

Title of the PhD project :

When the far right invites itself into the media:
Populism and the normalisation of identitarian discourses

Presentation of the project

1. Scientific background and state of the art

On 13 February 2024, the Conseil d'Etat (CE) announced a ruling on the assessment of the respect for pluralism of information by the *Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique* (ARCOM). *Reporters Sans Frontières* (RSF) had taken the case to court, arguing that the French TV channel CNEWS was not complying with its legal obligations in terms of honesty, pluralism and independence of information. This decision comes against a backdrop marked by the worldwide rise of reactionary currents (Palheta 2022), reflected in France by the electoral rise of the *Rassemblement National* (RN), which now occupies a significant place in the *Assemblée Nationale*, and regular accusations that certain media favour the far right in the media landscape.

Faced with these dynamics, the concept of normalisation of the far right has been developed to understand the evolution of this underlying trend (Guillet & Afiouni 2019). Rather than focusing solely on groups or individuals representative of this ideological family, this approach adopts a broader perspective by looking at the processes by which far-right ideas gradually become acceptable and integrated into public debate, particularly through the media (Tiberj 2024).

The role of the media appears to be crucial in the dissemination and normalisation of far-right ideas. Whether one refers to the growing popularity of talk-show-type programmes on the audiovisual media (Grindstaff 2008) or the new media ecosystem emerging through social networks such as X/Twitter and Instagram (Atton 2006; Winter 2019), we are witnessing a range of media mutations including the personalisation of political issues, the polarisation of electoral discourse and the hybridisation of information and entertainment (La Sala Urbain 2003).

In addition, the platform offered to advocates of far-right ideology, or to bearers of similar ideas, has become increasingly frequent, making their discourse more widespread and accessible (Brown & Mondon 2021). The ideologues of intolerance are often established public figures, visible in the mainstream media and integrated into the political and media system (Ivaldi 2023). This favourable media presence is also the result of the increasingly assertive support of media owners (Grossmann et al. 2022), whether traditional media such as those used by Vincent Bolloré in France to promote a xenophobic agenda, or the most influential social media, as demonstrated by Donald Trump's proximity to Silicon Valley figures such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos.

What's more, their ease in a media ecosystem that values divisive statements and transgression has enabled far-right political actors to use media codes to serve their xenophobic and reactionary agenda (Gaufman & Ganesh 2024). Acknowledging the need for a change in political strategy theorised by the New Right (Rueda 2021), far-right figures have also adopted the populist style with great electoral success (Moffitt 2016; Aiolfi 2025), presenting their struggles through the framework of an opposition between the people and the elite. Presenting themselves as the sole legitimate defenders of a homogeneous people threatened by immigration that would alter its deep-rooted identity, populism thus enables far-right politicians to claim a form of popular legitimacy as well as an outsider position vis-à-vis the traditional parties (Mondon & Winter 2020).

2. Technical and scientific arguments : problem, issues, methodology

The research carried out under this doctoral contract is therefore part of the research on the normalisation of far-right ideas, adopting an interdisciplinary approach at the crossroads of information and communication sciences (SIC), sociology and political science. It examines the role of the media in the normalisation of far-right ideas and the popularisation of its political figures. To this end, this doctoral contract will enable several issues to be explored simultaneously, the centrality of which will be determined jointly by the supervisors and the PhD candidate. They include, in particular, questioning (1) the way in which the traditional and/or digital media develop their coverage of the far right; (2) the mechanisms by which the identitarian discourses of the far right are normalised ; (3) the instrumental role of certain media formats in the success of identitarian discourses; (4) the relative agency of far-right political figures in instrumentalising media dynamics and tools to their advantage; (5) the importance of the populist style in the normalisation of far-right ideas.

In methodological terms, this PhD project is open to several methodological angles whose selection will depend on the empirical choices made by the doctoral student. In terms of research design, this could involve a specialised case study of a particular country's media ecosystem, a comparative research project examining media treatment of the far right across several national contexts, a detailed analysis of a particular case of "global" media (such as X/Twitter) or a comparison of several media in dialogue with each other.

