Mediatized Extreme Right Activism and Discourse

The Case of 'The Immortals'

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This paper presents a case study of the German neo-fascist network The Immortals (*Die Unsterblichen*) who in 2011 performed a flash-mob disseminated on YouTube for the so-called 'Become Immortal' campaign. The street protest was designed for and adapted to the specific characteristics of online activism. It is a good example of how new contentious action repertoires in which online and street activism intertwine have also spread to extreme right groups. Despite its neo-fascist and extreme right content the 'Become Immortal' campaign serves as an illustrative case for the study of mediated and mediatized activism.

In order to analyse of the protest form, the visual aesthetics and the discourse of 'The Immortals', the paper mobilises two concepts from media and communication studies: *mediation and mediatization.* It will be argued that that the current transformation of the extreme right: that is, the development of an *ethno-nationalist* master frame can be conceptualized and understood through the lens of mediatization.

INTRODUCTION

Bautzen, Germany, May 1 2011: Dark figures in black cloaks marching through the streets at night, their faces covered with iconographic white masks, carrying burning torches in their hands. The scene resembles a medieval procession if not for the jeans and the smartphones in the hands of the participants. The march was filmed and uploaded onto YouTube under the name of *Werde unsterblich!* (Become Immortal!). Within the first week 20,000 viewers watched the clip, it was disseminated via Facebook and Twitter and similar events were soon performed and filmed in a number of other German cities (Staud and Radke, 2012: 115; Radke, 2012). *Die Unsterblichen* (The Immortals) – a German extreme right protest movement – took credit for the rally. The campaign was launched as a protest against the death of the German people, the so-called *Volkstod* and as a rejection of liberal democracy.[1]

In this working paper an empirical case analysis of the 'Become Immortal' campaign is presented. The relationship between extreme right activists and new media will be highlighted and it will be show how the intersection of online and street activism has recently been adopted by extreme right youth movements in Germany. Since the revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East in the spring of 2011, the Gezi park protests in Turkey in 2013 and the Occupy resistance in 2011 – just to mention a few recent examples – a lot of celebratory claims were made regarding the emancipatory impact and participatory potentials of mediatized cultural activism. Accordingly, mediated social and political protest generally refers to left-wing progressive, environmental, anti-globalization or other social movements whose aim is to strengthen civic engagement and participation and influence decision-makers by showing their moral disgust with cynical neoliberal policies. (Jasper, 2014; see also Loader, 2008; della Porta and Tarrow, 2004).

However, progressive movements and activists are not the only ones appropriating new information and communication technologies such as the internet and web 2.0. Also actors with explicit anti-democratic and anti-pluralist agendas appropriate the participatory potentials of these communication technologies to increase the impact of their political action and to disseminate their discourses. As the far-right web activist Don Black, founder of the virtual community *Stormfront*, explained to *The Guardian* as early as in 2001: 'Whereas we previously could only reach people with pamphlets, or by holding rallies with no more than a few hundred people, now we can reach potentially millions of people.' (Quoted in Copsey,

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[1] The YouTube clip 'Werde Unsterblich – Demonstration in Bautzen'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkU6KTjLTYU [Last consulted on: 30/01/2015].

2003: 222) Political action has become much easier and faster to organize through new media especially for loosely organized small groups or networks (Copsey, 2003; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Cammaerts, 2012).

The relationship between extreme right activism and new media has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in recent years by exploring the opportunity structures for discourse and action repertoires (della Porta *et al.*, 2012); the creation of online public spaces through blogs (Cammaerts, 2009) or the use of video activism by right wing extremist as an example of alternative and activist media practice (Ekman, 2014). By applying two concepts from media and communication theory: *Mediation* and *mediatization* I will investigate the impact of new social media on extreme right activism and discourse. I will argue that the protest forms and political discourse of 'The Immortals' must be analysed as part of a more general transformation process of extreme right mobilization in terms of *ethno-nationalism*. I will suggest that a media-focused framework is essential in order to investigate these changes, especially as broader media transformation processes affect both the protest forms and the political discourse.

The article is structured as follows: Building on social movements theory and concepts (as outlined in della Porta and Diani, 2006) I will first describe the structure and identity of 'The Immortals' and present a methodological framework for the study of the interrelation between activism and media. In the middle section I will present a qualitative content analysis of the 'Become Immortal' campaign by focusing on the protest form, the visual aesthetics and the political discourse. Here a media practice as well as a mediation framework will be used. In the final section I will contextualize the case by relating it to more general transformation processes of the extreme right as described by a number of scholars in the last years and discuss how these changes could be conceptualized through the lens of both mediatization as well as mediation.

