

ARENAS

ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES
TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

ARENAS Work Package 2

Defining Extremist Narratives: A review of the current state of the art

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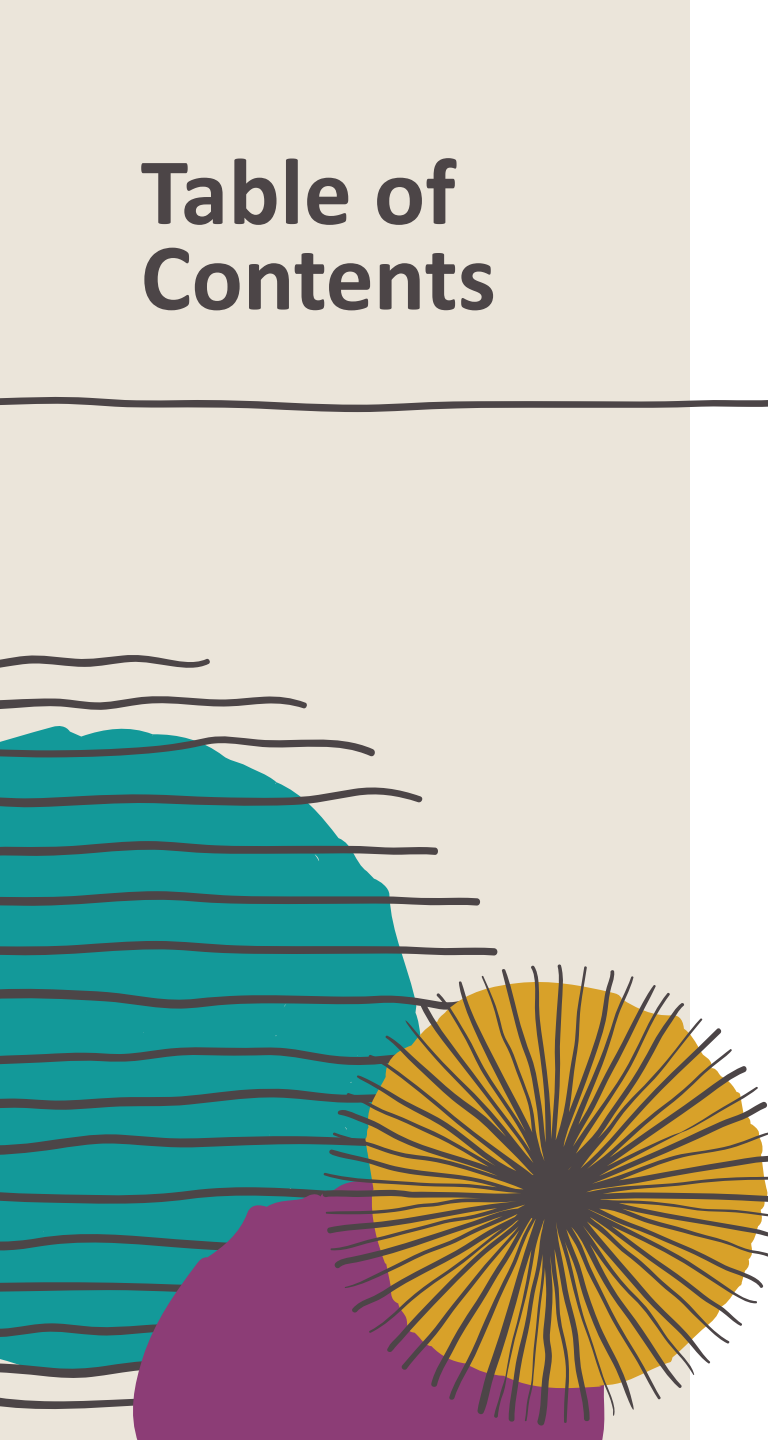


