to have an impact on the extent to which extremist narratives spread, but potentially also on how they surface.

The current temporal context can be defined as an era of multiple crises emerging on different spatial levels. Prolonged and overlapping crises influence the perceptions of security, trust in institutions and people-power relations (Eurofound: Trust 2022).

Since 2018, the debate about the rule of law and core values of liberal democracy has been accelerating. Confrontation and polarisation have become stronger, and recent years have seen a resurgence of illiberal movements, organisations and populist parties advocating centralised power and nationalism and/or promoting illiberal views on issues such as sexual orientation or gender identities (Mounk 2018; Almeida 2019). These issues were arguably exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which forced Western liberal democracies to take on measures that were incompatible with their basic values. As such, the pandemic called into question not only democratic principles but also the ability of liberal democracies to respond appropriately to such a crisis (see Goetz & Martinsen 2021). At the same time, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the proliferation of conspiracy theories, pervasive disinformation, fake news, and increasingly extremist narratives. This phenomenon has led to a widespread distrust of official knowledge, including information disseminated in science, politics, and the media (Freedom House Report 2021; McIntyre 2018).

In February 2022 the European community experienced yet another crisis in its immediate neighbourhood – the war in Ukraine. This crisis also contributed to increased polarisation, as different narratives regarding the causes and effects of the crisis were discussed. Another war, geographically less close but stirring even more controversial debates in the entire Western world including Europe, broke out in 2023, with the terrorist attack of the radical-Islamist Hamas on Israel and Israel's subsequent military reaction. As an escalation of the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine, this war fuelled both antisemitic and anti-Islamic narratives to a considerable extent.

These examples show that populist and extremist narratives are particularly appealing, and thus particularly dangerous, in times of crisis. As such, it is all the more important to recognise them, which requires an adequate definition. Our attempt to define extremist narratives, in the context outlined above, is a contribution to the research programme of the ARENAS project. Importantly, the ARENAS consortium focuses on narratives as crucial nexuses, because "the battle of stories, not the debate on issues" (Cornog 2014) may determine the way in which citizens react to political events. Looking at extremist narratives in the European political and social context invites us to cross-reference questions of discourse and "semiotization" of social reality with the positioning of these narratives, and/or stories, which can be defined as "extremist". Extremist narratives constitute counter-narratives in the sense that they challenge mainstream worldviews and mainstream interpretations of periods of social change and major events. Thus, a strong antagonism is constructed between extremist and mainstream narratives, which is evident, for instance, if we compare the narratives on the ongoing war in Ukraine.



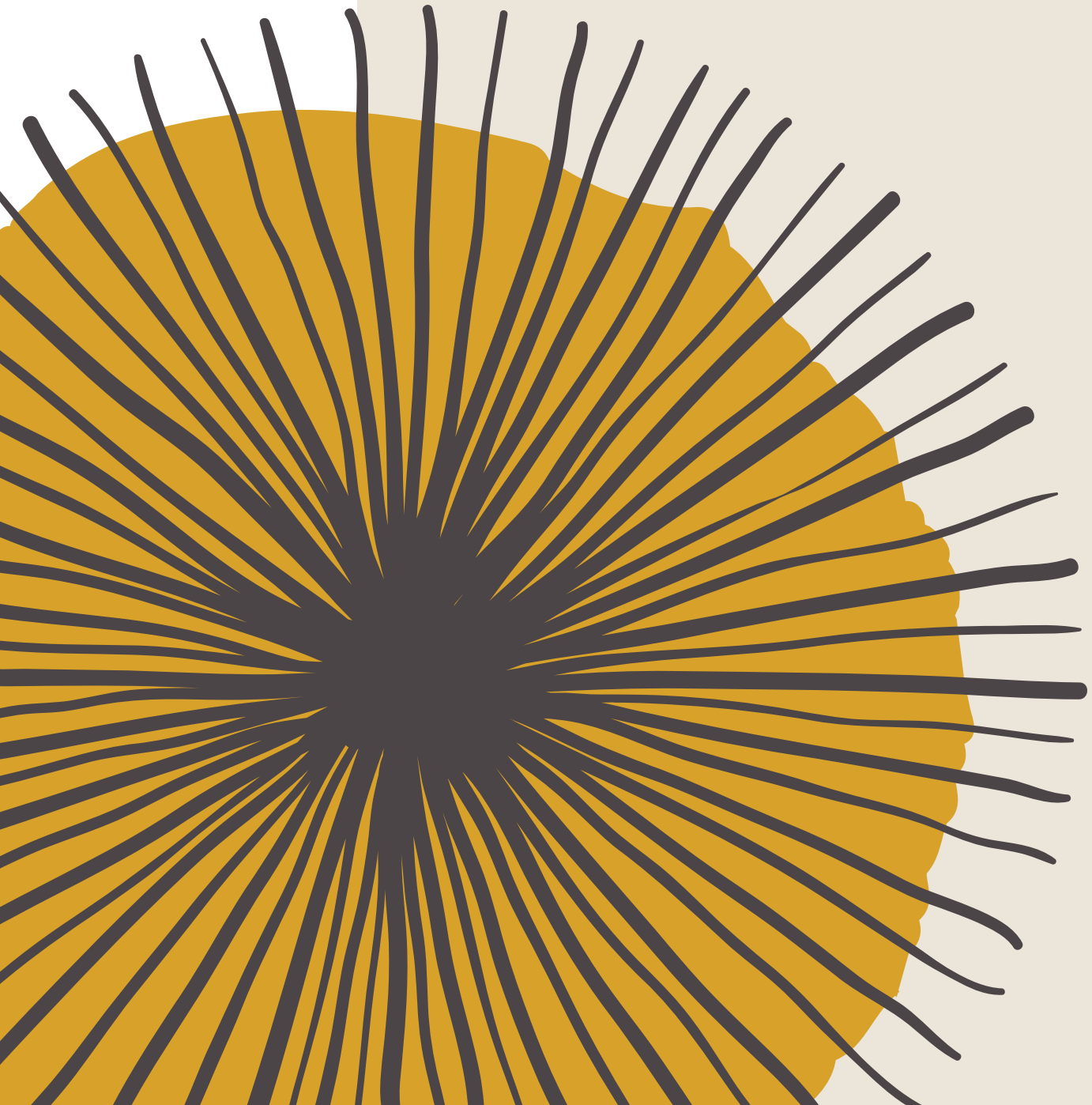
The ARENAS project considers the effectiveness of extremist narratives as a fundamentally discursive phenomenon and seeks to identify and characterise their linguistic, and more broadly, semiotic dimensions in order to provide concrete recommendations concerning their detection, characterisation, and prevention.

First, "extremist narratives" need to be distinguished from "hate speech" (and "extremist" needs to be precisely defined), and "narratives" need to be distinguished from "discourses".

In contrast to other approaches and definitions, we argue for taking conceptual and formal, qualitative and quantitative differences into account, in that we follow Udupa's work (2021) which focuses on the shortcomings of hate speech definitions compared to extremist speech: "Distinct from the normative emphasis of hate speech which comes with a heavy evaluative load, extreme speech stresses the importance of comprehension over classification and proposes to develop measures by understanding (if not condoning) actors, practices, and networks that constitute vitriolic cultures online".

This definitional approach is expedient in two respects: in addition to comprehension-related issues, epistemological issues arise, such as those addressing the adherence to and persuasiveness of narratives containing specific, extremist dimensions of structuring (the ideas we have about) the world.

02 WHAT IS EXTREMISM?



WHAT IS EXTREMISM?

Key Points

- **The formation of extremist attitudes can be described as a process of radicalisation.**
- **However, extremism should not be considered as a logical continuation of radicalism, since radicalism originally comes from the liberal freedom and democracy movement.**
- **Extremism is based on the demarcation of a superior in-group (superiority) from an out-group.**
- **In order to preserve the in-group, it is necessary from an extremist point of view to inflict a serious evil (typically a type of violence) on the out-group.**
- **Extremism assumes a unified will of the in-group to which there are no admissible alternatives (dogmatism).**

For defining *extremist narratives* we first have to get a grasp of the concept of extremism. There are plenty of attempts to define extremism. However, definitions differ massively, yielding to the conclusion that a consensus on how to define extremism might not be possible, while other researchers proposed to adopt a widely agreed-upon definition for practical reasons (see McNeil-Willson 2023: 17 for an overview). To this end, Hervik (2019: 3105–3106) notes that *extremism* is an essentially vague but highly politicised concept that has often been used to denounce political dissent. In a similar vein, McNeil-Willson (2023: 18) argues that "the labelling of someone or something 'extremist' represents a political act". This makes it all the more important to flesh out and delineate the concept as precisely as possible.

Extremism and Radicalisation

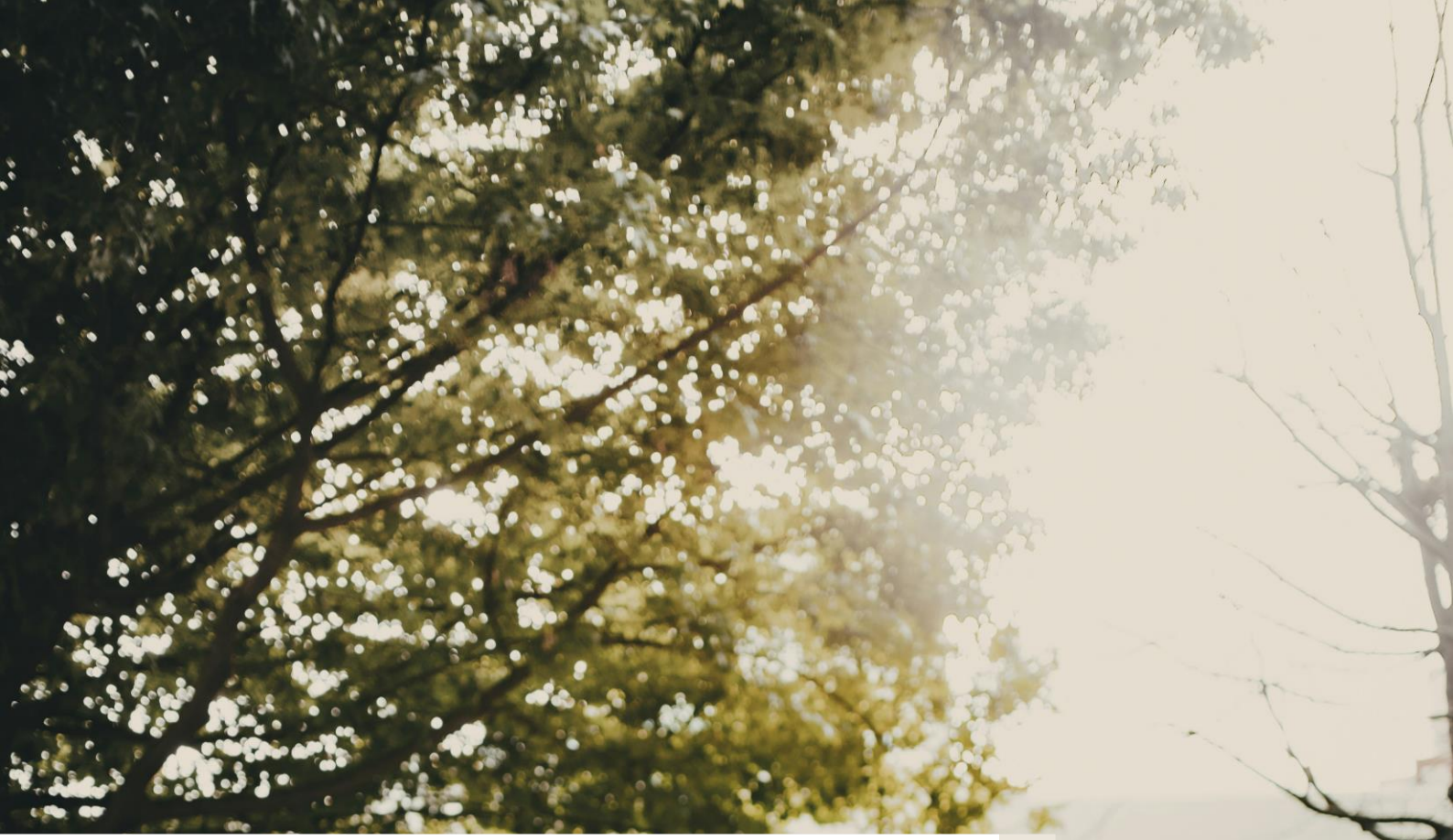
Orofino & Allchorn (2023: 2), for instance, place extremism on a continuum between *radicalization* on the one hand and *terrorism* on the other. On this view, radicalization can lead to extremism, which in turn can lead to terrorism. According to Orofino & Allchorn (2023: 2), extremists are "radicals who have moved to the next step, opposing the enemy (mostly the establishment) with all the legal tools available (generally protests, petitions, demonstrations and online campaigns) but without using violence". Radicalisation can be seen as a pathway to extremism, usually consisting of the adoption of specific, usually anti-establishment ideas, often rooted in a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo; terrorism, then again, is a form of politically motivated violence that puts extremist ideas into action (Orofino & Allchorn 2023: 2-3).