THE IMMORTALS – ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY

So far 'The Immortals' have received very limited scholarly attention although they have been mentioned in the German as well as international news media (Pfohl, 2012; Schmitt, 2013).[2] 'The Immortals' who marched for the first time in Bautzen on the 1st of May 2011 have been identified by the German intelligence agency (Verfassungsschutz) as members of the National Democratic Party's (NPD) youth organization: Young National Democrats, activists from the Autonomous Nationalist milieu and a neo-Nazi youth organization called 'Widerstandsbewegung in Südbrandenburg', which on their homepage *Spreelichter* took full responsibility for the coordination and organization of the first demonstration by 'The Immortals' (Verfassungsschutzbericht, 2012: 59; Radke, 2012). Since the first *Volkstod* performance in Bautzen the same kind of short flash-mob action has been repeated in at least 25 other German cities – as the many copycat versions on YouTube indicate.

Although their self-representations on different social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Flickr would suggest that this is a well-established nationalist far right organization their subcultural and heterotopic form indicate that this is rather a form of collective action or a protest phenomenon than an actual organized group lest a political or social movement. Young activists from the above mentioned networks have found a common ground in what they perceive as the extinction of the German people due to exaggerated immigration from non-Western countries, the low birth rate among ethnic Germans and the escape from eastern German regions where the younger generations struggle to find jobs and life opportunities. They have also found a common identity in being opposed to the powers that be as they consider themselves in opposition to the political establishment and the hegemonic liberal democratic order. In particular they despise the political elite and blame them for having destroyed the unity and cohesion of the German people by embracing multiculturalism.

By adopting such a worldview they are ideologically in line with the broader European extreme and populist right-wing movements, although their organizational structure and

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[2] See: 'Disturbing footage shows masked German Neo-Nazis dubbed The Immortals recreating torch rallies of the Third Reich', *Daily Mail*, August 15, 2012: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2188595/Neo-Nazis-dubbed-The-Immortals-embrace-social-networks-organise-terrifying-protests-German-cities.html - [Last consulted on: 30/01/2015].
'Was verbirgt sich hinter den "Unsterblichen"?', [What is behind 'The Immortals'?] *NDR.de*, October 25, 2013: http://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/dossiers/der_norden_schaut_hin/dieunsterblichen107.html - [Last consulted on: 30/01/2015].
'Germany's flash-mob neo-Nazis', CNN, August 13, 2012:
http://edition.cnn.com/video/?/video/world/2012/08/13/german-neo-nazi-group.cnn&video_referrer - [Last consulted on: 30/01/2015].

protest forms differ from traditional right-wing organizations and parties such as e.g. The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), Stop Islamisation of Europe or the so-called free fellowships. According to Rydgren (2005; 2007) extreme right wing and populist parties share a political worldview centred around a core of cultural protectionism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, anti-pluralism, critique of the political establishment and an ethno-nationalist myth of a golden past (see also Mudde, 1996). Other ideological characteristics include nationalism encompassing both biological and cultural forms coupled with the belief that the nation is in a state of cultural decadence and decline (della Porta *et al.*, 2012). The political message of 'The Immortals' is that a national socialist Germany 'clean' of immigrants is the only solution to the downfall of the German people caused by immigration from Non-Western countries and by the flaws of modern liberal democracy.

The 'Become Immortal' campaign was a short-lived protest phenomenon with no lasting impact. In the second half of 2012 the activities and marches of 'The Immortals' had already started to decrease and at present the only sign of their existence are the YouTube clips and the self-representations on their webpage (see note 1). Still this phenomenon remains interesting to study for at least two reasons: It is a good indicator of how the extreme right has been going through a massive transformation process in recent years from the old neo-Nazi and skinhead subculture towards a more mediatized ethno-nationalist movement which has the potential to attract followers far beyond the traditional extreme right milieu (c.f. Schedler and Häusler, 2011; Sommer, 2008; Botsch, 2012). The case of 'The Immortals' is, however, also relevant beyond extremism studies; their protest activities serve as an interesting case through which we can analyse the actual impact of media technologies on (radical) activism and in particular the role of new social media for activist performance. Empirical research into what happens to radical political action and discourse as it becomes mediatized and entangled in mediation and remediation processes is a timely and increasingly important topic in social movement as well as in media studies.

MEDIA PRACTICES, MEDIATION PROCESSES AND MEDIATIZATION IN THE STUDY OF PROTEST AND ACTIVISM

In recent years mediatization has become a very prominent concept in media studies. The concept mediatization does not refer to a single theory but rather to a specific approach to understand the complex relationship between media, culture and society and to study long-term processes of change (Hepp and Krotz, 2014: 3). As a concept in media and communication theory it elucidates the processes by which media become increasingly influential in many different spheres of society and play an increasingly important role in emergent processes of socio-cultural change (Hepp and Couldry, 2013; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014).

