

The (far-) right kind of feeling

How representations of emotional experiences perform discourses in Swedish far-right alternative news media

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Abstract

The growth of far-right alternative news media and its influence on political debate highlights the need to understand the role of emotions in this type of media. Emotions are central to how ideologically motivated news gains persuasive power, yet few studies have shown in detail how descriptions of emotions help shape patterns of discourse. This article addresses that gap by analysing how emotions, as represented in language, perform discourse in Swedish far-right alternative news texts. The analysis shows how these texts construct a contrast: emotions tied to the far-right are legitimized and valued, while emotions tied to the left-wing are delegitimized and devalued. In doing so, the texts define which issues deserve emotional attention, shape how readers are expected to feel about them, and portray those who respond differently as ignorant or weak of character.

KEYWORDS

alternative media, right-wing populism, emotions, discourse, fear, polarization

Introduction

Research shows that far-right alternative news is gaining importance in Western politics (Haller, et al., 2019), and that its influence on the public agenda is increasing (Ihlebak & Nygaard, 2021). Emotionality is identified as one of its main features (Rae, 2021; Freistein, et al., 2022; Ruzza & Fella, 2011; Hameleers, et al., 2017), and as a factor contributing to an increased polarization in society (Lu & Lee, 2019; Garrett, et al., 2014; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Revers, 2023; Törnberg, 2022). Those developments motivate sustained scholarly efforts to “furthering the empirical study of emotions in political and social life to understand the use of emotions in contentious politics” (Fullerton, et al., 2023, p. 295; Ihlebak, et al., 2022).

Drawing on concepts identifying emotional expressions as discursive elements (Reddy, 2001; van Kleef, et al., 2015; Bericat, 2016; Barbalet, 2002), and news media as a key vehicle for the circulation of emotionality in society (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2019; Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2022), this article contributes to that field of inquiry by answering the following research question:

How do emotional experiences represented in Swedish far-right alternative news texts construct ideology and perform discourse?

Populism, far-right alternative news, and emotionality

Studying “alternative right-wing media of the populist brand” (Holt, 2020b, p. 202) calls for some theoretical clarifications as to the meaning of the concepts of populism and alternative media, as well as their relation to emotionality. Populism as a concept is described as “elusive”, (Demertzis, 2019, p. 31) and “contested” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). Canovan (1999) characterizes the concept as “notoriously vague” and states “there is a good deal of agreement on which political phenomena fall into this category but less clarity about what it is that makes them populist” (p. 3).

Far-right populism has been conceptualized in terms of actors, organizations, consequences, and normative implications (Demertzis, 2019, p. 31). It has been defined as an ideology, a symptom, a mentality, a political movement, political discourse, and a political style (Mudde, 2004; Moffit, 2016; Tarchi, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Researchers also define populism in a Western context as a communication phenomenon (de Vreese et al., 2018) and claim that focusing particularly on the online aspects of the phenomenon is a key to understanding its role in contemporary politics.

Right-wing populism

In this study *far-right* populism is understood as a combination of the “ideational” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 5, Müller, 2020) phenomena composing far-right political ideology (Canovan, 1999, p. 3), and the rhetoric/political style used to “articulate [that] ideology discursively” (Mannuci, 2017, p. 482) through “repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance” (Moffit, 2016, p. 28). The term is applied to groups, politicians, and political parties who propagate a critical stance towards immigration, Islam, globalization, feminism, and environmentalism, and for whom nativism and protectionism are accentuated ideological positions. The main rhetoric style consists of an expressed ambition to champion the needs and aspirations of a pure and homogenous *common people whose interests are purportedly circumvented by a corrupt and devious elite whose characteristics need to be exposed and unmasked* (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2022; Wodak, 2015, p. 7).