Bötticher (2018: 76) notes that radicalism can be absorbed into democratic political systems so that that radical demands are integrated into reasonable compromises. On the other side, in the face of extremism, it should be noted that democratic systems and pluralistic societies cannot absorb dogmatic demands that are based on ideological constructs and fundamentally challenge democracy and pluralism. This brings us to another aspect that is often cited as a defining characteristic of extremism and contrasted with radicalism. Extremism is seen as inherently anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic (McNeil-Willson 2023: 18). Mudde (2007: 31), discussing right-wing radicalism and extremism, sees this as an important point that distinguishes radicalism from extremism: While the populist radical right is not anti-democratic (but may reject *liberal* democracy), the extreme right is essentially anti-democratic (Mudde 2007: 31).

However, as Bötticher (2018: 76) points out, it is commonplace in current public discourse to label radical political engagement as radicalisation and thus as the first step that inevitably leads to extremism and political violence (terrorism). This risks disqualifying all forms of radical rebellion, including legitimate resistance to corrupt regimes, as illegitimate extremism. There is a danger that pro-democracy radicals will be driven into the hands of anti-democratic extremists. Authoritarian regimes often promote the equation of radicalism with extremism to present themselves as the only guarantors of relative stability in the current geopolitical situation, capable of combating extremism and terrorism.

Although this is often forgotten in debates on radicalism (Bötticher 2018: 76), it is worth remembering that the term 'radicalism' originally came from the liberal freedom and democracy movement of the 19th century. For a long time, it was used to describe the 'bourgeois left' (the left-liberal political spectrum). Radical democrats fought for universal suffrage, the consistent disempowerment of the church and the republican form of government. Left-liberal radical democratic parties still exist today, especially in the Romance countries (e.g. France and Italy). Radicalism can therefore still have positive connotations today, in the sense of a return to the roots of liberal democracy and the defence of its values.

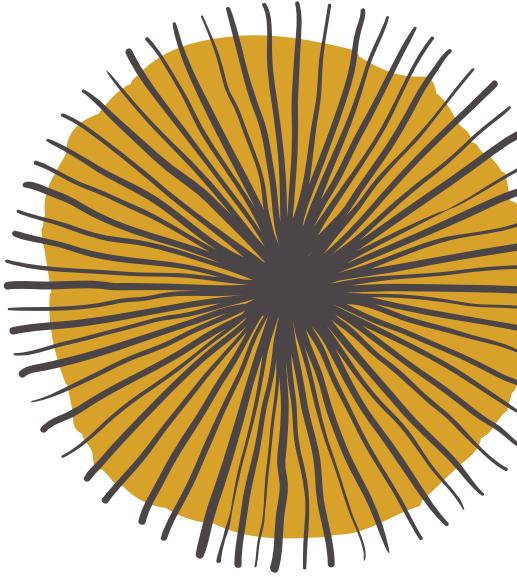
We therefore suggest that the terms radicalism and extremism should not be used synonymously. It also seems problematic to us to understand radicalism as part of a continuum that leads, if not necessarily, then regularly via radicalisation to extremism and terrorism. Since the term radicalisation is difficult to dislodge from current discourse to describe a process leading to extremism, we will distinguish between radical political ideas on the one hand and radicalisation (towards extremist positions) on the other. This is not entirely successful terminologically, but it seems unavoidable.



Extremism and Populism

Importantly, distinguishing between in-group and out-group is a characteristic that *extremism* shares with *populism*; as defined by Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 6) populism is "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." Müller (2016: 42) offers a similar definition, but instead of conceiving populism as an ideology, he views populism as a specific conception of politics; in a similar vein, Jesse & Panrek (2017: 65–66), who consider Mudde & Rivera Kaltwasser's definition to be too broad, define populism as a political *style*. According to Jesse & Panrek (2017: 65–66), what sets populism and extremism apart is their relationship to democracy:

Extremism is directed against the constitutional democratic state, while populism, as a political style, operates within a democratic system. This is in line with the previously cited view of Mudde (2007: 31), who contrasts the populist radical right, which is not anti-democratic *per se*, with the extreme right, which works against democracy.



Some Legal Aspects of Extremism

Across the spectrum, narratives play a key role: especially the “Us” vs. “Them” distinction, which is a definitional feature of both extremism and populism and can hardly be thought of without some sort of narrative. This is why we will explore the concept of narrative in more detail in the next section before we try to synthesise both aspects in offering a working definition of extremist narratives.

Many national legal definitions commonly establish their foundational principles based on the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. An initial challenge arose from the fact that the Covenant did not permit any restrictions on the right to hold an opinion, with the only exceptions being regulated by law to protect national security, public order, public health, morals, or the reputation of others (as stipulated in Article 19). Consequently, an additional framework was developed to address issues related to hate speech, and this supplementary framework, known as the Rabat Plan of Action, was adopted as recently as 2012.

Notably, these definitions encompass six key aspects: context, speaker, intent, content/form, extent, and likelihood:

(i) Context, which necessitates an examination of the social and political environment during the speech's dissemination;

(ii) Speaker, considering the speaker's societal position and their relevance to the intended audience;

(iii) Intent, as stipulated in Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, involving the activation of a triangular relationship between the subject, object, and audience of the speech act;

(iv) Content and form, emphasising the content's provocative nature and the style of arguments employed;

(v) Extent, encompassing factors like the reach, public nature, audience size, means of dissemination, and accessibility of the speech; and

(vi) Likelihood, which requires a reasonable probability of the speech inciting actual harm against the target group, with causation being relatively direct.

To illustrate, in the Finnish government documents (2020), ideology and networks are emphasised as signifiers of extremism. Extremism is characterised by its emphasis on ideology and networks. Ideology, within this context, denotes a shared worldview held by a specific group, encompassing beliefs about various aspects of society, religion, human dignity, and morality that guide individual behaviour. Extremist offences are defined as crimes motivated by the perpetrator's ideology, distinct from hate crimes, which target specific characteristics of the victim.

All violent crimes associated with extremist groups and their members are considered extremist violence, as such violence serves as a means of achieving the group's objectives and instilling fear, regardless of the specific target or motive. However, violent crimes committed by these groups are not classified as extremist crimes if they can be clearly attributed to alternative motives, such as non-ideological criminal activities or personal disputes.

Features of Extremism

It seems fair to say that most of the features proposed in the literature as defining characteristics of extremism support the view to frame extremism as a form of ideology, or a set of ideologies (see Section 3.1). As Hart (2014: 3) points out, the term *ideology* is often used in a pejorative way and associated with polarising between "Us/Them" (see also van Dijk 1993). This kind of polarisation, i.e. the construction of an in-group as opposed to an out-group, is often considered constitutive of extremism (Berger 2019; McNeil-Willson 2023). More precisely, McNeil-Willson (2023: 18) notes that "the creation of specific and *exclusivist in-groups* and out-groups" (emphasis original) lies at the heart of extremist ideologies.

Furthermore, it is part of an extremist construction of group identity that the in-group feels superior to the out-group *per se*, however, they portray themselves as inferior by taking the role of 'the underdog' that is somehow oppressed by the out-group. In this respect, the out-group is conceptualised as inferior, not just hostile. In an extremist understanding, the members of the out-group can therefore not simply become members of the in-group. Either this is categorically excluded according to the in-group's self-image or it involves giving up fundamental identity characteristics (nationality, religion, sexual orientation, central attitudes and beliefs). In fact, this strict way of attending to the characteristics of the in-group is dogmatic also for the members of the in-group, who, if they show that they do not meet these characteristics, are excluded from the in-group.

According to Berger (2018), extremism "refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group", with hostile action ranging from verbal to physical violence and, in the most extreme case, even genocide. This latter aspect, however, is not included in other definitions of extremism.

Jesse (2021: 279) mentions the strive to abolish or restrict the democratic constitutional state as a key characteristic of political extremism. He identifies four major "pillars" on which (political) extremism is based:

(i) the identity theory of democracy, i.e. the idea, often attributed to Rousseau, that there is a *volonté générale*, a clearly discernible general people's will (but see Bertram 2023 for a more nuanced discussion of Rousseau's ideas, which are open to numerous interpretations);

(ii) friend-foe-stereotypes (cf. the in-group/out-group distinction discussed above);

(iii) a high degree of ideological dogmatism; and

(iv) usually a missionary perspective (demagoguery), fuelled by the belief that there is a pre-defined and objectively recognisable common good.

These last two points, especially the observation that "[e]xtremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise" (Bötticher 2017: 76), are also crucial for understanding the relationship between extremism and violence, which has been subject to controversial debate.

Let us note that in these demarcations it seems that democratic regimes cannot be extremist by definition. In fact, we do not consider extremism to be a purely relational concept that describes attitudes that deviate from an arbitrarily defined "centre". What separates democracy from extremism is the opening up of a (broad) pluralistic spectrum and thus a plurality (multitude) of coexisting group constellations. However, it is conceivable that in the process of a debate about a "defensive" democracy, the democratic spectrum is narrowed to such an extent that even “the position of the democratic centre” is defended by extremist means.