Mediatization should, however, not be confused with the concept of 'mediation' which addresses the connection between media use and social, cultural and political practices. Mediation is a dialectical concept referring both to media use in communication processes, that is how different actors use and appropriate technologies to communicate a message as well as captures the production and circulation of meaning, processes of participation, interpretation and reinterpretation which are constituted through the communication process (Silverstone, 1994; Martín-Barbero, 2006; Cammaerts, 2012). According to the mediation tradition, media and culture (in a broad sense) are intertwined and 'mutually determining aspects of the whole phenomenon of communication' (Lievrouw, 2011: 4), however mediation does not necessarily encompass social change or changed social institutions / social practices on a large scale (Mattoni and Treré, 2014).

In contrast mediatization signals a more complex and historically oriented meta-process through which social and political institutions and cultural interaction gradually change and assume media form similar to other meta processes such as globalization, individualization or digitalization (Krotz, 2009; Hjarvard, 2008). In terms of politics and political protest mediatization can be used as a framework to describe how political organizations, groups and individual actors adapt to the media; how they need to change their action and communication in order to gain visibility and attract an audience and how this process affects the political action and discourse on a long-term scale. This process can take place directly or indirectly and actors can pursue this adaptation more or less proactively.

As Couldry (2008: 377-78) has critically remarked, we should be careful not to use mediatization as a catch-all term to cover all changes in social and cultural life both on a micro and a macro level. Instead mediatization functions as a helpful concept with which we

can understand and systematize certain empirical phenomena on a historical and sociological macro-level bearing in mind that such a broad focus gains solidity from studies addressing mediation perspectives. It is a useful tool when studying 'the interplay between media and social movement processes through a cross-time perspective' (Mattoni and Treré, 2014).

In a recent article Mattoni and Treré (2014) have suggested a more multi-facetted conceptual framework with which to study the complex interactions between activists and media, which encompasses media practices, mediation as well as mediatization. By focusing on the specific qualities and limitations of all three concepts it is possible to systematize and structure empirical analysis of activism interacting with media. The media practice level refers to creative social practices in which activists engage with all sorts of media objects, generate, produce or appropriate media messages, interact with other media practitioners and therefore act as media producers or media consumers (Mattoni and Treré, 2014: 259). Theoretically this focus is situated on a short-term micro-level of analysis, addressing actual media usages and the social practices performed by actors during specific moments of protest. This is a necessary first step to determine the specific characteristics of particular protest forms e.g. the intersection of online and offline protest activities and the social practices that intertwine with them.

However, this focus falls short if we want to study how the protest activities are entangled in larger political processes and social or even global phenomena on a medium term scale. From the media practice level we can move to the investigation of broader mediation processes on a meso-level focusing on a wide array of media practices and including more groups or networks, that is how actors produce discourse, circulate and create new meanings from already existing media products (Mattoni and Treré, 2014: 260). One of the key processes of mediation is 'remediation' and 'reconfiguration' described by Lievrouw (2011: 16) as 'the ongoing process by which people adapt, reinvent, reorganize, or rebuild media technologies as needed to suit their various purpose or interest'. In 'mediated mobilization' the use of new media becomes constitutive of action and physically manifests the political ideals instead of just serving as a communication resource among many (Lievrouw, 2011: 156-57; see also Cammaerts, 2012: 120).

Finally it is possible to study how and to what extent mediation processes have changed over time and have become intertwined with other socio-cultural processes. The concept mediatization allows us to investigate on a macro-level how media have come to play an increasingly important role over time in protest and in the shaping of political discourse. Conceptually, mediatization is 'able to grasp changes that occurred in the media on one side

and the changes at the societal and cultural level of social movements on the other' (Mattoni and Treré, 2014: 265). Here the focus is thus on media's wider effects on social organization in a cross-time perspective (Couldry, 2012: 137). According to Mattoni and Treré a good starting point to reconstruct the interactions between activism and media is to analyse the media practices of social movements and activists and then gradually broaden the exploration to an understanding of the mediation and mediatization processes. In the analysis below I will primarily deal with aspects related to the analytical terms mediation and mediatization and to a lesser degree address the media practice level although the point of departure of the empirical case study is the political, aesthetic and media practices of 'The Immortals'.

PROTEST AS MEDIATED ACTION

The first street march in Bautzen serves as a brilliant illustration of a new activist practice in which media play a key role in the very moment of protest: Street and web activism is entangled and cannot be separated anymore. It was organized as a flash-mob via text messaging and took place without any warning making it almost impossible for the Police to track down the actors before they had already vanished (Radke, 2012).