Far-right populist rhetoric has been analysed as a form of particularly emotional communication, the main modes being fear of immigration, Islam, and multiculturalism, derogatory out-group representations, nostalgic romantic folkloric affection for the nation, disdain for political and cultural elites, and suspicion towards environmentalist politics (Demertzis, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Wodak, 2015). Tarchi (2016) states that populist thinking is “based more on emotional inputs than on rational consideration” (p. 104), and he lists “the use of a popular language, characterised by vulgarity, extreme simplifications, absence of doubts, and exaggerations; paternalistic attitudes; the frequent recourse to proverbs, stereotypes, clichés and other expressions of ‘popular wisdom’”, as rhetorical populist strategies employed to connect emotionally with target audiences (p. 102). Demertzis (2019) shows how such rhetoric has an emotionally polarizing effect as it develops feelings of “antipathy”, “alienation”, and “frustration” on behalf of common people in relation to those elites (p. 33). The rhetorical identification of legacy media in general, and public service media in particular, as integrated parts of such elites is a main factor in understanding the reason for the establishment, development, and proliferation of far-right alternative media.

Far-right alternative media and the Swedish case

The expression *Alternative Media* has historically been used to characterize media that, from various ideological, social, or cultural positions, challenge the dominant or hegemonic media discourse (Waisbord, 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019 a; Guedes Baily, et al., 2007; Atton, 2002; Cushion, 2024). In recent years the term has been

applied to a growing number of online platforms supporting far-right populist ideology in a European context (Holt, 2018; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021; Frischlich, et al., 2020) by harsh, and sometimes vulgar, criticism of immigration, Islam, globalization, and gender politics.

Holt et. al (2019) defines alternative right-wing media as a “proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media” (p. 862). Holt (2020b) describes it as “relational” or “reactive” in the sense that its reason for being is a strong notion that mainstream media is not representing issues, actors, and events fairly and accurately, and that it excludes certain perspectives, and fails to cater to important interests of the people (p. 202). Legacy news journalism is branded as “biased, elitist, leftist, politically correct, and distanced from the people” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019b, p. 903).

In Hallin & Mancini’s (2004) classification of media systems, Sweden is classified as belonging to the Democratic Corporatist Model, which is characterized by high circulation rates, substantial journalistic autonomy, a developed professionalism, and a strong position of legacy media (p. 144). In comparison to the media in other Scandinavian countries, legacy media in Sweden has more critically covered the domestic populist party, the Sweden Democrats (Herkman & Jungar, 2021). According to Heft et. al. (2019) this may contribute to the strong position of alternative right-wing media in Sweden as their research shows that countries with a media ecology where far-right and right-wing populist ideological positions are well-represented, like Austria and Great Britain, have a less vibrant far-right alternative news media presence. In contrast, countries where legacy media adopt a “marginalization of right-wing views and positions in media and politics” (p. 20), like Sweden and Germany, alternative news becomes more prevalent and popular. Sweden is one of the countries in Europe where the demand for, and the reach and supply of, right-wing alternative media is the greatest considering population (Holt, 2020b). In 2019 around 10 % of Swedes read the news sites studied in this article (Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021).

Far-right communication and emotionality

Scholars claim that the success of far-right populist movements is in part explained by their efficient use of messages that cater to negative emotions rather than rational thought (Wirz, 2018; Betz & Oswald, 2022; Nguyen, et al., 2022), and far-right alternative media has been associated with emotionalization for ideological purposes (Demertzis, 2019; Freistein, et al., 2022; Rae, 2021).

Several studies seem to substantiate those assumptions. Hameleers et al. (2017) argue that “populist messages are characterized by assigning blame to elites in an emotionalized way” (p. 870). Wirz (2018) found that “populist appeals elicit stronger emotions than non-populist appeals and that these emotions mediate the persuasiveness of the appeals” (p. 1114). A study of Kaati et al. (2016) showed that Swedish far-right alternative news consistently features more negative emotion words than legacy journalism.