Orofin & Allchorn (2023: 5) point out that “extremism can come in many varieties: extreme by method and not by goal, extreme by goal and not by method, or extreme by goal and method.” Thus, extremism is not necessarily violent, which is why the distinction between violent and non-violent, or vocal, extremism is widespread in the literature. However, some scholars have suggested that even non-violent extremism is connected to violence in some sense, and that non-violent and violent extremism may even be “two sides of the same coin” (Schmid 2014).

For one thing, this follows from the extreme polarisation inherent to extremism: Given that the out-group is framed as a threat and that even non-violent extremists may consider the option of undertaking violent acts, or at least not explicitly oppose any violent acts against the out-group. For example, take the following two (German) tweets from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. (1) refers to a demonstration against COVID-19 measures on August 28, 2021, (2) refers to proposed restrictions for non-vaccinated individuals in the case of a worsening of the situation.

1. Nicht einmal das gewaltige Militäraufgebot des faschistischen #BRD-Unrechtsregimes zu Lande und zu Luft vermag die glühende Entschlossenheit der #Freiheitskämpfer am #Freiheitstag #B2808 zu bremsen! Die #Impfdiktatur wird eine vernichtende Niederlage erleiden! #ImpftEuchInsKnie! ‘Not even the vast military contingent of the fascist German rogue regime by land and in the air can curb the fierce determination of the freedom fighters on Freedom Day #B2808! The vaccination dictatorship will suffer a crushing defeat!’ (Twitter-ID: 1431580263067398144)

2. Gesunde Menschen werden eingesperrt, weil sie die Giftspritze nicht sich EINSPRITZEN lassen wollen. Balls [sic!] wird Aktion notwendig.. #ImpftEuchInsKnie #Impfapartheid #Impfverweigerer #impffanatiker #impfkrieg ‘Healthy people are locked up because they don't want to be INJECTED with lethal injections. Action will soon become necessary. #GoVaxxYourselves #VaccinationApartheid #VaccinationRefusers #VaccinationFanatics #VaccinationWar’ (Twitter-ID 1431291102477291521)

While both statements do not explicitly promote or endorse violence, they clearly construct an out-group that has to be fought against by all means necessary; the latter tweet is slightly more explicit by vaguely referring to "action" that may be required. A second aspect that blurs the boundary between violent and non-violent extremism is that the notion of violence itself is a fuzzy one, and has been considerably extended in recent years and decades. In particular, there is a broad consensus now that not only physical acts but also verbal behaviour can constitute violence, e.g. in the case of hate speech (see e.g.Guillén-Nieto 2023). In his definition of extremism, Berger (2018) uses the term "hostile acts" that encompasses violence: hostile acts can range from verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behaviour, violence, and even genocide.

A last aspect that remains implicit in many definitions but that should be explicitly discussed is the point made at the beginning of this section, viz. that extremism is always relative to some established set or system of norms and values. Extremists are said to be engaged in a fight "against the socio-political and cultural system in which they operate" (Orofin & Allchorn 2023: 4). In these socio-political and cultural systems, as well as in the definitions mentioned earlier, there is a consensus on the embrace of certain widely shared values. These encompass the recognition of universal human rights and the endorsement of various aspects of liberal and constitutional democracy. These core values, in turn, give rise to a range of other principles and norms, such as the promotion of equal rights for all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation. These principles are derived from the overarching concept of universal human rights. Opposition to these values can manifest in an extreme manner, e.g. Islamist extremist groups who are "committed to replacing the current world order with a new caliphate-that is, a global Islamic state" (Baran 2005: 68). But they can also target more specific aspects of the agreed-upon value system, e.g. LGBTQ+ rights (see e.g. Korolczuk 2023). Importantly, the value system matrix is subject to change – for example, recent decades have seen major progress regarding the understanding of, and attitudes towards, different gender identities and sexual orientations. While this does not affect the definition of extremism *per se*, it may entail consequences regarding the question of which specific ideologies are commonly viewed as extremist.

Linguistic characteristics of extremist discourse

Extremism is a multifaceted phenomenon characterised by various defining features that provide insights into its linguistic manifestations. Researchers such as Baldauf *et al*. (2017) have explored these characteristics, shedding light on the way extremist ideas are expressed.

The in-group is based on a closed ideological system, which manifests as a discourse with a shared set of unassailable, immunized assumptions, as it were, which gives rise to cohesion of the in-group. This set of assumptions, which can also have the character of a worldview, is coupled to a value system such that the out-group, which by definition does not, or not completely, share these assumptions is considered inferior. The in-group-specific discourse manifests itself linguistically in various forms (specific metaphors or metaphor systems, topic-specific argumentation patterns, key words) and stereotypes that are revealed through these linguistic means used.

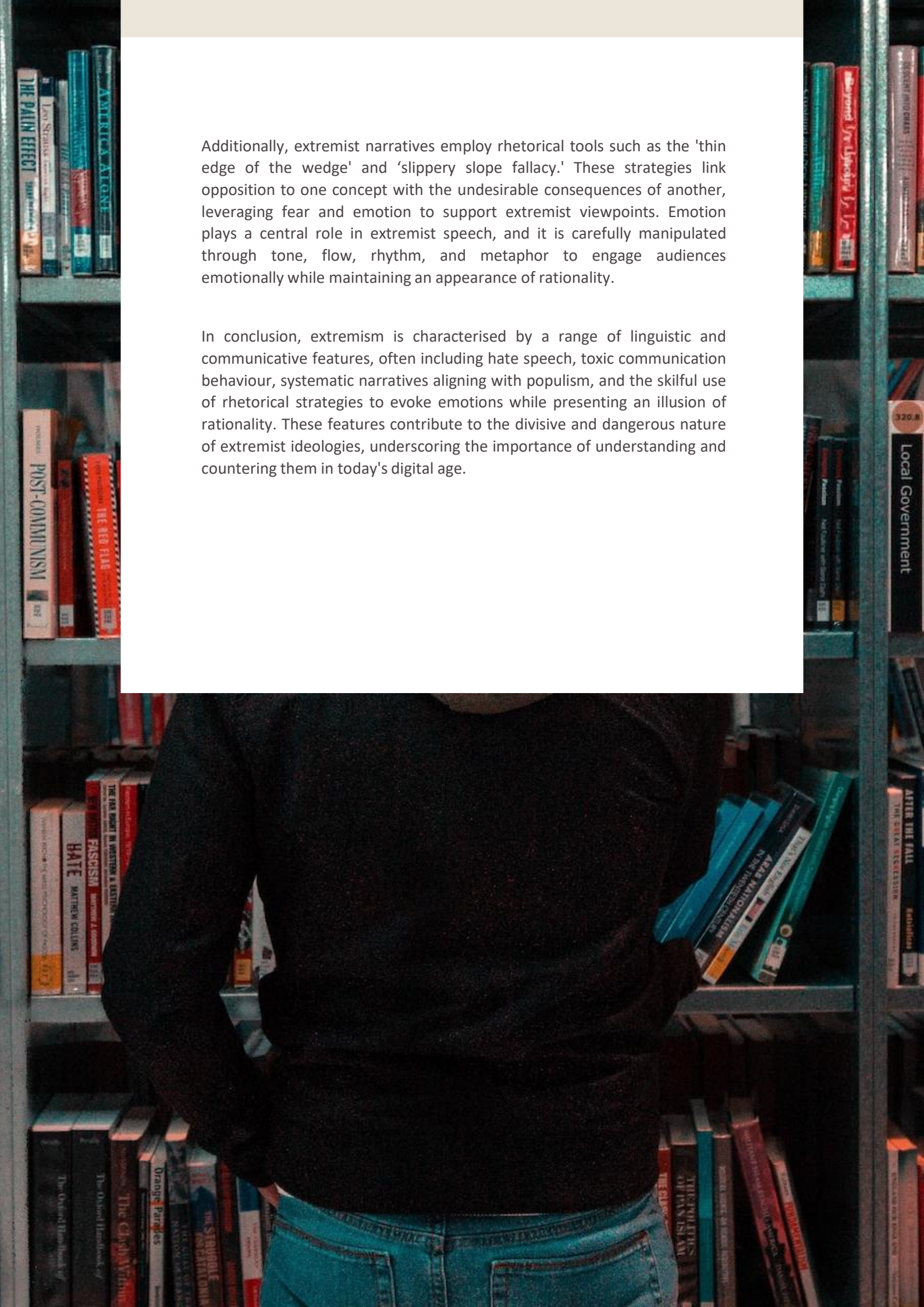
Another crucial aspect of extremism is toxic communication behaviour, a concept closely related to hate speech. Baldauf *et al*. (2017) define toxic communication behaviour as methods and content that aim to destroy online communities or drive participants away. This behaviour includes practices such as permanently disparaging discussion partners, spreading falsehoods, issuing insults, and making destructive statements. It serves to undermine constructive dialogue and maintain a hostile environment within extremist circles.

These aspects relate to the concept of hate speech (which we have differentiated above from the concept of extremism). Hate speech is a form of harmful communication that targets individuals or groups based on attributes related to their origin, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, or religion. Hate speech serves to attack, vilify, or incite hatred, contributing to a hostile and divisive atmosphere. An example of this can be found in extremist narratives that demonise certain religious or ethnic groups, fostering animosity and intolerance.

In the realm of extreme speech, particularly hate speech, Hare and Weinstein (2010) emphasize its power to evoke intense emotions while maintaining an appearance of rationality. Hate speech often employs rhetorical strategies, including the categorization of 'us' versus 'them,' the use of caricatures that exaggerate and downplay aspects to suit the narrative, and the 'foot in the door' technique, drawing audiences in through shared interests. However, note that extremist discourse does not necessarily rely on hate speech.

Additionally, extremist narratives employ rhetorical tools such as the 'thin edge of the wedge' and ‘slippery slope fallacy.' These strategies link opposition to one concept with the undesirable consequences of another, leveraging fear and emotion to support extremist viewpoints. Emotion plays a central role in extremist speech, and it is carefully manipulated through tone, flow, rhythm, and metaphor to engage audiences emotionally while maintaining an appearance of rationality.

In conclusion, extremism is characterised by a range of linguistic and communicative features, often including hate speech, toxic communication behaviour, systematic narratives aligning with populism, and the skilful use of rhetorical strategies to evoke emotions while presenting an illusion of rationality. These features contribute to the divisive and dangerous nature of extremist ideologies, underscoring the importance of understanding and countering them in today's digital age.



Interim conclusions

To sum up, extremism can be defined as a characteristic of an ideology that fundamentally relies on the sharp distinction between an in-group and out-group, whereby the in-group's interests are viewed as evidently and obviously legitimate; at the same time, the out-group is construed as a major threat against the in-group and/or their interests, which is why hostile acts against the out-group, even though they may not be explicitly encouraged or put into action, are seen as justified, and perhaps even as ultimately unavoidable.