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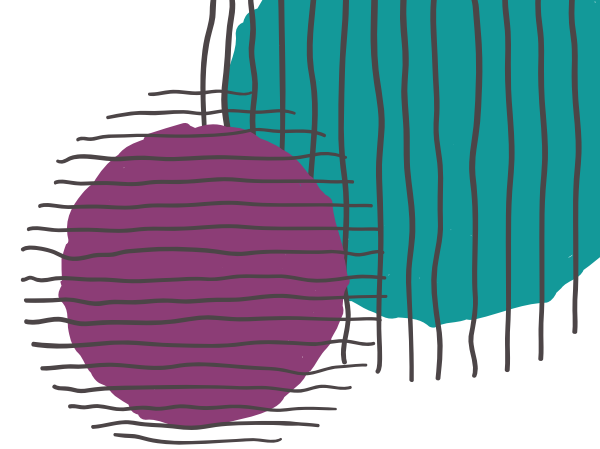


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01

INTRODUCTION

The recent rise of disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories encourages extremist narratives.

What exactly counts as extremist narratives?

What exactly is a narrative?

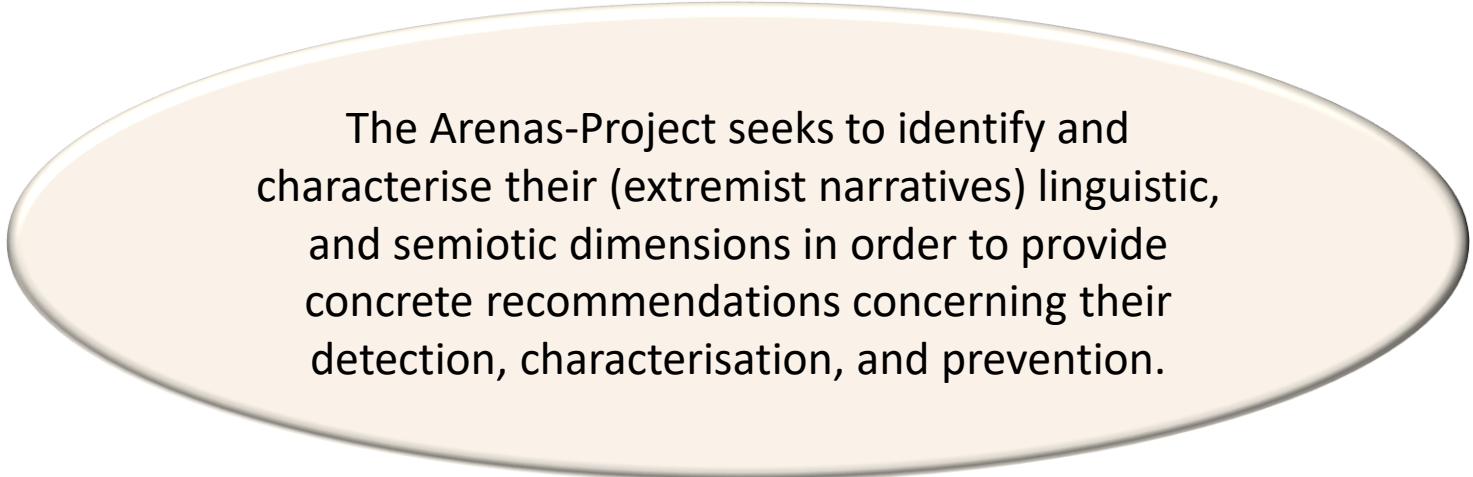
Where does extremism begin, and where does it end?