In a study based on interviews with far-right online commenters, Ihlebaek & Riborg Holter (2021) conclude that even though the informants consume a fair amount of both legacy and far-right alternative news, fear of political change, particularly related to immigration and Islam, influences them to endorse the emotional discourses and narratives in far-right alternative media, and to develop hostility towards, and disdain for, what they perceive as legacy media’s unsubstantiated claims of factual and emotional objectivity (p. 1209). The results of a visual analysis show that Finnish far-right alternative media use recontextualized images of people published elsewhere, to express negative emotions, such as fear, disgust, hate and distrust towards three groups in particular; ethnic minorities, young women who advocate multiculturalism, and elite politicians promoting generous immigration policies (Tuomola & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2022). Freistein et al. (2022) demonstrate how this type of media is “establishing alternative emotion norms that collectivize feelings and their expressions” in line with ideological goals, and how this is done through storytelling and visual narratives that employ a complex cocktail of indignation, humour, compassion, and *schadenfreude*, and not necessarily by simply promoting negative emotions (pp. 1, 2).

Represented emotional experiences as discourse

This study uses the term “discourse” as “language use as a form of social practice” (Fairclough, 2002, p. 63). Descriptions of emotional experience in news texts are analysed as such practices. Potter (2007) states that “discourse is constructive of (...) psychological characteristics and phenomenological experiences” and “descriptions of how social actions [such as representing emotional experience] build character and group affiliation when embedded in broader ideological contexts and practices”. He also explains that “discourse is situated rhetorically, such that any description can be inspected for how it counters relevant alternative descriptions” (Potter, 2007). Descriptions and contextualization of emotional experiences in media texts are not just readouts of internal emotional

states, they are also given discursive value as they position the feeling subjects politically, socially and culturally, and in the process, perform identity, ideology, and political antagonism (Döveling & Konijn, 2022; Farkas, 2023).

Emotional experiences may constitute elements of discourse in several ways. Firstly, they identify and provide understanding of values of communities and ideological groups (Rosenwein, 2002, p. 842; Smith & Mackie, 2018). Rosenwein & Cristiani (2018) describe how *emotional communities* develop systems of displaying emotional expressions and assessing them as valuable or abject; and structure them according to what is expected, encouraged, tolerated, deplored, and derided (p. 42). Those expressions emotionally communicate the ideological values of the group (Greer, 2022) and are used to construct and characterize the ideological “other” (Koschut, 2018, p. 334). Representations of such expressions perform what Döveling (2009) calls “the cohesive power of the media” (p. 315), which refers to how media environments constitute emotional rallying points pivotal to the creation and maintenance of emotional cultures significant for ideological groups. Eksner (2015) explains that textual displays of emotion enact specific “affective identities” and constitute “a site in which the relationship between emotions and social structure is enacted” (p. 193). A specific media environment may also constitute an *emotional refuge* (Reddy, 2001), where the influence of the prevalent emotional culture is relaxed.

Secondly, displays of emotionality are social and moral “learning cues” (Harris, 2018, p. 260) identifying acceptable emotions and teaching how to express emotional experiences in an acceptable way (Marinetti, et al., 2011), and thus grooming those exposed to fit into a particular social milieu (Freistein, et al., 2022; Reddy, 2001). Smith & Mackie (2018) show that “people’s perceptions of typical emotions in their group as a whole (...) influence their self-reported emotions, appraisals, and collective action tendencies”, and that members of an emotional group-culture tend to emotionally “converge toward the group profile” (p. 418).

Thirdly, expressed emotions have motivating properties (Harris, 2018, p. 259), as they accentuate the importance, urgency, and meaning attributed to specific events and societal issues, and could be used to “manipulate the internal states and behaviours of others, in service of social goals” (Harris, 2018, p. 257). Reddy (2001) categorizes emotional expressions as “a dynamic tool that can be seized by attention in the service of various high-level goals” (p. 105).