The most obvious purpose of the first nightly parade on May 1st 2012, which was filmed and disseminated on YouTube shortly after, was to serve as a propaganda tool for the 'Become Immortal' campaign and to increase the 'potential participation rate in mobilization' (Mattoni and Treré, 2014) so that similar direct actions could spread all over the country. Being short, spectacular and performed as an act in a relatively small eastern German city of 42,000 inhabitants it seems obvious that the dramatic event was not staged in order to attract immediate attention in public space although citizens who did witness this rally in the middle of the night probably felt emotionally disturbed. The street march in Bautzen was specifically designed, performed and adapted for dissemination via YouTube.

As Ekman (2014: 94) has argued as well, the primary purpose of extreme right-wing video activism is to achieve and increase public visibility and to attract and connect with large youthful audience outside the usual channels of communication. YouTube and the Internet thus serve as alternative media platforms by which extreme right actors can circumvent the power of traditional mass media where they have limited or no access at all (Atton, 2002). This is why the success of a protest campaign such as this should not exclusively be measured by its mobilizing effect but also by the viral traction on different social media platforms. From this perspective, YouTube video activism becomes a way of showcasing beliefs and

mobilisation capability (Ekman, 2014: 95). At the same time, however, it also provides new opportunities for participation, which is not limited to real life protest activities, since it can also be played out virtually (see Askanius, 2012).

Information about the 'Become Immortal' campaign and the political views of the group were presented on an official website along with an encouragement and a short recipe of how to organize and broadcast a similar street performance on social media channels. The web page delivers an instructional *how-to* for activists who feel attracted by the ideas of 'The Immortals':

> Do you want to become immortal as well? Go buy a mask like the one you see on this website. Think of a funny, impressive, perhaps totally new kind of action and just perform it! Tell your friends about us and make them join you. Put your photos and/or video on the Internet and make sure to promote the Immortals all over your neighbourhood.[3]

This is a good example of how 'The Immortals' have embraced the do-it-yourself idea (DIY) known for instance from punk culture or third wave feminism (Spencer, 2008). According to this ethos anyone is capable of designing a protest and distributing it over different media channels without needing any organized expertise apart from a few basic instructions and organizational cues. In contrast to traditional neo-Nazi rallies with very formal demarcations and hierarchies between the organizational and participatory levels, this protest form is regulated through loose organizational routines and ties. On the web page anyone who sympathizes with the ideas is encouraged to join the protest or even organize a similar action as long as a few basic rules are being followed: Activists must employ a few recognizable features during the protest action such as putting up official posters (which can be downloaded from the web page), They must document the action on the Internet and restrain from using any form of violence or bullying. Although 'The Immortals' have created the campaign and the vocabulary, did produced the initial video and have set-up the web page they rely on their viewers and (online) followers to give life to the campaign on a virtual as well as on a street level.

The DIY ideology fits perfectly with the anarchistic mind-set of the Autonomous Nationalist movement and as such marks a deep contrast to the more traditional extreme right groups whose ideas of strong organizational ties, hierarchical order and a firm leadership favour a thoroughly authoritarian mind set (Schedler and Häusler, 2011). By joining the informal network of 'The Immortals' one can become part of an ultra-nationalist, authentic, protest

action taking place in physical as well as in virtual spaces without having to give up one's commitment with other movements or having to join the extreme right movement permanently. This is a protest form, which does not rely on total obedience of its followers or devotion to the leader, but rather on momentary and fragmented support, be it through direct action, or virtually by liking, commenting and sharing on social media platforms. The video clip itself with its pictures of a marching and shouting mob articulates collective identity (Ekman, 2014) and signals a large powerful community of resistance which is spreading all over Germany and which supporters can easily become part of by joining the activities of 'The Immortals' – so their web page claims.

Another distinct characteristic is the direct communicative approach and engagement with the viewer emphasized by the youthful tone of the manifesto, the use of the imperative tense and the pronoun 'you' in the web manifesto to address the audience emotively and to engage them in a dialogue:

> You have watched the Immortals and have become interested? […] You ask yourself why do we actually call ourselves The Immortals? Immortal is anyone who continues to live in his children or grandchildren […] But now, enough of words. It is time to become Immortal.[4]

The aim here is to *discursively* create a similar kind of common purpose and feeling of collective identity as is *visually* created in the direct action clip on YouTube. But the discursive dialogue with the viewer also aims at convincing him or her that the problems in German society can best be fought by joining this community of young nationalists who have the right solutions to the crisis of democracy.