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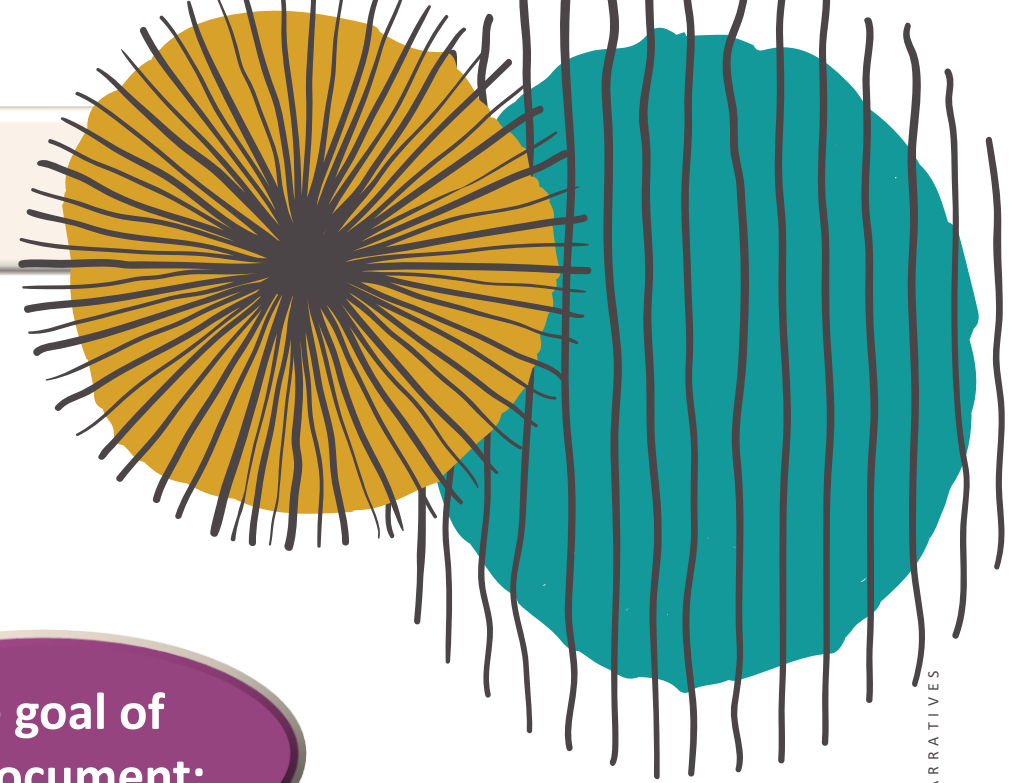


ARENAS-PROJECT GOAL



The Arenas-Project seeks to identify and characterise their (extremist narratives) linguistic, and semiotic dimensions in order to provide concrete recommendations concerning their detection, characterisation, and prevention.

INTRODUCTION



What can provide a different breeding ground for extremism:

Spatial context:

- political culture
- democratic experience
- strength of and public trust in institutions
- level and appreciation of education
- perception of civil rights

Temporal context:

- 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

The goal of the document:

Development of an **operational definition of extremist narratives** based on:

- existing literature on extremism
- the concept of narrative

02

WHAT IS EXTREMISM?

- It is important to flesh out and delineate the concept as precisely as possible.
- “The labelling of someone or something ‘extremist’ represents a political act” McNeil-Willson (2023: 18)

02.1 Extremism and Radicalisation



Orofino & Allchorn (2023: 2), for instance, place extremism on a continuum between **radicalization** and **terrorism**. On this view, radicalization can lead to extremism, which in turn can lead to terrorism.

Radicalisation

- can be seen as a pathway to extremism
- often rooted in a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo

Terrorism

- a form of politically motivated violence that puts extremist ideas into action

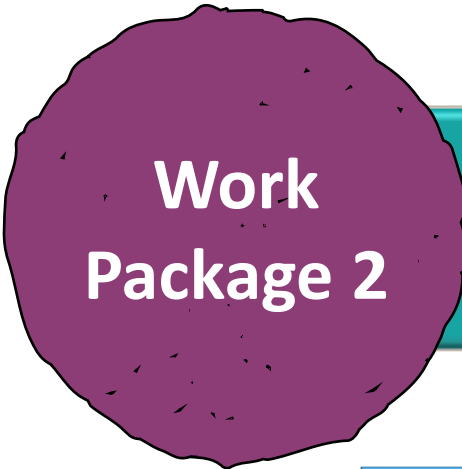
An important point that distinguishes radicalism from extremism:

- ➔ While the populist radical right is not anti-democratic (but may reject liberal democracy), the extreme right is essentially anti-democratic (Mudde 2007: 31)

It is worth remembering that the term 'radicalism' originally came from the **liberal freedom and democracy movement** in the 19th century:

- ➔ Radical democrats fought for universal suffrage, the consistent disempowerment of the church and the republican form of government