Fourthly, displayed emotionality performs morality, character, and personality. Displays of emotion are normative indications of appropriate, or inappropriate, conceptualizations of morality and justice (Rosenwein & Cristiani, 2018, p. 46; Turner & Stets, 2006).

Emotional responses and the way in which they are expressed indicate personality characteristics, social status, dominance, affiliativeness, likability, and since emotional expressions are culturally gender-coded, degrees of masculinity/femininity are associated with how emotions are expressed (Hess, 2018; Sabini, 1995, p. 273). Koschut (2018) discusses how verbally expressed emotional experiences perform “self-validation” (p. 334), when they either are presented as a reasonable and sound positive reaction to the moral excellence of self, or the unavoidable negative emotional response to the failure of adversaries.

Fifthly, emotional expressions make sense of social reality and forge an understanding of cognitive experience. Reddy (2001) suggests that expressions of emotional experience have an “exploratory and self-altering effect”, which means that expressing an emotion, or being exposed to an emotional expression, may define, and intensify that emotion, bringing it from the domain of diffuse circulation of thought material into an articulated and activated emotion to which focused attention is paid and importance is attributed (p. 100). Basic emotional needs are catered to by the exposure to emotional expressions with which one sympathize and identify – but there is also a more complex and elaborate multi-level intellectual and emotional pleasure to be gained by the impression of having gained deeper insight and understanding. Konjin, et al. (2022) describe how a processing of exposure to expressed emotions engenders potentially “rewarding experiences of insight, and reflexivity” (p. 34).

The theoretical understanding of how certain properties of emotional expressions construct social surfaces of emergence through which discourse appears, is pivotal when systematically researching the discursive, ideological, and cultural implications of the circulation of emotions in a particular ideologically confined media space.

Method and material

The method used is a qualitative content analysis conducted in the following sequence (1) identification of textually described emotional experiences, (2) a systematic coding and categorization of those expressions according to a theoretically determined set of properties (Bertrand & Hughes, 2018, p. 268; Schreier, 2012), and (3) a subsequent analysis of how they construct ideology and discourse. The unit of analysis is: *an emotional experience represented by language, either expressed/quoted, or attributed to a feeling subject*. Expressed or attributed emotions refer to how emotional experiences are represented in the texts. Either “I am so angry”

(expressed/quoted), or “He was very angry” (attributed).

The method follows three steps. The first step is to establish the experiences as emotional profiles by identifying, structuring, and coding them according to the following set of properties.

Feeling subject. Bericat states that “the feeling subject, constitutes the central reference upon which emotions turn” (Bericat, 2016, p. 493). The subject may be an individual or a group (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 54).

Type of emotion. The expressions are labelled and coded according to the characterization, classification, and identification of emotions described in Plutchik’s (1980) “Wheel of Emotions”, where he proposes eight primary emotions that serve as the foundation for all others, and group them in polar opposites, joy/sadness, acceptance/disgust, fear/anger, surprise/anticipation. For a detailed presentation of the taxonomy see (Williams, et al., 2019, p. 622).

Object. An emotional experience is elicited by an object, or stimuli (Sabini, 1995).

Valence. The expressed emotion may be pleasant or unpleasant (Kagan, 2007).

Intensity. High, medium, or low. Example: Furious – high. Angry – medium. Irritated – low (Kagan, 2007).

Context. How is the expression contextualized? In what socio-cultural environment is the emotion expressed. What is the topic at hand? Is it commented on in an ironic sense? Is it legitimized or delegitimized? Does it have discursive or ideological implications? Is it performative (Reddy, 2001)?

Complexity. Simple, or complex. By complex I mean an expressed emotion that may be multi-faceted. If someone claims to be angry, but also scared, or disgusted, but also fascinated – the expression is coded as complex (Harris, 2018).

Motivated action/goal. Emotions disposes their subject towards certain actions (Frijda, et al., 1989), which means that emotional expressions suggest, implicitly or explicitly, some sort of action with some sort of goal, either the prolongation or amplification of a pleasant state, or a change of the state of affairs to alleviate or extinguish the negative emotion expressed (Bericat, 2016, p. 493).