To sum up, there are two aspects that are of particular importance about the media practices used in this protest: First, the producer-audience relationship is it fundamentally changed since the audience is not only encouraged to participate and give support to the action but to also start a similar action and creatively produce new clips and posts themselves. A group such as 'The Immortals' thus uses the potential of YouTube that is, the broadcasting of user generated video content and reproduction on other social media channels to spread their anti-democratic protest and discourses. Such a strategy is characterized by the blurring of the conceptual divides between producers and receivers, between activists and followers. This ultimately serves propaganda and mobilization purposes of reaching out to a much wider group of potential followers and supporters who do not belong to the far-right milieu but who

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[3] See the official web page http://www.werde-unsterblich.info [All quotations translated by the author].
[4] See: http://www.werde-unsterblich.info

are somehow attracted by the radical ideas and the visual aesthetics of 'The Immortals'. With its 154,000 viewers, 1174 likes and 1460 comments at the time of writing[5], the first Immortals-Bautzen clip did in fact reach a relatively large audience much beyond the 200-300 participants in the actual street performance.

Second, this media practice in which online/offline street protest is intertwined extends the here-and-now of the direct street action to the virtual realm of the web. Through its dissemination on YouTube the short and nightly performance is extended in time and space and lives a mythic afterlife on social media platforms where it gains its own immortality. As Ekman (2014: 82) has pointed out, a broadcast first of all shapes a group's identity and historiography and it serves as evidence of collective action so that a prolonged political space of action is created.

The intersection of online and offline activities and the creative use of new media in order to increase participation and mobilization is, however, not an unusual practice within the extreme right milieu (Ramalingam, 2012: 8-9). In a case study of the blogs and forums used by the North Belgian post-fascist movement, Cammaerts (2009) demonstrated how the Internet provides new opportunities for radical and marginalized activists to network, to supersede the boundaries of time and space and to create new platforms and spaces for communication. A conclusion, which is supported by Ekman (2014: 94) who in his analysis of more than 200 Swedish right-wing extremist clips on YouTube argues that:

> the "articulation" of political identities and practices in the video clips disclose a complex relationship between video production/distribution and socio-political organization and mobilization.

The protest actions of 'The Immortals' are a good example of what Lievrouw (2011: 150) refers to as 'mediated mobilization' in so far as new media is not only used as a practical means of networking and communication but is a pivotal part of the mobilization and the creation of active participation. In this case the mediated political performance cannot be separated from the goals of achieving radical social and political change.

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[5] As viewed on 5 November, 2014

VISUAL AESTHETICS AND SYMBOLIC PRACTICES

When analysing the visual and dramaturgical features of the video clip one of the first things that becomes apparent is the ambiguity with which an aesthetic is created. The DIY march-and-grow strategy does not correspond very well with the highly staged performance and semi-professional production of the YouTube clip. Filmed as quick images from a number of different locations in the streets, the rally in Bautzen is orchestrated in order to appear much larger than it is. By mediating the collective action, the group is able to create the image of an enormous faceless national socialist resistance movement marching through the streets at night, while the actual number of demonstrators did not exceed 300 (Radke, 2012). In contrast to the many rather amateurish copy-cat versions on YouTube, the initial 'Become Immortal' march was clearly staged as a performative act suitable for dissemination on social media and with well-arranged aesthetic, historical and symbolic references.

One particularly interesting detail is that the music in the clip is sampled from *The Matrix* film soundtrack. This music is very dramatic and its bombastic rhythm rises to a crescendo during the clip thus producing a very affective and intense mode that is radically different from the White Power Heavy Metal music which is traditionally associated with the far right (Virchow, 2007: 151). The intense music is combined with a voice-over of one of the activists declaiming the political message of 'The Immortals', which is momentarily drowned out by the shouting of extremist slogans by other activists and fireworks in the background. Placards with extreme nationalist slogans carried by the activists as well as captions with political messages create a kind of hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Ekman, 2014) and gives the impression of a professionally produced clip. Half way trough the clip a caption is displayed with the slogan 'Make your short life immortal' followed up by the key statement of the campaign towards the end of the film: 'So that those to come don't forget that you were German'.

The march itself, performed in the night on the 1st of May is a political manifestation that achieves its powerful symbolic effect through the appropriation of a traditional left-wing celebration: The International Worker's Day. According to Virchow (2007: 152) the 1st of May has over the last fifteen years become an important nationwide demonstration date for the extreme right in Germany (and beyond). It serves as a physical and symbolic expression of the attempt to construct a national socialist 'social policy'.