Given the perceived self-evident legitimacy of their cause, extremists can frame hostile acts as necessary self-defence. Its anti-pluralistic and antidemocratic tendencies follow from this clear in-group/out-group distinction, in which the in-group is construed as a homogeneous entity with a clearly discernible general will that makes the competition of ideas, which is characteristic of liberal democracies, obsolete.

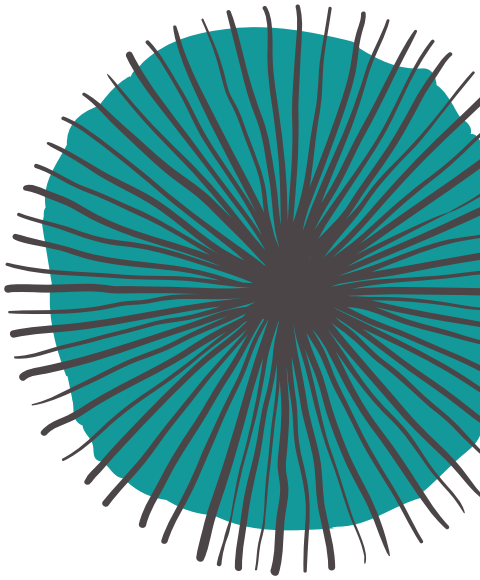
As noted above, Orofino & Allchorn (2023: 3) suggest that radicalisation fuelled by populist rhetoric, extremism and terrorism form a continuum. In this view, radicalisation can lead to extremism, which can lead to terrorism.

03 WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

Key Points

- **Narratives conceptualise and shape envisioned pieces of reality, including sequences of events and complex scenarios, in accordance with the values and convictions of speakers; they are used for strategic communication aka framing.**
- **Narratives extend their influence through repeated and widespread dissemination, embedding themselves in individual and collective memory.**



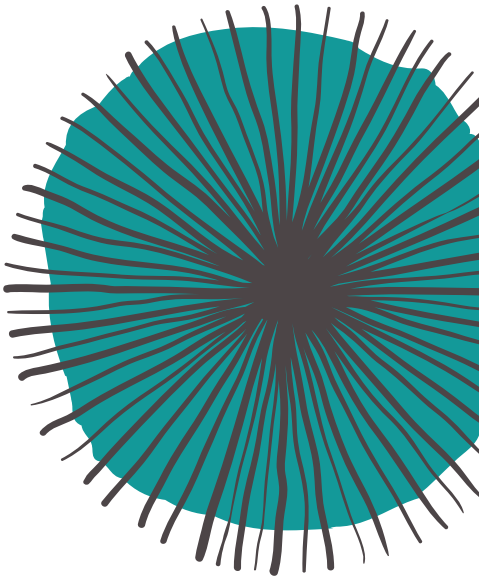
What is Narrative?

Narratives, as defined by Baldauf et al. (2017), are powerful tools for individuals to navigate and comprehend the world. They provide coherent explanations and perspectives that shape the way society is perceived. Narratives are a driving force for spreading e.g. right-wing populist and far-right ideas and conspiracy theories. The spread and development of toxic narratives, i.e. narratives that negatively influence the environment, leads to radicalisation processes and promotes group-related misanthropy far beyond the right-wing populist scene (Baldorf et al. 2017).

The term 'narrative' can be traced back to the English translation (1984) of the term 'récit' in Lyotard (1979) La condition postmoderne. While Lyotard counts Kant's Enlightenment and Hegel's historicism among the grand narratives (grand récits) (Lyotard 1984: xxiii), the humanities and social sciences more generally speak of narratives as perspective stories, not necessarily true, constructing a chain of events that have an action-motivating and legitimating function in the political and social context (Shenhav 2006).

Glazzard (2017: 7–8) argues that extremist narratives should be analysed as narratives in the literary sense using the tools of narratology. He points to Aristoteles' Poetics, whose distinction between two fundamental elements of narrative is still influential today: on the one hand, ordering events into a sequence ("mythos"); on the other hand, characters who experience the events ("ethos"). Müller (2019: 2) recurs to Prince's influential narratological theory, according to which a communicative unit has a narrative structure if one can derive propositional descriptions of three temporal states from it: an initial state, a change causing a change, and a final state.

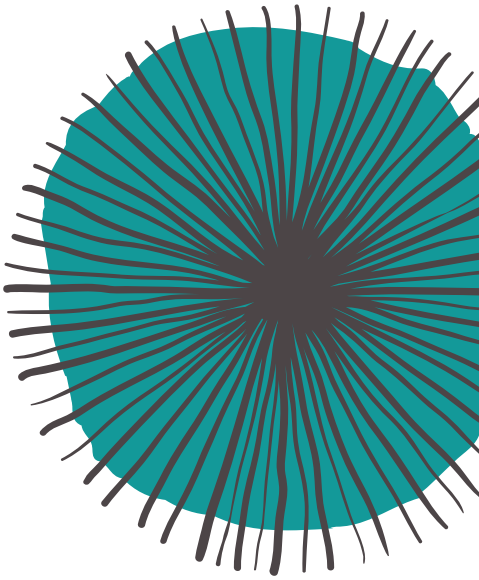
He illustrates this with the slogan "Make America great again", which can be seen as evoking two (populist) narratives, one related to the past, the other related to the future. The past-oriented narrative can be summarised as follows: a) The country used to be in a positive state, b) negative powers have taken over, c) hence, the country is now in a negative state. According to the future-oriented narrative, a) the country is in a negative state now, b) the "people" (as opposed to the "elites") will rise to power again, c) and therefore, the country will be in a positive state again. This example shows that narratives, extremist or not, can be fleshed out to different degrees.



Müller (2019: 6) proposes the term meta-narrative for narratives that structure very different kinds of communicative entities, that are often shared within a community, and that can manifest in various different more specific narratives. For example, the idea of “Islamization” can be seen as such a meta-narrative (Müller 2019: 7). The term metanarrative is used in a related, but different way in Lyotard’s (1979/1984) influential work, where metarécit (metanarrative in the English translation) refers to “traditional means by which we order the world” (Gratton 2018), e.g. “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). In a rather confusing way, Lyotard (1984: xxiii-xxiv) refers to these narratives also as “metadiscourses” or “grand narratives” (grand récit). However, these metanarratives are largely lost in postmodernism in favour of smaller, more local narratives (Lyotard 1984: xxiv; see also Priester 2019: 11).

At their essence, narratives have a dual function, as outlined by Baldauf et al. (2017). On one level, they communicate the content of events, answering the question of "what" happened. On another level, narratives delve into the "how" by incorporating the temporal dimension, describing settings, and offering causal explanations. Narratives serve to contextualize events, selectively including or excluding details and framing interpretations from specific perspectives. These perspectives rely on the recipient's knowledge and experiences for comprehension, akin to parables; they provide a structured framework of meaning that reinforces particular worldviews.

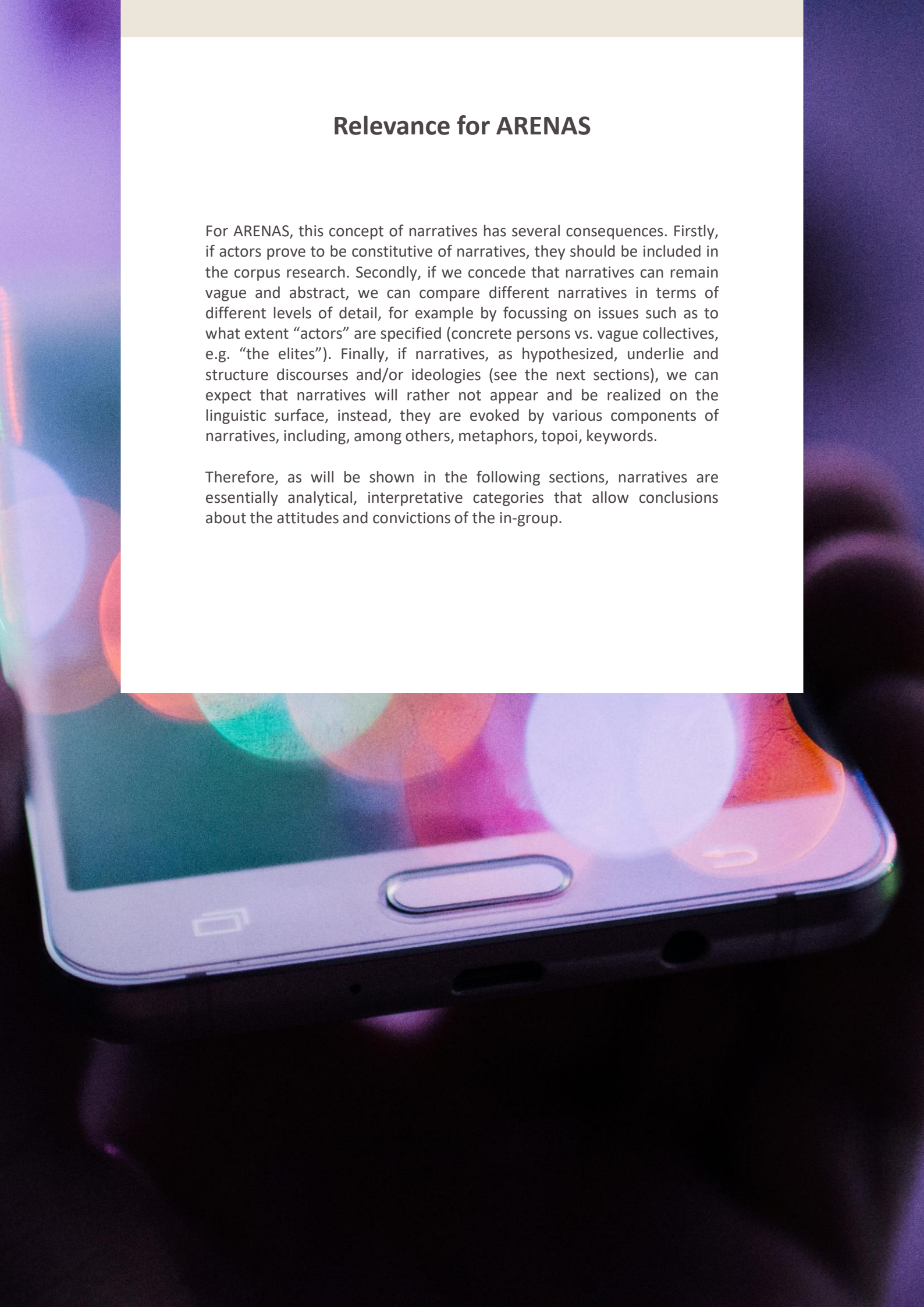
Bal (2009) proposes a definition of narratives as any sequence of events that is narrated by an agent or subject to an audience. According to Bal, narratives consist in three layers: The fable, which is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by the actors; the story, which is how those events are presented to the reader; and the text, which is the verbal presentation of the story. While this terminology is arguably slightly counterintuitive, it captures important aspects of narratives that can also be framed in terms of the aspects already mentioned above: What Bal calls the “fable” is ultimately the sequence of events being described; the “story” is the way in which it is presented, involving aspects such as construal, perspectivation, and “framing”; finally, what Bal calls “text” is the concrete linguistic manifestation of a narrative.