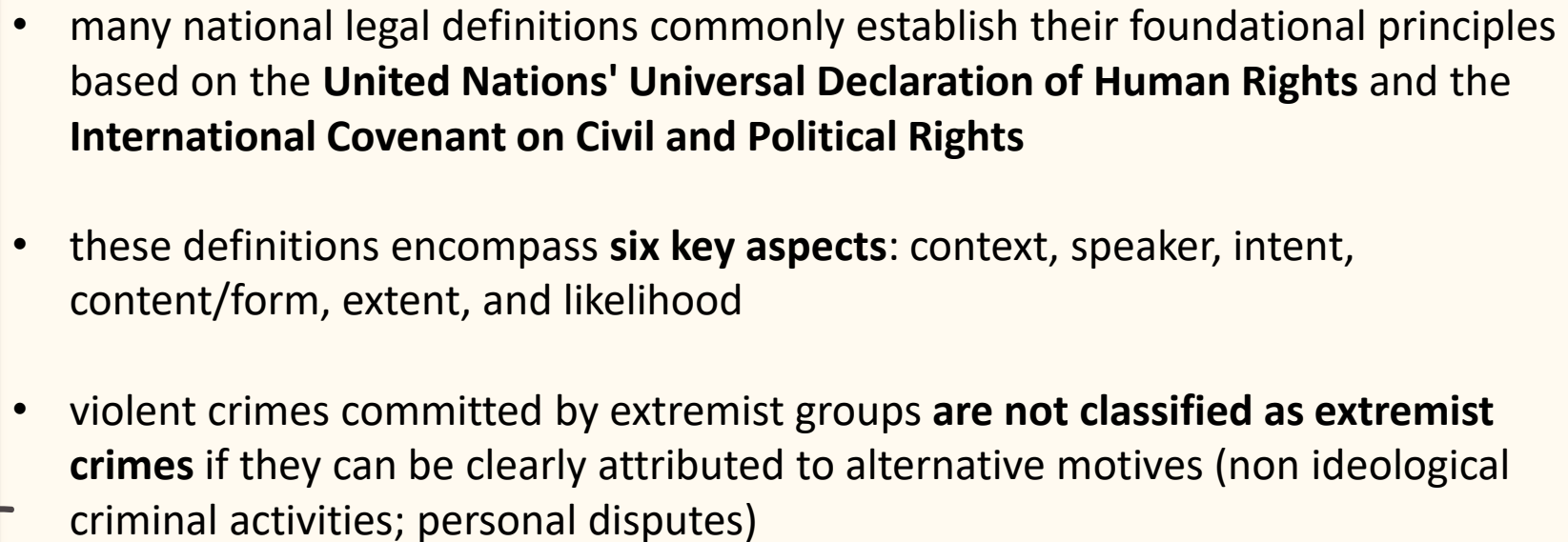


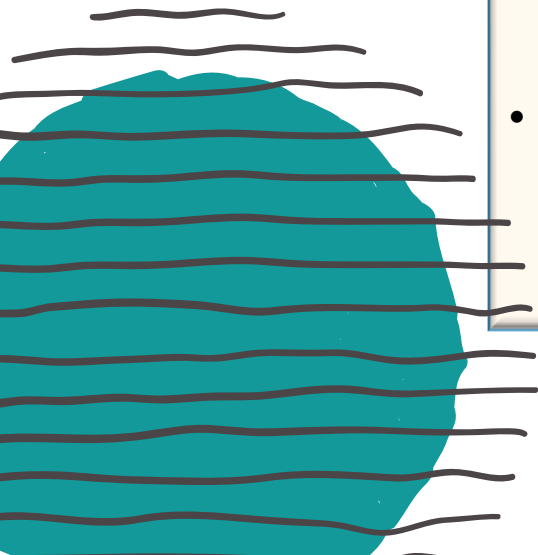
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02.2 Some Legal Aspects of Extremism



- 
- 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**
 - these definitions encompass **six key aspects**: context, speaker, intent, content/form, extent, and likelihood
 - violent crimes committed by extremist groups **are not classified as extremist crimes** if they can be clearly attributed to alternative motives (non ideological criminal activities; personal disputes)



02.3 Features of Extremism

Polarisation: in-group / out-group

- the in-group presents themselves as morally superior AND victim of the out-group, whom are framed as a danger and morally inferior
- thus, the hostile actions against the out-group are justified