Another distinctive feature of the aesthetic dimension of the protest action is the striking resemblance with the Nazi rallies performed by *Sturmabteilung* (SA) troops during the 1930s

in order to honour Hitler and the national socialist regime. Indeed, one of the distinctive characteristics about classical fascism was its appeal to emotions and its capability of engaging emotions in order to generate political activism reflecting a 'politics of the will' (Heywood, 1998: 217). This has been theorized by Walter Benjamin as the 'aestheticisation of politics', with which he pointed to the artistic structuring of the political in order to produce affective emotions. However, the mythic and symbolic features of the performance are not only committed to traditional Nazi aesthetics. Just as they employ traditional right wing and fascist symbols and allusions, 'The Immortals' creatively appropriate music, symbols, ideas and discourses from contemporary popular culture or from other political movements including the radical left (i.e. the white face masks, the music, the web design) thus creating an eclectic cut-and-paste aesthetic.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND FRAMING THROUGH ETHNO-NATIONALISM

The discourse as presented in the manifesto on the web page revolves around four main issues: 1) anti-democracy, 2) anti-capitalism, 3) anti-immigration and 4) anti-globalization wrapped up in a neo-fascist and ethno-nationalist vocabulary. The focus here is on how and in what way this political framing resembles or differs from contemporary and historic extreme right and/or fascist worldviews?

'The Immortals' wish to promote what they coin 'weltanschaulisches Denken', a form of 'worldview politics', which refers to a set of attitudes and a commitment to core ideas rather than a systematic ideological approach. Such an attitude is not far removed from traditional fascism. As Heywood (1998: 215) has remarked, Hitler used the word 'Weltanschauung' (worldview) to describe the national socialist 'faith' as opposed to political ideologies such as liberalism or socialism. Although it has to be pointed out here that socialism was always a fundamental component of fascism since it was fundamentally anti-capitalist and positioned community above individuals.

Also in line with core fascist ideas, party politics is rejected as 'a show' and a mere struggle for power in contrast to 'real' political protest which attempts to change hegemonic political beliefs and influence the public debate be it through direct action or discursive-rhetoric strategies. This openly anti-democratic discourse is supported by an appraisal of imprisoned right extremists who are portrayed as freedom fighters with the courage to stand up against the deceitful political democratic elite and to promote a nationally conceived socialism.

Throughout the manifesto the idea of an 'ethnically pure' community is promoted as a counter-concept to a pluralistic or 'multicultural' society paralysed by cultural conflicts that split and weaken 'the German people'. This view is legitimized by historical arguments and examples from ancient and medieval history presented as evidence of how migration has always been followed by cultural decline and degeneration. One of the key beliefs of 'The Immortals' is the death of the people (*Volkstod*), which refers to the neo-fascist dystopia/utopia according to which the white race is in danger of a cultural and/or biological extinction due to the genetic mixture of different races (Griffin, 1991). An imaginary of decadence is thus juxtaposed to the need for a *rebirth* of a nationally awoken people. This has been coined as the 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism of fascism' (Griffin, 1991: 32-3) and it constitutes the ideological core of 'The Immortals'.

Despite its clear fascist references, the manifesto also represents a populist shift towards an ethno-nationalist master frame. Ethno-nationalism is based on an essentialist doctrine whereby ethnicity and culture are seen as fixed and unchangeable entities. This doctrine also dictates that an ethnic community, which is seen to coincide with the nation state, must have absolute authority over its own political, economic and social affairs. In the ethno-nationalist worldview, a nation is primarily defined in terms of ethnicity rather than citizenship – *Blut und Boden*. Immigration and cultural integration between groups should be avoided at all cost in order to preserve the unique character of different peoples. In the German tradition ethno-nationalism has its historical roots in the interwar fascist and radical conservative ideas of a strong *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people) conceptualized on ethnic-cultural grounds (Sommer, 2008: 313; Spektorowski, 2003: 119-120). Indeed the identity category the 'people' (*das Volk*) is an important component in the ethno-nationalist worldview presented by 'The Immortals':

> The mixture of different peoples [*Völker*] leads to conflicts. Just think of Yugoslavia. Such conflicts prevent all cultures from prospering. They cause a cultural and linguistic decline and a number of different problems in society.[6]

Today these ethno-nationalist themes are broadly being picked up by anti-immigrant populists across Europe who see globalization and immigration as the main threats to a homogeneous society – as well as by radical fascists who promote the idea of 'ethnically clean' communities (Sunshine, 2008). Within the last 10 to 15 years ethno-nationalism has

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[6] http://www.werde-unsterblich.info

become one of the master frames of the extreme right collective identity through which a social policy of welfare chauvinism is promoted (Spektorowski, 2003; Sommer, 2008; Rydgren, 2005). In line with the social policies of the neo-fascist party NPD, in the manifesto of 'The Immortals, social justice and welfare benefits should be restricted to ethnic Germans. Not only in terms of their discourse but also regarding visual aesthetics, extreme right groups have over the last years appropriated left-wing and anti-globalization symbols, for example by embracing a 'social policy' and participating in May Day celebrations (Sommer, 2008; Virchow, 2007).