Narratives further extend their influence through repeated and widespread dissemination, embedding themselves in individual and collective memory. They play a pivotal role in constructing and stabilising personal and communal identities over the long term. In an age marked by the proliferation of conspiracy theories and the challenge of distinguishing between viral claims and factual information, the scrutiny of narratives becomes increasingly vital. New right-wing populist and extremist actors employ innovative media and technologies to propagate their digital challenge to pluralistic, liberal, and democratic societies.

Identifying and describing the underlying rhetoric techniques requires a thorough analysis based on narratological and (discourse-)linguistic expertise. Narratives, both in literature and political discourse, provide access to actors, places and events and establish temporal and logical connections between them. They employ specific stylistic and rhetorical strategies to create a lasting impact on their audience. Frischlich et al. (2018) expound upon the discourse-specific conceptualisation of narratives, highlighting their role in constructing interrelated facts, entities, persons, and actions within in-group discourse. Narratives, regardless of their veracity, help create a chain of events that motivate and legitimise actions in political and social contexts. These narratives operate within narrated event contexts, blurring the lines between experienced and fictitious events. At the same time, the narrated event context simplifies and implicitly 'explains' complex socio-political problems, often suggesting solutions within the narrative framework.

Narratives are fundamentally discursive tools for sense-making, characterised by a structure involving protagonists, actors in various roles, spatial and temporal dimensions, and a real or imagined endpoint. As integral parts of narratives, (potentially controversial) concepts, assumptions about the world as well as events and actions directed against third parties (e.g., out-group members) are rationalised and thus normalised. In discourses, narratives help to 'clarify' and justify ideologies and make them dominant; they are thus of central importance in the struggle between different antagonistic and polarising worldviews. In the case of conspiracy theories, for example, they can be painstakingly detailed, with a clear set of protagonists or antagonists (say, Bill Gates, George Soros, etc.); but in the arguably more common case, they can remain fairly vague and abstract.



Relevance for ARENAS

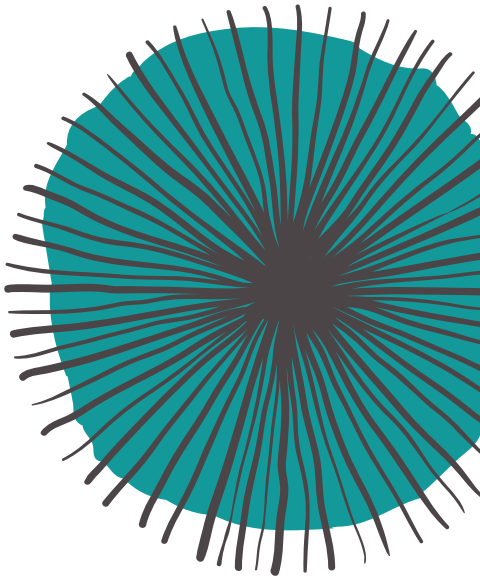
For ARENAS, this concept of narratives has several consequences. Firstly, if actors prove to be constitutive of narratives, they should be included in the corpus research. Secondly, if we concede that narratives can remain vague and abstract, we can compare different narratives in terms of different levels of detail, for example by focussing on issues such as to what extent “actors” are specified (concrete persons vs. vague collectives, e.g. “the elites”). Finally, if narratives, as hypothesized, underlie and structure discourses and/or ideologies (see the next sections), we can expect that narratives will rather not appear and be realized on the linguistic surface, instead, they are evoked by various components of narratives, including, among others, metaphors, topoi, keywords.

Therefore, as will be shown in the following sections, narratives are essentially analytical, interpretative categories that allow conclusions about the attitudes and convictions of the in-group.

3.1 Narratives and Ideology

Key Points:

- An ideology is a relatively closed and inherently coherent set of beliefs and values that guide the political, ethical, and moral choices of those who advocate them.
- Ideologies can underlie or be supported and thus reflected by narratives; oftentimes narratives implicitly relate to ideologies.
- While the ideology of a certain community remains relatively stable across speakers, time periods and even discourses, narratives are usually tied to specific groups of speakers and discourses.

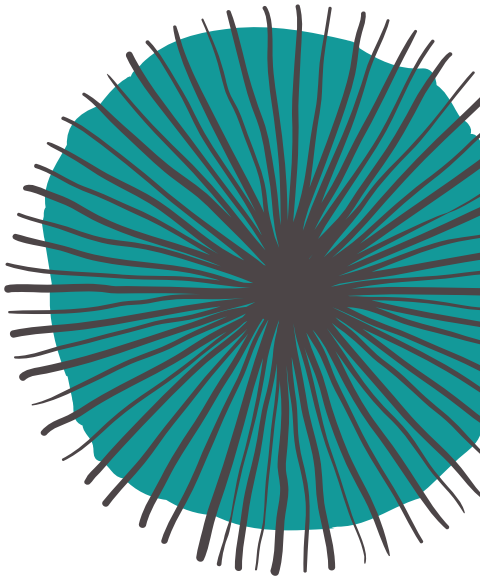


Within the ARENAS project, it is important to relate the concepts of ideology and narrativity to understand the naturalisation of extremist narratives and their influence on everyday discourse. This involves examining how the ideological dimension becomes integrated and normalized in the perception of events and the world. Extremist ideologies can become mainstreamed, blurring, to use Mouffe's (2005) terms, the line between democratic agonism and antagonism that threatens democracy.

As the term narrative has moved into non-academic spheres such as politics and media, it has lost considerable sharpness and is often equated with explanation, worldview or ideology in the sense of a systematic set of (mostly political) beliefs (Glazzard 2017). This evolution underscores the profound impact of narratives on contemporary discourse. Hence, our goal is to conceptually distinguish between narrative and ideology, and also to determine the relationship between ideology and narrative.

The concept of ideology itself has undergone a significant change from its origins in the research program of the French philosophical school around Destutt de Tracy, through the ideology criticism of Marxism to its current usage (Dierse & Romberg 2017). Even more so than the concept of narrative, the term ideology is notoriously hard to define as it is used to refer to a number of different concepts; Eagleton (1991: 1–2), for instance, provides a non-exhaustive list of no less than sixteen different definitions. However, certain commonalities between different widely used definitions can be discerned. Nowadays, ideology is usually related to guiding principles that serve social groups or organisations to justify their actions (Beyer et al. 2021). As such, an ideology can be seen as a set of beliefs and values that guide political, ethical, and moral choices on an individual and on a social level. In the context of our project, we can define ideology, following Hart (2014:3), as consolidated patterns of beliefs and values that are normalized within a specific group. For example, extreme right-wing ideologies tend to believe that there are crucial differences between members of different cultures (or even "races"), which entails that they see cultural and/or ethnic homogeneity as a value in its own right. This can be supported by corresponding narratives that are in line with this view

The linguistic analysis of a narrative delves into both explicit and implicit elements. Explicit elements are those directly stated or expressed within the narrative, while implicit elements are inferred from the surrounding context and linguistic resources. Importantly, these implicit elements do not constitute the core beliefs that form the ideology. Instead, they carry semantic implications that linguistic analysis can unveil. Techniques such as analysing collocations in reference corpora help uncover these subtle semantic nuances. Consequently, narratives serve as linguistic representations of a specific perspective derived from the underlying ideology, without being synonymous with the ideology itself.



As an example, Baldauf et al. (2017) emphasize the important role that narratives play in contemporary discourse within right-wing extremist scenes. Narratives serve right-wing extremists as effective tools for emotionally anchoring and strengthening their ideologies. They lead to the spread and normalisation of right-wing extremist ideologies right into the middle of society. They permeate various segments of the media landscape, extending their influence beyond their immediate circles. Notably, these narratives contribute to the normalisation of latent racist prejudices and conspiracy theories, ultimately gaining acceptance as credible alternative "theories" in broader society (Hidalgo 2021: 392).

Baldauf et al. (2017) also highlight the distinction between narratives and more rigid ideologies. Narratives often thrive on subjective impressions and operate within the boundaries of socially acceptable discourse. This characteristic often leaves them unchallenged. However, the authors emphasize the critical importance of actively rejecting and countering toxic narratives. They advocate for any form of response, as it is preferable to allowing these narratives to stand unopposed. Moreover, they stress the value of responding with an approach that upholds democratic values and explicitly labels derogatory or racist elements within such narratives.

Additionally, populism, as a political phenomenon, is inherently connected to ideology (Baldauf et al., 2017). It provides two distinct orientations for identifying perceived enemies: a horizontal one against external forces and a vertical one against powerful figures within the existing social hierarchy. According to Hildalgo (2021), right-wing populism turns out to be a massively ideological event that forces people out of the discourse framework of democracy in a self-destructive manner. The central ideologeme is ethnopluralism, according to which homogeneous populations are hostile to each other and have no prospect of shared values. Narratives that portray migration policy as close to a conspiracy for a large-scale population exchange (Great Replacement) concretize this ideology using narrative means.

Laclau's (2004) concept of the chains of equivalence highlights the strategic construction of political identities. It revolves around the idea of uniting disparate and, at times, conflicting demands and grievances within the realm of political discourse to forge a shared sense of unity and purpose. This approach is particularly pertinent in the context of populism, where Laclau posits that populist leaders or movements can effectively create a cohesive "people" by skilfully articulating diverse demands as equivalent within a political narrative. By doing so, they can mobilise broad segments of the population under a common political project, exemplifying the power of discourse and identity formation in the realm of politics.

Lakoff's (2014) concept of "ideology package" or "frames" delves into the cognitive underpinnings that shape individuals' interpretations of political matters. These cognitive structures are intricately tied to people's core values, worldviews, and cultural backgrounds. Lakoff's research places a strong emphasis on the role of political communication, particularly the process of framing, in shaping how individuals perceive and make sense of political concepts and issues. He underscores the significance of comprehending these underlying cognitive structures, which play a pivotal role in moulding political beliefs and opinions. Lakoff's work underscores the idea that the way political ideas are framed can profoundly influence public perception and, consequently, political discourse and decision-making.

Interim conclusions

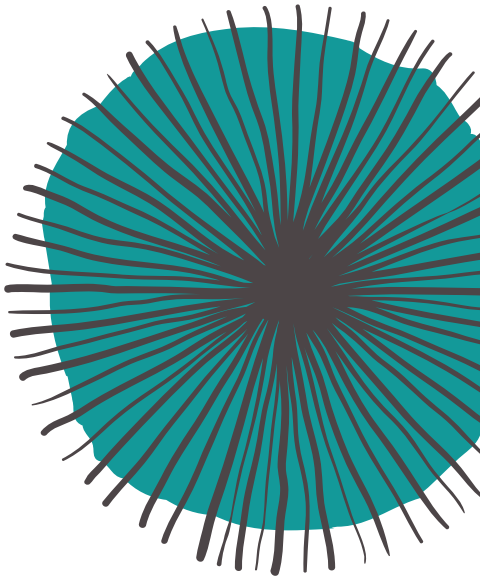
The relationship between narratives and ideologies is bilateral. Narratives can be used to support ideologies; at the same time, ideologies can be the theoretical basis that gives rise to a narrative in the first place. Essentially, a narrative consists of a logically connected sequence of (spatially situated) events and actors. While it provides a rationalisation for a particular phenomenon, it also offers a distinct perspective or angle on the underlying ideology. However, it is crucial to recognise that a narrative does not encapsulate the entirety of the ideology itself. Rather, it unveils specific facets of the overarching ideological framework. This distinction illustrates the relationship between narrative and ideology—a conceptual divide where ideology operates at a higher, more abstract level, representing a systematic set of political beliefs, while narrative functions at a more specific level, conveying the perspective through storytelling.