The question of **violence**:

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)

Four major “pillars” on which (political) extremism is based: Jesse (2021: 279)

- identity theory of democracy
- friend-foe-stereotypes
- usually a missionary perspective
- high degree of ideological dogmatism

Extremists are said to be engaged in a fight “against the socio-political and cultural system in which they operate”

(Orofin & Allchorn 2023: 4)

02.4 Linguistic Characteristics of Extremist Discourse

The **in-group-specific discourse** manifests itself linguistically in various forms (specific metaphors or metaphor systems, topic-specific argumentation patterns, key words)

Toxic communication behavior (related to hate speech):

- permanently disparaging discussion partners, spreading falsehoods, issuing insults, and making destructive statements
- undermine constructive dialogue and maintain a hostile environment within extremist circles

Emotion in extremist speech:

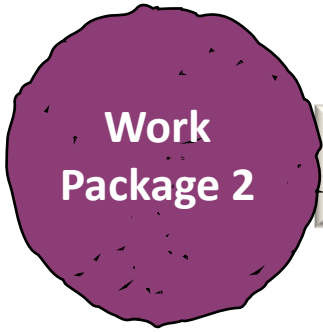
- is carefully manipulated through tone, flow, rhythm, and metaphor to engage audiences emotionally while maintaining an appearance of rationality

Hate speech: 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

03

WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

- Narratives are powerful tools for individuals to navigate and comprehend the world Baldauf et al. (2017)
- They conceptualise and shape envisioned pieces of reality, including sequences of events and complex scenarios, in accordance with the values and convictions of speakers



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WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

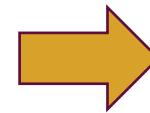


The function of narratives Baldauf et al. (2017)

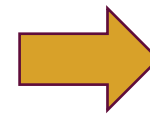
Communicating the content of events, answering the question of "what" happened

Delving into the "how" by incorporating the temporal dimension, describing settings, and offering causal explanations

Contextualizing events, selectively including or excluding details and framing interpretations from specific perspectives

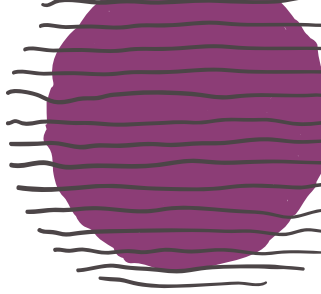


Narratives play a pivotal role in **constructing and stabilising personal and communal identities** over the long term.



Narratives **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.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE?



Müller (2019: 2) recurs to Prince's influential narratological theory:

A communicative unit has a narrative structure if one can derive propositional descriptions of **three temporal states** from it:

- a.) An initial state
- b.) A change causing a change
- c.) A final state

Example: „MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN“

Can be seen as evoking two (populist) narratives:

The past-oriented narrative:

- 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

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

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03.1 Narrative and Ideology

Within the
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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**.

... the goal is to conceptually **distinguish between narrative and ideology**.

In the context of our project:

Ideology = consolidated patterns of beliefs and values that are normalized within a specific group Hart (2014:3)

Explicit elements: directly stated or expressed within the narrative

Implicit elements: inferred from the surrounding context and linguistic resources

Relationship Narrative-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



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.

Distinction between

Epistemological-based concept of discourse:

- refers to a symbolic or semiotic dimension of creating order, which becomes effective not least with the help of linguistic means
- makes a contribution to structuring social and cultural contexts or circumstances within a community

Performance-based concept of discourse:

- rather located at the micro level of individual utterances and speech acts
- here, discourse relates to concrete (interactional or socio historical) communication contexts

Storytelling is a **dynamic technique** employing language, pacing, and thematic elements to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually

- It serves as a **fundamental cognitive tool**, offering frameworks for understanding the world and shaping perspectives
- 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)
- **The distinction between storytelling and narrative** lies in the former's ability to breathe life into structured narratives, making them relatable and emotionally resonant
- **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

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
- serve as cognitive structures for representing knowledge
- help document the meanings and functions of narratives

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”.