This ethno-nationalist worldview held by extreme right movements and parties also marks a shift away from 'biological racism' to 'cultural racism'. It enables extreme rightwing and populist parties to mobilize on political discontent and to promote xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes without being stigmatized as being racists (Rydgren, 2005: 428). However, as Sommer (2008: 315-16) quite rightly argues, this is not merely

> another strategic attempt by the extreme right to incorporate Zeitgeist issues into its political agenda in order to become attractive to the political mainstream. [It] is *not simply* a political strategy but something that genuinely forms part of its core agenda.

Despite this, it is apparent that the discourse of 'The Immortals' is more radical and more creative in terms of injecting leftwing stances into core fascist values than other ethno-nationalist groups; they are thus forming a kind of eclectic patchwork ideology. Fascist, ultra nationalist themes, as for example the myth of cultural decadence, and populist and anti-immigrant issues such as the alleged high unemployment and crime rates among immigrants are linked to leftwing solutions, e.g. a decentralized anti-capitalist economy, welfare state concern and environmental issues. The socially imbued populist/fascist discourse of 'The Immortals' is also influenced by anarchism which favours an anti-elitist and anti-authoritarian attitude – anyone who sympathizes with their ideas is actively encouraged to participate through direct action or online support and internal hierarchies as emphasised much less compared to traditional neo-fascist groups.

Although their discourse does operate with ethnic and biological categories and defines 'the people' as an ethnic as well as a cultural category it never refers to any racist doctrines and 'The Immortals' explicitly discourages any use of violence. Instead, implicit references to 'forgotten forms of action' that must be reawaken (meaning emotive and fascist-aesthetic protest forms) can be found. Besides this, a number of euphemisms such as 'foreign people' or 'democrats', are used to denote their ideological enemies.

DISCUSSION: EXTREME RIGHT ACTIVISM AS PART OF BROADER MEDIATION AND MEDIATIZATION PROCESSES

My analysis of the protest action and visual aesthetics of 'The Immortals' has focused on their mobilization and participation strategies from a mediation perspective. A focus on mediation enables us to understand how new media play a central role in terms of the efforts to mobilize for, to organize and to perform protests. At the same time, as Lievrouw (2011: 161) points out, it is the 'intersection and blending of message and channel, material and social, means and ends, offline and online, that is the distinctive characteristic of *mediated mobilization*'. Not only does mediation affect the practices and the collective action in which radical right actors perform their radical political alternative, it also fundamentally changes the way people with similar interests and grievances organize and interact across different groups. The question of interest here is whether these expressions of a new radical nationalist identity politics (described here as an orientation towards ethno-nationalism in its neo-fascist or more populist guises) could also be understood in terms of more general media transformations in the 'digital age', referred to as mediatization processes?

In his book *Media, Society, World,* Couldry develops what he calls a socially oriented media theory to discuss how and in what way digital media are changing social and political constructions and the framing of political worldviews. His claim is that today media and communication tools are pivotal to understand the contextual dimension of politics, dimensions which are rapidly changing in the digital era of 'networked publics'. Though his analysis is not focused on right wing extremism it delivers a strong framework for the study of radical political movements and counter publics in a mediatized world. According to Couldry (2012: 120)

> '[t]he internet creates new possibilities for non-formal political actors to form and build communities of practice online, challenging the boundaries of national politics'.

It is however not only networks and communities which are affected by these new opportunities, also the protest action and the construction of worldviews must be analysed as part of much broader processes. New forms of action and 'engagement in transformative politics' are made possible by the specific collaborative and participatory features of new, and especially social, media. Couldry (2012: 137) relates this structural shift to the concept of mediatization in so far as mediatization captures the irreducible influence of media on a number of different social processes: that is, 'the changed dimensionality of the social world in a media age'.

For the extreme right (as a counter politics balancing on the edges of legitimate politics) mediatization has caused a significant change in their discursive strategies and the way they organise protest actions. New media and networked communication technologies has made it much easier to mobilize around potent master frames such as ethno-nationalism and to create new forms of participation which unite different actors across different groups and organizations. A nationalist discourse centred round ethno-nationalism has become extremely potent because it offers a legitimate frame with which to express social and political discontent and anger on a wide array of different media platforms without using delegitimized racist or neo-Nazi frames. It unites and links together many different actors and groups from the whole right wing movement family thereby generating what Couldry (2012: 123), with reference to Bohman (2004: 152), defines as separate publics linked together and forming 'a public of publics around specific issues or political crisis'.