These insights underscore the intricate relationship between narratives and ideologies, shedding light on the pivotal role that narratives play in shaping, disseminating, and normalising ideological perspectives within contemporary discourse. For the ARENAS project, this means that we should strive to find ways of disentangling narratives and ideologies while at the same time being aware of the fact that they are inextricably interwoven.

3.2 Narrative and discourse

Key Points:

- **Narratives unfold in (often thematically defined) discourses, and they constitute complex components of discourses.**
- **Discourses provide the epistemic coordinates within which members of a community act, interact and think; they define what can be said in a community in a given time.**
- **Narratives co-constitute and reproduce discourses, they are vehicles and manifestations of discourses.**
- **Narratives can only be reconstructed and analysed in relation to the discourses in which they *emerge*.**



Narratives, as mentioned above, unfold in discourse. However, discourse is a very ambiguous term; definitions vary substantially across disciplines and approaches (for an overview cf. Wrana et al. 2014: 75-78). Nevertheless, it is helpful - and necessary for our purposes - to distinguish between an epistemological and a performance-based concept of discourse. The first refers to a symbolic or semiotic dimension of creating order, which becomes effective not least with the help of linguistic means and makes a contribution to structuring social and cultural contexts or circumstances within a community. In contrast, the performance-based concept of discourse is rather located at the micro level of individual utterances and speech acts; here, discourse relates to concrete (interactional or socio-historical) communication contexts. Even though also on this level, discourses turn out to be relevant for analysing narratives, simply because in this view discourses are the places where narratives unfold, we consider the epistemological dimension more important.

The epistemological approach goes back to Foucault's "archaeology" of knowledge systems in human sciences, as explored in Les mots et les choses (1966) and L'archéologie du savoir (1969). Following Foucault's (1969) historical epistemology, discourses determine what can (and cannot) be said and known in a (speech) community at a given time. As Foucault puts it, discourses define "historical apriori". Thus, they also provide the embedding structures of narratives. Narratives always relate to discourses; more specifically, they emerge under discursive conditions and gain their coherence and persuasiveness through the discourse in which they are embedded. For example, narratives about the supposed harmlessness of COVID-19 and the need to disguise this in order to exert global power and influence become accessible through the general context of the discourse on the pandemic and the measures to be taken to contain it.

Hence, for empirical investigations of narratives, it is important to take into account that narratives unfold within larger discourse formations in such a way that they are, among other (verbal) strategies, manifestations and vehicles of a discourse at the same time. They are manifestations of discourses, in that they exemplify pieces of discourse-specific knowledge; and they are vehicles of discourses, in that they help to reproduce and thus constitute discourses in which they operate.

Foucault's perspective emphasises the profound impact of language on shaping social reality. He contends that language, in the form of discourses, functions as a practice that systematically moulds the objects it discusses (Hare & Weinstein, 2010). Language's selective nature, highlighting some aspects of reality while disregarding others, constructs a specific version of reality rather than providing a neutral, one-to-one correspondence with its complexity. Narratives play a crucial role in this process.

As Hart (2015: 123) points out, narratives can make use of a variety of linguistic means, such as the use of locative and deictic expressions, to cause the reader to adopt a specific point of view on a situation or event. Beyond deixis, as a plethora of discourse studies across many disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, political science, history, and anthropology shows (for an overview, Angermuller et al. 2014), discourses manifest themselves in various other ways, most prominently through linguistic categories, such as discourse-specific keywords, metaphors and argumentation patterns, which provide access points for investigating world-views, attitudes and ideologies unfolding in the discourse addressed. To the extent that discourses are characterised and shaped by specific linguistic categories, keywords and argumentations, narratives also become central analytical categories. Essentially, they serve for interweaving keywords, metaphors etc. to coherent larger units in a discourse. Thus, for a deep understanding of narratives, it is essential to identify discourse-specific linguistic categories and the ways they are combined.

Foucault posits that those who define the world hold power over it, exemplified by his exploration of the history of madness, where psychiatric labels exercise control over individuals' lives. A diagnosis like 'schizophrenia' could profoundly shape a person's existence, whether justified or not, highlighting language's role as a battleground for power struggles.

However, it is essential to recognise that discourses are not autonomous agents in societies but rather influenced by human agency (Hare & Weinstein, 2010). We argue that Foucault's (1969) archaeological approach to discourse sometimes portrays language as the primary actor in societal dynamics. However, by contrast, it is humans who act as agents. Discourses only wield power when they resonate with individuals' pre-existing constructions of reality. A discourse that fails to align with listeners' experiences and perceptions of reality may seem strange and irrelevant. Conversely, language that communicates a worldview coherent with individuals' experiences integrates into their existing belief systems, gradually altering those frameworks over time.

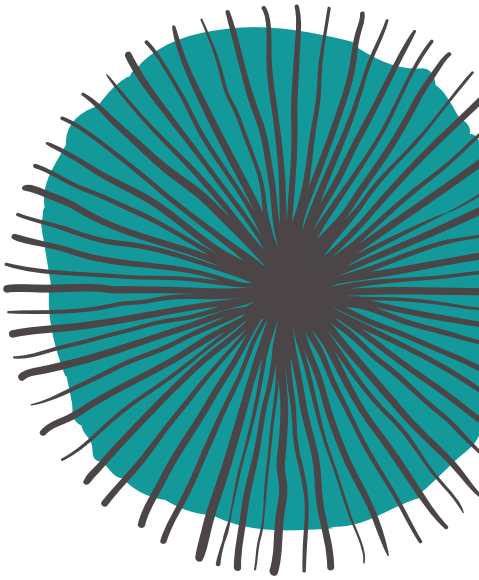
In Summary

Narratives form complex segments of a discourse. They emerge within discourses, and they co-constitute and reproduce discourses at the same time. We thus view narratives as both vehicles and manifestations of a discourse. Since narratives cannot be separated from the discourse in which they unfold, it is essential that analytical reconstructions of narratives consider the discursive contexts in which narratives emerge or have emerged.

3.3 Narrative and storytelling

Key Points:

- **Storytelling is a dynamic technique employing language, pacing, and thematic elements to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually.**
- **The distinction between storytelling and narrative lies in the former's ability to breathe life into structured narratives, making them relatable and emotionally resonant.**
- **Storytelling serves as a fundamental cognitive tool, offering frameworks for understanding the world and shaping perspectives.**
- **Through strategic use of language and emotional engagement, storytelling transcends mere presentation, influencing perceptions and fostering a shared understanding of the world.**



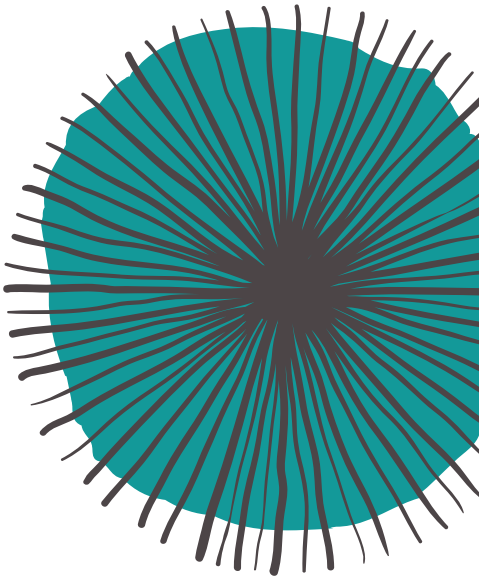
Storytelling, as a technique for narrative, can be defined as the craft of conveying stories or narratives through the use of carefully selected language, pacing, and thematic elements to engage the audience's imagination, emotions, and intellect. It involves the arrangement of plot, character development, dialogue, and setting in a way that is compelling and resonant with the listener or reader. The goal of storytelling is to entertain, inform, inspire, or persuade the audience by presenting a narrative in a manner that is accessible, memorable, and impactful (Storr, 2019).

Baldauf et al. (2017) highlight the dynamic nature of storytelling and its relationship with emotions. Stories possess the ability to evoke emotions, yet this emotional impact is not enduring. With repeated exposure to a story, the emotional response tends to wane. Consequently, narratives are often crafted in a diverse manner, or only select segments of a story are presented, with the intention of consistently eliciting emotions and making a lasting impact.

In parallel, Hare and Weinstein (2010) emphasise the central role of stories in human cognition. Stories serve as a fundamental cognitive tool that people utilise to comprehend the world around them. They provide a framework for understanding the connections between events, including causation, and offer a sense of how life should unfold, thereby establishing teleological perspectives. The allure of a well-structured story is universal, captivating individuals of all ages. Omissions or incongruities in a story's ending can lead to frustration, underscoring the power of narrative to engage and involve its audience.

Van Dijk (1993: 264) points to the key role of “storytelling” in the construal of “us/them” dichotomies, coupled with rhetorical figures such as hyperbole and understatement to enhance “their” alleged negative actions and “our” alleged positive actions, specific lexical choices, and the structural emphasis of “their” negative actions e.g. in newspaper headlines.

Stories achieve their influence by constructing dramatic tension and ultimately providing resolution. This power of storytelling operates subtly, often exerting a more profound impact precisely because it is implicit rather than overt. According to Griemas, fundamental stories, such as folk tales or fairy tales, typically comprise three key components: (1) an initial sequence; (2) the introduction of obstacles and the provision of assistance; and (3) the resolution. Narratives that adhere to this three-part structure resonate with people, as they align with common-sense understanding. Consequently, such accounts possess a natural appeal and effectively make sense to individuals, thereby gaining a firm foothold in their comprehension of reality. It's worth noting that in these discussions, the terms 'story' and 'narrative' are used interchangeably, underscoring the inherent connection between storytelling and the construction of meaning in human experience.



Interim conclusions

The relationship between storytelling and narrative is deeply intertwined, with storytelling serving as the vehicle through which narratives are brought to life and conveyed to audiences. Storytelling transcends mere presentation of events; it is an art form that imbues narratives with emotion, depth, and universality, engaging the listener's or reader's imagination and emotions. Through the strategic use of language, pacing, character development, and thematic exploration, storytelling crafts narratives that are not only accessible and memorable but also capable of influencing perceptions, shaping cultural and social identities, and fostering a shared understanding of the world. The emotional dynamism, cognitive frameworks, and cultural constructs discussed by scholars such as Baldauf et al., Hare and Weinstein, and Van Dijk, alongside the narrative structures outlined by Griemas, underscore storytelling's multifaceted role in human experience. It is a fundamental cognitive tool, a means of emotional engagement, a builder of community, and a constructor of reality. Thus, the essence of storytelling lies in its power to transform ordinary narratives into rich, compelling experiences that resonate with the collective human psyche, highlighting its indispensable role in both individual and societal contexts.