In terms of methods, this doctoral contract lends itself above all to a qualitative analysis inspired by post-positivism and interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2013). Although the collection of quantitative data is possible in a specific research design such as a content analysis, the doctoral student will be encouraged to explore different types of qualitative tools adapted to the research problems. These could include discourse analysis (critical, poststructuralist, thematic, etc.) of a corpus drawn from various types of media, semi-structured interviews with journalists, politicians or other political figures linked to these channels, or network analysis (Steiner 2024) based on interactions between the media and politicians.

3. Objectives and expected results

The research funded through this PhD project aims to shed new light on the links between the media and the normalisation of far-right identitarian discourse. It has several objectives: to identify the communication strategies of the far right, to explore the mechanisms by which their ideas are gradually accepted, to examine the media coverage of these ideas in the mainstream media, and to understand the links between populism, polarisation and normalisation, among others.

Given the growing prominence of this issue in public debate in France and beyond, this thesis will help raise public awareness of the media strategies of the far right, encouraging more critical and informed media consumption. Its findings could inform journalistic practices, encouraging responsible and ethical media coverage that avoids normalising extreme right-wing discourse. By highlighting the dangers of this normalisation of xenophobic identitarian discourse, it will contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive vision of democracy.

During the course of the thesis, the PhD candidate will be strongly encouraged to publish three articles in peer-reviewed national or international journals in the fields of political communication, studies of the far right and/or populism, or traditional and/or social-digital media.

4. Affiliated laboratory and integration of the project into the laboratory's research area

The thesis is part of the research programme of the research laboratory *Textes, Images, Langages* (TIL) of Université Bourgogne Europe, and more specifically of its research team *Individu & Nation*, whose general research theme is "Societies on the move: dynamics, transformations, conflictualities". It is part of both its first theme, "Construction and circulation of cultures and identities", through its focus on nationalist, reactionary and identitarian discourse and its circulation, and its second theme, "Democracy: actors, strategies and practices", through its research angle focused on the media strategies, and more broadly the discursive strategies, of political figures associated with the far right.

5. Partenariats éventuels, environnement scientifique

The thesis is directly funded by the *Chaire Professeur Junior* "Discours Identitaires et Diversité dans l'Espace Public" and will be fully integrated into its research environment. The aim of the *Chaire* is to shed light on the circulation of identitarian discourse in the public arena. This PhD project fits in transversally with the CPJ's three areas of research: (1) identity and political representation; (2) identity and the construction of otherness; and (3) identity and digital media. Because of its particular concern for the media ecosystem in which far-right identitarian discourses operates, the PhD project will be particularly involved in the Chair's third research area. The doctoral student will therefore be expected to participate actively in the Chair's scientific activities and to take a leading role in the associated research area.

The empirical positioning of this doctoral contract also places it within the research networks established around the media role of the extreme right in France and internationally. These include the research group on journalism of the *Société Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication* (SFSIC), the section on political communication research of the *International Association for Media and Communication Research* (IAMCR), the research groups on changing political parties (PARTIPOL) and digital political science (SPN) of the *Association Française de Science Politique* (AFSP), and the specialist groups on populism and media and politics of the *Political Studies Association* (PSA). Active participation and attendance to the annual conferences and events of these research groups will be strongly encouraged.

6. Bibliographie indicative (courte)

Aiolfi, T. *The Populist Style: Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far-Right*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Atton, C. (2006). Far-right media on the internet: Culture, discourse and power. *New media & society*, 8(4), 573-587.

Brown, K., & Mondon, A. (2021). "Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study". *Politics*, 41(3), 279-295.

Gaufman, E., & Ganesh, B. (2024). *The Trump Carnival: Populism, Transgression and the Far Right*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Grindstaff, L. (2008). *The money shot: Trash, class, and the making of TV talk shows*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Grossman G., Margalit Y., & Mitts T., (2022), "How the ultrarich use media ownership as a political investment". *The Journal of Politics* 84 (4): 1913–1931.