In the second step, the profiles are entered into a descriptive matrix (See Table 1). Using the matrix, the profiles are then subjected to an

iterative sorting according to properties to get a holistic overview and to identify patterns and clusters (Averill, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Firstly, the profiles are sorted and analyzed according to *Subject*, secondly, according to *Emotion type*, thirdly, according to *Object*, etc.

Properties	Description	Example from the data [SN230716]
Subject	Who is expressing, or being attributed the emotional experience?	The Swedish minister of migration
Emotion	Type of emotion?	Disgust
Object	Towards what, or whom, is the emotion directed?	A critical stance towards Islam
Valence	Negative or positive?	Negative
Intensity	High, low, or medium?	High
Desired outcome	What action, outcome, or change of affairs, does the feeling subject desire?	An end to critical comments of Islam and Islamophobic actions
Complexity	Simple or complex?	Simple
Context	What contextual factors influence the meaning of the emotional experience?	The expression is presented and commented on in an ironic and exaggerated manner.

Table 9: Descriptive matrix of the properties making-up emotional profiles

The third phase is an analysis of how the emotional profiles construct discursive meaning at an aggregated level. To guide the analysis, the five performative characteristics of emotional expressions described in the literature review are employed to analyse how represented emotional experiences are: a) indicating the emotional and ideological composition and values of communities and ideological groups, (b) identifying and demonstrating distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate emotions, (c) motivating action, (d) constructing morality and character, and (e) stimulating the exploration and understanding of our own emotions and those of others. Attention is given to how the representations of emotional experience are woven into the discursive fabric of the texts, and how they “build character and group affiliation when embedded in broader ideological contexts and practices” (Potter, 2007). The profiles are thematized according to similarities and variation in discursive meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Material and sampling

The empirical material in this study consists of articles from the three largest Swedish far-right alternative online news sites (*Samhällsnytt*, *Fria Tider* and *Nyheter idag*) (Holt, 2020a, p. 58). A 2018 survey showed that they reach between 8–11 % of the Swedish online population, that their readers mainly are positioned on the far-right political scale, and that regular users have a low level of trust in legacy media (Levy, et. al, 2019). *Samhällsnytt* has close connections to the Swedish far-right populist party *Sweden Democrats* (Heft, et. al., 2019), and one of its expressed purposes is to study and map anti-democratic, left-wing extremist, and anti-nationalistic tendencies in society (Freje Simonsson, 2020). *Fria Tider* is also reckoned to be a part of the Swedish “radical right-wing populist digital ecology” [my translation] by the Swedish Media Counsel (Statens medieråd, 2013). It describes its own ideology as paleo-conservative (Holt, 2016, p. 129). *Nyheter Idag* is defined as libertarian-conservative but has no direct ties to a political party, it has some professional journalistic ambitions, and is a part of the Swedish self-regulatory system of the press and thus professes to abide to its ethical codes of conduct (Holt, 2016; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021, pp. 275, 276). All three sites promote anti-immigration sentiments, disdain for the political and cultural elite, and critique of legacy media, “mainly through a descriptive news-genre style” (Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021, p. 271). Scholars have identified those three news outlets as the major mouth-pieces of the Swedish far-right populist movement (Holt, 2016; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021, p. 274). The study treats the material as one single set of data, and does not analyse differences between the sites.

The articles were retrieved from the sites’ general news flows, and were sampled in chronological order as they appeared in the main news flows (the news flows produced a mixed stream of chronicles, editorials, and various types of news articles), until 25 articles containing emotional expressions from each media outlet and sampling period were sampled. The first sampling started on March 14, 2023 and the second sampling started on August 8, 2023. A total of 150 articles containing some 334 expressions or attributions of emotional experience were sampled. The sampling was purposive, “on a substantial, concrete level” (Flick, 2009, p. 126), with the purpose to sample articles that met readers directly as they accessed the sites in that particular temporal and local setting. When citing sampled articles, I use the abbreviations: *Samhällsnytt* (SN), *Fria Tider* (FT), and *Nyheter idag* (NiD), using the following format [*NewssiteYear-MonthDay*].