➔ **Narratives are tools for framing ‘reality’** in line with the speaker's strategic interests and ideological stance

➔ **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

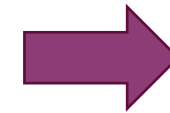
We are now in the position to provide a **more detailed “definition”** of narratives that incorporates the various epistemic dimensions explained before:

Narratives...

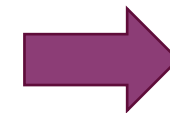
... **do not mirror reality**: They rather put the world into perspective and thus help shape the world in such a way that relations to existing or - often implicitly advocated - ideologies and assumptions about the (social) world are not only possible, but even reinforce them

... **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

... **are inherent meaning-bearing units**



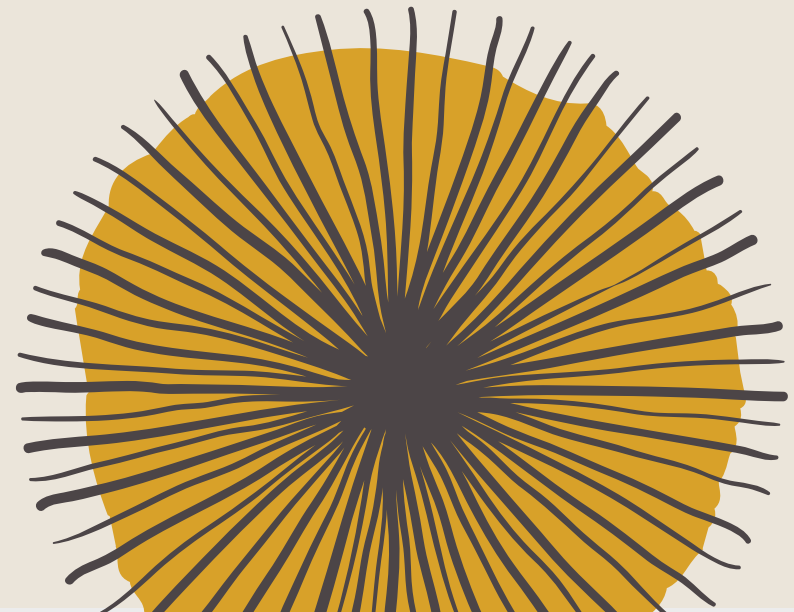
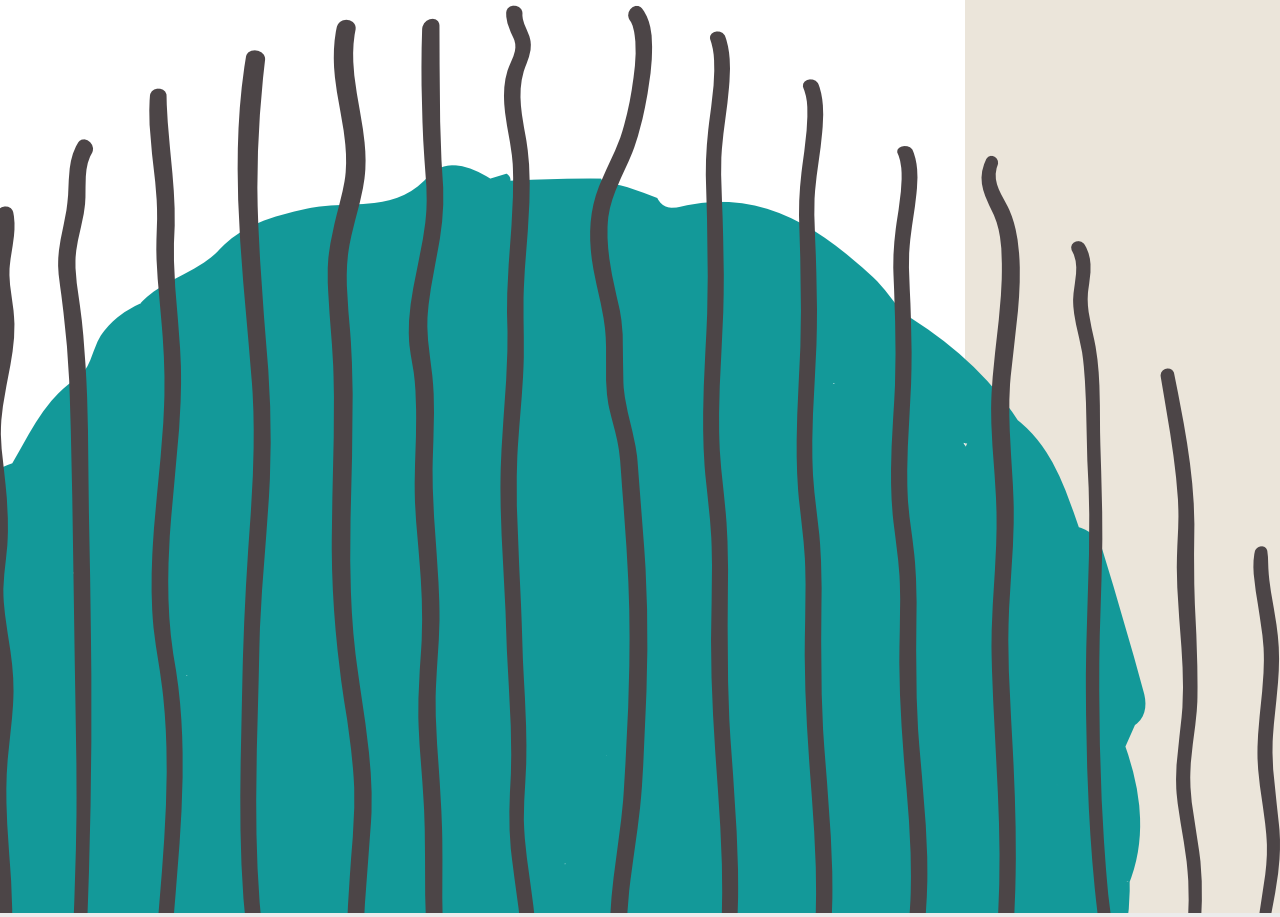
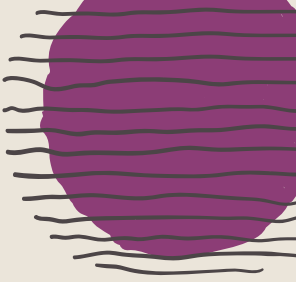
Discourse: can be seen as the habitat in which narratives emerge and operate