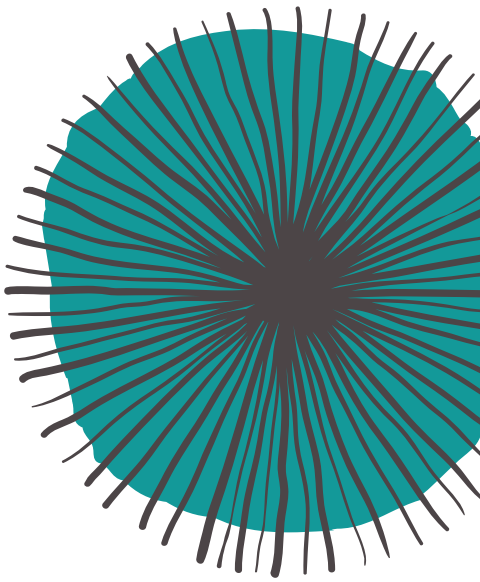
The distinction between narrative and storytelling is vividly illustrated in the context of climate change. The narrative of climate change lays out the scientific facts and the broad implications of global warming, providing a structured understanding of the issue's seriousness and the need for urgent action. For example, this might include data on rising temperatures and its effects. Storytelling, on the other hand, brings this narrative to life through specific, emotionally charged examples, such as the story of a Pacific Island community grappling with the immediate threat of rising sea levels. Through personal and poignant accounts of individuals' fears and challenges, storytelling transforms the abstract narrative into tangible, relatable human experiences, thus highlighting the difference between the narrative's informative "what" and "why," and storytelling's compelling illustration of "how" these issues affect real lives.

The connection between storytelling and narrative is like the bond between a painter and their canvas. Storytelling is the brush and colours used to bring a story to life, making it more than just a series of events. It wraps stories in emotions, making them something we can feel and relate to, and paints them in ways that stick in our minds. Through storytelling, narratives become engaging tales that can teach us, move us, and bring us together. It's how stories get their power to change how we see the world and ourselves. In simple terms, storytelling is the heart of every narrative, turning basic plots into memorable journeys that touch our lives.

3.4 Narrative & frames

Key Points:

- **Narratives are used for strategic communication aka framing, aiming at conceptualising pieces of reality in line with a set of beliefs and convictions (ideology).**
- **Frames, as linguistic tools, help to analyse the inherent intricacy of a narrative's meaning.**
- **At the same time, frames serve as cognitive structures for representing knowledge; they help document the meanings and functions of narratives.**

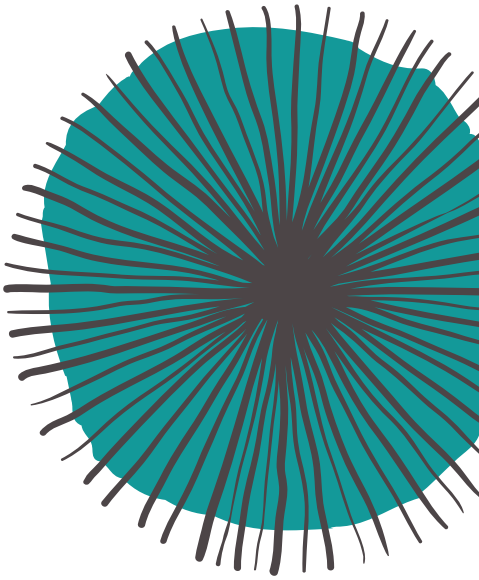


Just like other linguistic categories, such as key words or conceptual metaphors, narratives help to shape - or frame - (segments of) perceived 'reality' in a specific way. Choosing a narrative for 'describing' or 'explaining' reality, including events, states of affairs, issues etc., goes hand in hand with perceiving - or better: construing - reality in a way specific to the narrative chosen. Metaphorically speaking, a narrative is a pair of glasses, among many others glasses, through which we take a look at 'reality' - and, at the same time, with which we make the envisioned piece of reality comprehensible and coherent to existing ideologemes.

Hence, as a result, narratives never reflect reality, instead they offer a refraction of perspective with its own logic and its own persuasive power (Ziem & Fritsche 2018, Ziem 2019). In cognitive terms, narratives create a mental model that is loosely based on 'reality' (events, states of affairs, social issues…). Once the model has been evoked, it forces us to consider the issue addressed under the auspices of the inherent logic of the narrative and with recourse to the circumstances and conditions created by the narrative. Following this view, narratives are tools for framing 'reality' in line with the speaker's strategic interests and ideological stance.

What then are frames? The concept of frames has a long tradition; its origins go back to Minsky's (1975) work in computer science on knowledge representation and Fillmore's (1976, 1982) cognitive-semantic approach to linguistic meaning (for an overview cf. Busse 2012, Ziem 2014). In addition, the frame concept has been adopted in several other disciplines, including, for example, in cognitive psychology (e.g., Barsalou 1992) and media studies (e.g., Entman 1993, for an overview: Ziem 2018). They all share the view that frames serve as a format for organising and structuring knowledge; however, they differ for example in terms of the ontological status assigned to frames (cognitive vs. methodological vs. computational etc. entities) and the way frames are formalized and operationalized in research. For analysing narratives, particularly Fillmore's frame-semantic approach is of pivotal importance. Following Fillmore's tradition, frames are relevant for understanding and investigating narratives in two ways. Frames are, on the one hand, cognitive structures that we recruit when we understand linguistic units; at the same time, frames serve as analytical tools for revealing and investigating these structures (Fillmore 1982).

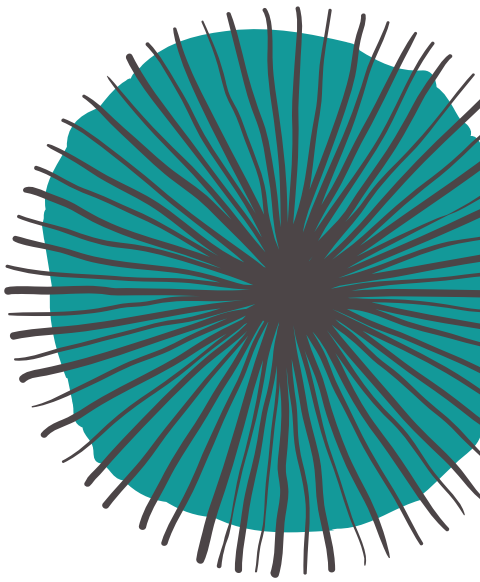
When Lakoff introduces the concept of frame and framing (2004; for a critical overview: Ziem 2022), he has both dimensions in mind. According to Lakoff (2014) "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. [...] They shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies". Words evoke frames, that is, frames get activated through language. Therefore, when a certain word is used in a narrative, even to negate it, it evokes the frame. Following Lakoff, the relationship between narratives and frames also plays a pivotal role in understanding the dissemination of hate speech and extremist ideologies (Baldauf et al., 2017). Hate speech serves not only to inflict harm but also as a strategic tool, functioning as a verbal weapon to recruit sympathizers, intimidate activists, control discourse topics, and establish interpretative dominance in social discussions. This strategic dimension is instrumental in shaping a self-reinforcing right-wing alternative media landscape within Web 2.0, where narratives and actors reference one another, ultimately normalizing extremist ideas.



Interim conclusions

The influence of framing through narratives can hardly be overestimated (cf. the case study Czulo et al., 2019). Framing is not a haphazard choice but follows specific patterns and real-world developments. Linguistic expressions evoke frames and activate often controversial concepts, allowing recipients to invoke additional frames for interpretation. As a result, frames can impact patterns of invocation and thus influence how and to what extent a frame is embedded within other frames in specific communicative contexts. Such recursive embeddings are often triggered by different units in text (keywords, metaphors, topoi etc.). In this way, specific facets of an issue are selected and emphasized while others remain defocused and hidden, yielding a significant impact on the way issues are interpreted and subsequent potential actions.

In summary, the interplay between narratives, frames, and language is a critical determinant in shaping the discourse landscape and influencing how information is perceived and acted upon. Furthermore, it is essential to distinguish between the narrative level and the linguistic surface level, recognizing that extremist narratives are not inherently bound to concrete linguistic realisations. However, there is an evident connection between extremist narratives and linguistic expressions, including "framings" and subtle techniques like dog whistles, which evoke specific narratives and contribute to the overall impact of extremist ideologies.



3.5 Defining narratives in the light of ideology, discourse, storytelling and frame

We are now in the position to provide a more detailed definition of narratives that incorporates the various epistemic dimensions explained above. Narratives are complex concepts serving for comprehending the world in a coherent way, following the logic inherent to narratives. Narratives do not mirror reality, they rather put the world into perspective and thus help shape the world in such a way that relations to existing or - often implicitly advocated - ideologies and assumptions about the (social) world are not only possible, but even reinforce them.

Narratives are naturally more complex than other vehicles for dissemination of in-group ideologemes. Narratives weave discourse-specific units such as key words, conceptual metaphors, topoi, etc. into a coherently presented context in such a way that a story that follows an inner logic emerges and can be told. In contrast, key words, conceptual metaphors, etc., do not tell a story; rather, they serve as building blocks for a story. Also due to their inherent conceptual complexity, narratives are always results of analytical reconstruction work. They do not have a uniform linguistic format of expression that could be searched for computationally corpora, but only emerge in the course of empirical investigations. Hence, narratives are analytical constructs and therefore interpretative phenomena resulting from careful data-based analyses (admittedly with the aid of computational methods). Nonetheless, narratives are inherent meaning-bearing units. Frames can serve as tools to make narratives analytically accessible, and frames may also serve to represent and document complex meanings of narratives.

From the user's perspective, narratives are powerful tools for strategic communication (framing). They follow strategic interests of the in-group, and are motivated by ideologies, e.g. self-contained knowledge systems in the political, or more general: social sphere. Just like key words or conceptual metaphors, also narratives reproduce and co-constitute the discourses in which they unfold. While discourses can be seen as the habitat in which narratives emerge and operate, ideologies more generally relate to the in-group system of convictions and beliefs supporting a specific worldview or political, social attitude.

Ideologies endure across discourses; they form relatively stable reference systems for an in-group and contribute significantly to creating identity within the in-group. Discourses, on the other hand, often emerge and develop across ideologies; they are usually thematically defined (e.g., discourse on migration, integration, climate change, etc.). Narratives mark positions within a discourse, and these are usually supported by the in-group's ideology. Importantly, through the lens of storytelling narratives gain an expressive dimension that not only communicates but also vividly brings to life their inherent ideologies and strategic interests, making them more impactful and relatable to the audience. This dynamic process allows narratives to not just exist within discourses but actively shape and reinforce the convictions and worldviews they advocate.