Whereas previously extreme right discourse was dominated by abusive language and racist outbursts, the ethno-nationalist discourse consists of euphemisms and blurred references to the perceived threats of increased immigration and cultural integration thus avoiding the traditional Nazi stigmatization. This discourse has created a collective identity and a sense of belonging among quite different actors who are linked together in heterogeneous, decentralized networks instead of organized, goal-oriented groups or parties. Even a protest network such as 'The Immortals' adopted the ethno-nationalist master frame although mixing it with anarchist, neo-fascist or even socialist frames in creating a more eclectic ideology. A contextual approach linking the mediated activities and discourse of 'The Immortals' to more general and long-term transformations of extreme right mobilization could thus benefit from the qualitative aspects of the mediatization concept which addresses the role of new media in broader processes of social, cultural and political change.

CONCLUSION

In this article the protest activities, visual aesthetics and discourse of 'The Immortals' have been described as a mediated form of activism characterized by a blurring of online and offline activities, producers and activists, message and performance. The aim of the 'Become Immortal' campaign was to increase mobilization at street level as well as in virtual spaces. The campaign was designed to produce a virtual afterlife on the internet, i.e. to become immortal through the web. The use of social media and networked communication technologies not only affected the action or the protest form of 'The Immortals', which was designed for dissemination on different social media platforms but has also significantly

changed the mobilization and organizing structure of the group, which can be characterized as a flexible, non-hierarchic and loose network, even applying DIY norms and values in order to achieve a more participatory form of action.

The significant impact of mediation processes on social movements and activism is well documented in the research literature (c.f. Lievrouw, 2011; Cammaerts, 2012). What is remarkable in terms of the particular case analysed in this paper is that mediation also seems to affect the organizational level of extreme right groups, which have traditionally been characterized by very hierarchical and centralized ties and structures.

The ultra-nationalist protest actions of 'The Immortals' and the framing of a political rejection of mainstream democratic politics should, however, also be understood as part of a more general transformation process of the extreme right party family towards an ethno-nationalist master frame. In the research literature this transformation has been described as a successful shift away from the 'old' stigmatized Nazi jargon to an ethno-nationalist doctrine stripped off any overtly racist or abusive rhetoric (Rydgren, 2005; Sommer, 2008). If we wish to contextualize these changes and analyse them through the lens of the more general social and cultural changes related to the increased networking character of the digital age, mediatization could function as a useful concept, since it captures the relations between media changes on the one hand and changes at the 'societal and cultural level of social movements on the other' (Mattoni and Treré, 2014: 265).

The re-orientation of extreme right movements and parties towards a populist ethno-nationalist master frame is not entirely new. However, what seems to be new is that it is also being adopted by neo-fascist protest networks such as 'The Immortals' who use it as part of their eclectic approach but also to become part of a larger public of extreme right actors linked together in diffuse and loose networks.

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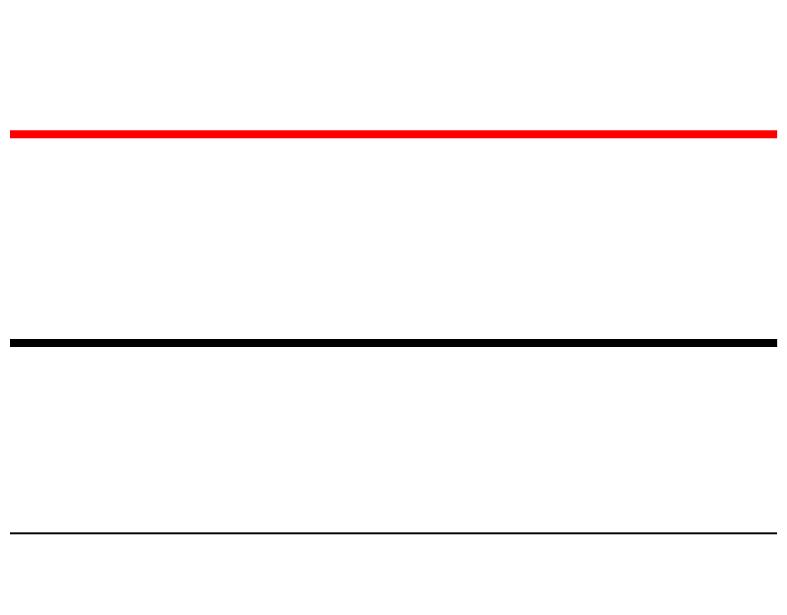
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