Guillet N. & Afiouni N. (2019) *Les tentatives de banalisation de l'extrême droite en Europe*. Bruxelles : Éditions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, Science Politique.

Ivaldi, G. (2023). « Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour : les deux extrêmes droites ». *Le vote clivé Les élections présidentielle et législatives d'avril et juin 2022*. (p. 61 -69). Grenoble : Presses universitaires de Grenoble.

La Sala Urbain, S. (2013). « Le Petit Journal ou la séduction de l'infotainment ». *Télévision*, 4(1), 105-123. <https://doi.org/10.3917/telev.004.0105>.

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2020). *Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*. London: Verso Books.

Palheta, U. (2022). *La nouvelle internationale fasciste*. Paris: Textuel.

Rueda, D. (2021). "Alain de Benoist, Ethnopluralism and the Cultural Turn in Racism". *Patterns of Prejudice*, 55(3), 213–35.

Schwartz-Shea, P. & Yanow, D. (2013). *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. New York: Routledge

Steiner, P. (2024), *Sociologie relationnelle*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, Humensis.

Tiberj V. (2024), *La droitisation française, Mythes et réalités*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Winter, A. (2019). Online hate: from the far-right to the 'alt-right' and from the margins to the mainstream. *Online othering: Exploring digital violence and discrimination on the web*, 39-63.

7. Provisional timetable

	Année 1 (2026-2027)				Année 2 (2027-2028)				Année 3 (2028-2029)			
	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3
Work on the literature review and drafting of the first section of the thesis												
Establishing the research protocol and work on the methodology chapter												
Data collection and analysis												
Drafting of the empirical sections, results and conclusions												
Peer-reviewed publications												
Conference attendance												

Monthly thesis follow-up meetings												
Individual follow-up committees												
Thesis defence												

Administrative information :

Thesis supervision: This thesis will be co-supervised by Agnès Alexandre-Collier and Théo Aiolfi, as part of the research laboratory *Textes, Images, Langages (TIL)* of Université Bourgogne Europe. This PhD contract will be managed by the Doctoral School LECLA.

Funding: This PhD contract is fully subsidised by the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR)* funding associated with the *Chaire Professeur Junior (CPJ) "Discours Identitaires et diversité dans l'espace public"*. Research activities undertaken by the PhD student, including attendance to conferences and research expenses, will be funded as much as possible by the *Chaire Professeur Junior*.

Attendance: The doctoral student is expected to be present in-person in Dijon throughout the duration of their PhD thesis, for their research and potential teaching duties.

Language of research: This PhD project can be undertaken in both French and English. A working knowledge of French will be a strong asset for potential candidates, particularly if they wish to undertake teaching during their PhD.

Application: The application should take the form of a unique PDF file combining:

- Curriculum Vitae (with French social security number, if the candidate has one)
- Cover letter including a discussion of the candidate's fit with the PhD project and details about the kind of research they seek to develop (theoretical inspirations, case studies, methods...)
- Transcripts of Masters degree (M1 and M2 in France, or equivalent)

Instructions for application: To apply, candidates will go on the LECLA Doctoral School's website (<https://lecla.ubfc.fr/parcours-doctorale/proposition-de-contrats-doctoraux/>) and select the PhD contract, entitled "*Quand l'extrême-droite s'invite dans les médias : Populisme et normalisation des discours identitaires*" in French. They will then be asked to create an account on the website *Adum* (<https://adum.fr/candidature/index.pl?site=lecla> or <https://adum.fr/candidature/initcpt.pl>) and submit their application file.

Deadline for applications: 5th of June 2025

Interviews of candidates: Selected candidates will be invited to an in-person interview in Dijon on the 1st of July 2025.

Beginning of the PhD contract: 1st of October 2025

For further information and inquiries about the application, prospective candidates are invited to contact Théo Aiolfi (theo.aiolfi@ube.fr)