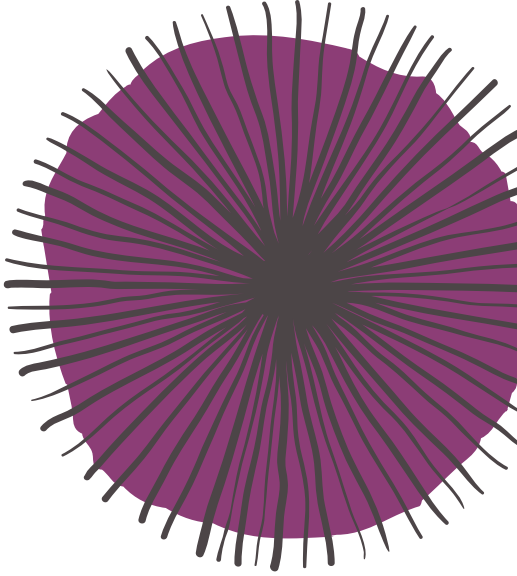
04

WHAT THEN IS AN EXTREMIST NARRATIVE?

4. What then is an extremist narrative?

Key points:

- **Extremist aspects: moral superior and victim in-group, portrayed as underdog; inferior and dangerous out-group; intolerance to other views; and causation, fostering or legitimisation of hostile action**
- **Narratological aspects: actors (in-group & out-group); told events in a determined historical context; structure of the told stories and events.**



A fundamental aspect of extremist narratives is the deliberate simplification and reduction of complexity. This reduction serves a dual purpose: it enhances the narratives' accessibility and broadens their reach, making them more appealing to a wide audience, while simultaneously bolstering the coherence and plausibility of the narrative itself. By simplifying complex issues, extremist narratives become more easily comprehensible and thus more persuasive. This idea underscores the significance of narrative strategy in shaping extremist ideologies and its impact on the broader discourse.

These narratives often present mainstream worldviews as distorted by ideology, portraying themselves as champions of truth against a backdrop of conspiracy and suppression. Extremists employ narrative techniques reminiscent of literature to spread and justify their ideologies (Glazzard 2017), using stories that collectively provide a coherent worldview, supporting individuals, groups, or movements engaged in illegal violence and violence-assisting activities (Baldauf, 2017).

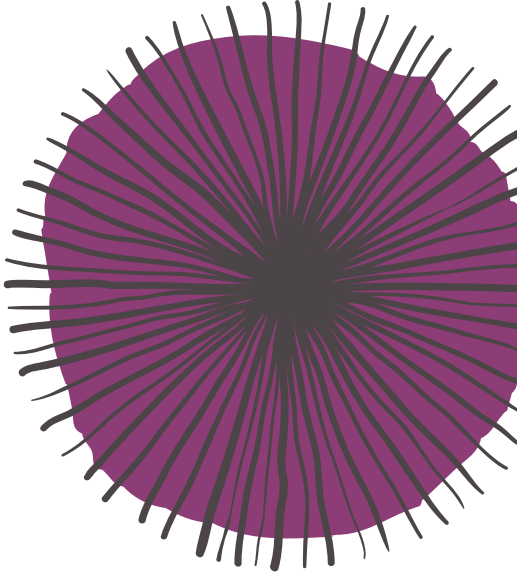
As already mentioned, extremism is characterised by a set of defining features that shed light on its nature. According to Baldauf et al. (2017), extremist narratives often disguise hostile actions as legitimate defences, invoking principles like freedom, democracy, or human rights. These narratives tend to assert the inherent superiority of the in-group while casting the out-group as intrinsically inferior. Members of the out-group are typically perceived as unable to join the in-group without renouncing crucial aspects of their identity. This rigidity in thinking fosters intolerance, a hallmark characteristic of extremism.

What truly distinguishes extremist narratives is their presentation—the "story" itself (Baldauf 2017), which leaves no room for alternative perspectives, fostering an environment of intolerance. While narratives may vary in their degree of fictionality, extremist narratives often exhibit a low degree of consensus in open pluralist societies. Narratives are then structured as stories with logically and chronologically related events, featuring an In-group as virtuous and superior and an Out-group as malevolent and inferior. These events unfold within a specific temporal and spatial context, adding depth to the narrative.

Hare and Weinstein (2010) contribute insights into this aspect regarding the psychological dimension of extremist narratives. They argue that extremist narratives foster a psychological state of 'splitting,' wherein the In-group is seen as entirely good, and the Out-group is perceived as entirely bad. This binary vision is grounded in narrative structures such as the "myth of redemptive violence," which portrays violence as necessary and redemptive, leading to the extermination of the perceived "bad" to preserve the "good." A representative extremist narrative technique is Scapegoating: During times of intense rivalrous crisis between social groups, extremist narratives may incorporate scapegoating. This involves identifying an externalised "evil" outside the group and enacting violence upon a chosen target, believed to save society from self-destruction.

Narratives exhibit different story types, encompassing personal experiences, official accounts by organisations, and culturally rooted tales. Extremist propaganda often intertwines these storylines, necessitating consideration of the "level of narrativity" and its sociological implications related to social structure and citizens' perceptions. In a democratic society, it is important to understand the distinction between narratives that contribute to a radical but healthy agonistic debate and those that are antagonistic and threaten democracy. This is particularly important when considering the expression of extreme views and the potential normalisation of extremist discourses.

Through narrative techniques, extremism extends beyond ideology into the digital sphere (Baldauf 2017), creating an environment ripe for bullying, incitement, and hate speech. It seeks to manipulate emotions, influence mainstream media agendas, and stoke fear and hatred. These narratives establish alternative media landscapes and strategically employ misleading information, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. The aim is to manipulate emotions, influence mainstream media agendas, and stir up feelings of fear and hatred.



Extremism and Populism

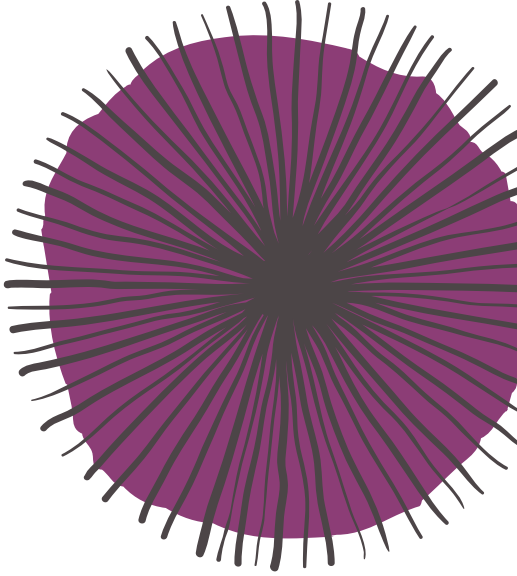
Populism, while controversial in political science, effectively describes the shared features of group-based misanthropy and anti-Semitism found within extremist narratives. Extremist narratives share systematic structures with populism, as outlined by Baldauf et al. (2017), simplifying complex social contexts into dichotomies that divide the world into good (the in-group) and evil (the out-group). This is exemplified by portraying politicians who do not align with extremist views as traitors against the people, a narrative used by right-wing extremist groups.

Furthermore, extremist narratives thrive on well-told, carefully placed, and widely disseminated stories. These narratives are adaptable and evolve to suit changing circumstances, requiring a nuanced analysis and deconstruction to reveal their core beliefs. This adaptability allows extremist narratives to remain relevant and persuasive within their target audience.

Extremist narratives also utilise language and symbolism to create a sense of unity among disparate ideologies. The use of "empty signifiers" and "floating signifiers" allows extremist groups to appeal to a broad range of individuals with different grievances. For example, terms like "freedom," "justice," and "truth" can be imbued with various meanings depending on the context, enabling extremist narratives to attract support from individuals with diverse ideological backgrounds.

Moreover, the deployment of floating signifiers such as "the people" or "the enemy" serves to evoke strong emotional responses and create affective connections with the audience. These signifiers remain intentionally vague, allowing extremist groups to activate specific frames and shape how individuals perceive the world around them.

In essence, extremist narratives within populist movements play a crucial role in constructing a chain of equivalences by unifying diverse grievances under a common political identity. By simplifying complex issues and appealing to broad emotional themes, these narratives facilitate the mobilisation of support and the consolidation of power within populist movements. This process highlights the interplay between ideology, language, and power dynamics within contemporary politics, echoing Laclau's insights into the mechanisms of populism



In Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, the notion of a "chain of equivalences" is central to understanding how diverse social demands and grievances are unified under a common political identity. Populism, according to Laclau, is not inherently tied to any specific ideology but rather emerges through the articulation of these demands and grievances into a coherent antagonistic frontier, typically pitting "the people" against "the elite" or some other perceived adversary.

Extremist narratives, often found within populist movements, play a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing this antagonistic frontier by simplifying complex social contexts into dichotomous terms. Extremist narratives share structural similarities with populism, as both rely on simplification and polarisation to mobilise support. By portraying the world in terms of good versus evil, they create a binary opposition that resonates with individuals who feel marginalised or disenfranchised.

These floating signifiers remain intentionally vague, enabling extremist groups to activate specific frames, as theorised by Lakoff (2014). These frames influence how individuals cognitively structure their understanding of the narrative's characters, events, and moral judgments. Therefore, empty and floating signifiers, in conjunction with the theory of frames, illuminate the intricate dynamics of extremist narratives, revealing how language and symbols are strategically employed to construct and reinforce extremist ideologies.

Conspiracy Theories and Extremist Narratives

‘Extremist’ narratives can be defined as “stories that collectively provide a coherent world-view for the purpose of supporting individuals, groups, or movements in the furthering of their illegal violence and violence-assisting activities” (RAN collection, 2019). According to (Shenhav 2006), the term ‘narrative’ by no means implies a radically relativist point of view. Not all narratives are equally “fictional”. They come to coincide to varying degrees with a consensually constructed political reality. Extremist narratives are characterised in this respect by being consensual only to a (very) small degree from the perspective of an open pluralist society.

Conspiracy theories serve as the foundation for extremist narratives, framing the "enemy" as a group of conspirators concealing malevolent intentions. These narratives collectively provide a coherent world-view supporting individuals, groups, or movements engaged in illegal violence and violence-assisting activities. Conspiracy theories are based on narratives. They describe the “enemy” as a group of conspirators hiding their evil intentions. The conspiratorial narrative exposes the conspiracy and calls for resistance.

Interim conclusions

In summary, extremist narratives are intricate constructs characterised by narrative structure, storytelling power, simplification of complexity, conspiracy theories and binary visions. These characteristics collectively make extremist narratives potent tools for propagating extremist ideologies, intolerance, and violence. Understanding these features is paramount for analysing and countering the influence of extremist narratives in society.

Extremist narratives are extremist in the sense that they clearly distinguish between a (morally and ethically) superior in-group that it perceived as legitimate and an out-group that is framed as both inferior and dangerous, and against whom the in-group has to defend its interests at all costs, including by hostile actions and not accepting any alternative views.

Extremist narratives are narratives that often rely on "storytelling" in the sense of evoking a structured sequence of events caused or experienced by actors and involving a construal of Us/Them dichotomies, to emotionally anchor and reinforce worldviews, but also to propagate and normalise ideologies.

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ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

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