Quality criteria

Yardley's (2000) criteria of sensitivity to context, commitment, and rigor; transparency and coherence were employed as guiding principles when assessing the quality of the study. The context sensitivity criterion was addressed by sampling data from far-right alternative news organizations identified as representative and relevant by previous research (Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2020), and by an analytical engagement with theoretical aspects close to the empirical material (Atton, 2001; Holt, 2020; Ihlebaek et. al., 2022; Waisbord, 2022). Rigor and transparency were pursued by following a standardized analytical process informed by established methods of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Bryman, 2016, p. 387; Terry & Hayfield, 2021), and further endeavored by providing a description of the steps of the research method as clearly and detailed as possible, and making detailed references to its theoretical foundations (Bertrand & Hughes, 2018; Bryman, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results and analysis

The representations of emotional experience are related to immigration, Islam, gender studies, left-wing political elite, climate activism, multi-culturalism, "political correctness", and mainstream media (Holt, 2020a; Figschou & Ihlebaek, 2019 a; Greven, 2016). The feeling subjects are not only far-right sympathizers. Representatives of political and cultural elites, are also given emotional agency. However, the experiences are strictly organized into a dichotomy between a constructed legitimacy of far-right feelings and a delegitimization of left-wing feelings. A dichotomy illustrated by contrasting a quote expressing far-right feelings: "What feels right is almost always also rationally right. (...) The most efficient way to get rid of parasites and criminals just happens to be what our gut-feeling tells us: Kick them out!" [FT230809], with this comment on left-wing emotionality. "Every single one of those reality-denying convictions have been so entrenched that they border religious obsession. Logic, empirical data from the surrounding world – yes, everything that would have made normal persons revise their standpoints, does not affect those people. On the contrary, emotions rule" [SN230401]. The results section will analyse how this dichotomy is discursively constructed and contextualized.

The delegitimization of left-wing emotions

Left-wing sympathizers are represented as irrational, overly sensitive and easily offended. The intensity of their emotional

expressions is generally high. The left is “raging”, or “hitting the ceiling” [NiD230529], filled with “great anger” [FT230606], or characterized as “the screaming left” (FT230602). High-pitched offended emotional reactions, and moping and sulking when not getting things their way, connote immaturity, and a sense of entitlement. Their emotional reactions are presented as preventing left-wing elite persons from rational thinking. When a former Swedish Centre Party leader was said to despise those claiming a correlation between immigration and crime, that emotional expression was branded as a dangerous, “total, almost absurd, refusal to accept reality” [NiD230511]. Recurringly, articles attribute, interpret, and impersonate emotions of political opponents in an apparently exaggerated way. One article claimed that liberals “dislike real democracy (...), calling it populism when the voice of the people is given political significance. Arrogantly they frown upon the man and woman on the street, lecturing them by explaining that they are too stupid to understand (...) how society should be governed” [SN230804].

Left-wing fear is delegitimized as cowardice. Support for measures against discrimination of Muslims is represented as an anxious subjection to Islam. Left-wing sympathizers are qualified as “Quislings”, or “traitors”, who “in fear of threats, violence, or terror, or as a result of a misguided postcolonial guilt complex, succumb to an invasion of a Medieval Islam, at the expense of the democracy and the civil rights our forefathers sacrificed their blood, sweat, and tears, to conquer and defend” [SN230709]. Expressed left-wing emotions are repeatedly placed within a discourse of weakness and feminization. Left-wing politicians (and sometimes right-wing politicians who express sympathy for any of the objects of discontent) are constructed as too weak and too fearful to take necessary measurements. One news article stated: “Our elected representatives are too much cowards to oppose a loud and screaming left-wing minority” [FT230510].