Ideology: more generally relate to the in-group system of convictions and beliefs supporting a specific worldview or political, social attitude

04

WHAT THEN IS AN EXTREMIST NARRATIVE?



WHAT THEN IS AN EXTREMIST NARRATIVE?

Extremist aspects:

- moral superior and victim in-group: portrayed as underdog, intolerance to other views, hostile action (cause, foster or legitimate)
- inferior and dangerous out-group

Narratological aspects:

- actors (in-group & out group)
- narrated event contexts: are mostly at the same time a (simplified and mostly implicit) explanation for a complex socio-political problem; a solution for it is suggested
- structure of the told stories and events

A fundamental aspect: the deliberate simplification and reduction of complexity

- extremist narratives become more easily comprehensible and thus more persuasive
- this simultaneously bolsters the coherence and plausibility of the narrative itself

What truly distinguishes extremist narratives is **their presentation**—the "story" itself, which leaves no room for alternative perspectives, fostering an environment of intolerance. (Baldauf 2017)

- **Extremist narratives** share systematic structures with **populism**, simplifying complex social contexts into dichotomies that divide the world into good (the in-group) and evil (the out-group)
- **Extremist narratives** also utilise language and symbolism to create a sense of unity among disparate ideologies
 - Example: terms like "freedom," "justice," and "truth" can be imbued with various meanings depending on the context (those terms are also called "empty and floating signifiers")
- **Populism** is not inherently tied to any specific ideology but rather emerges through the articulation of these demands



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04.2 Conspiracy Theories and Extremist Narratives



- **Conspiracy theories** serve as the **foundation for extremist narratives**, framing the "enemy" as a group of conspirators concealing malevolent intentions
- They describe the “enemy” as a group of conspirators hiding their evil intentions
- The conspiratorial narrative exposes the conspiracy and calls for resistance

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