An editorial explained why women sympathize less with far-right politics than men by claiming that they are more prone to succumb to Islamic threats and to “believe in the establishment’s theories of a climate crisis” due to “a fundamental inner fear of events beyond their control, due to their physical weakness”. The article continued:

But that being said, there are also a lot of Swedish male wimps. Social media is filled with beta-males, snowflakes, and soy-boys who declare their wish to succumb to Muslim threats and violence [SN230722].

Attributed left-wing expressions of emotional experience are

branded as “hypocritical” in the sense of being deliberate misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and exaggerations, to fuel and justify strong emotional reactions against far-right political positions. Left-wing reactions to controversial statements made by far-right politicians are said to be “deliberately misunderstood (...) otherwise the Left had not been able to act indignant and upset to the point of demanding their resignation” [SN230806].

The valence of left-wing emotions is mostly negative, but there are also instances of constructed ironic positive valence. Left-wing representatives are quoted expressing joy over political failure, and satisfaction over disastrous effects of their own political actions. A representative of the workers’ union commenting on his role in an economic hospital reform, was said to be “‘extremely satisfied’ that patients now are given even worse care” [SN230405]. Expressed emotions of joy and contentment are represented as tokens of irresponsible behaviour, bad judgement, a stubborn overriding of public will, or a violation of common sense.

Legitimized far-right emotions

Far-right emotions are represented as rational, logical, and well-founded. Feeling subjects are given the status of concerned citizens, experts, and knowledgeable officials with first-hand experience, thus reinforcing the legitimacy and accuracy of the emotional experience. This status, together with a low to moderate intensity of the expressions, connote reflection and reliability and construct the subjects as initiated and level-headed. When commenting on how far-right representatives are labelled Islamophobes, one editor wrote that fear of Islam:

Is however not more unfounded than fearing Nazism or Communism, at least not for anyone who considers freedom and democracy as inalienable parts of a dignified life [SN230730].

Expressed emotional experiences are predominantly negative and situated along the whole spectrum of far-right objects of discontent, immigration being the dominant theme. In Swedish far-right alternative news media, responsible citizens are not outraged by heart-breaking deportations, but by criminal immigrants remaining in the country. They fear multiculturalism, Islam, and the feminisation of politics, but neither climate change, nor xenophobic violence. Those who feel differently are portrayed as misled, misinformed, or weak. Objects of indignation, or fear, are constructed as caused by a societal failure due to mismanagement of the ruling elite.

Some emotional expressions are constructed as encompassing an obviously wider range of objects than intended. A report on why many urban Swedes want to move to the countryside, had the headline “Swedes Abandon Immigrant-Infested Inner Cities.” [The article discussed an article in the Swedish legacy newspaper *Sydsvenskan* [230403] in which urban residents who had moved from inner-city areas discussed their decision to move. The far-right alternative news article argued that immigration is making life in inner-cities unbearable, and thus causing people to want to leave. However, in the in *Sydsvenskan* none of the feelings expressed, or the rationales provided, were linked to immigration [SN230404]. A report from a press conference where a Police Officer expressed her concern about how criminal gangs in problem areas are recruiting children, there was an interjection explaining how the purported tax-financed support of gangster rap by Swedish Public Service Media incites young immigrants to pursue a criminal career. The spokeswoman’s subsequent quotes thus appeared to indicate that the purported Swedish Public Service’s support of gangster rap was the main object of her concerns [SN230120].

Some subjects are constructed as formerly left-wing sympathizers having undergone self-altering “conversion experiences” (Reddy, 2001, p. 128), now expressing emotions reinforcing far-right ideology. A columnist working for the legacy tabloid *Expressen*, who previously declared measures against immigration “insane”, is quoted expressing sadness over a migration policy that “has been more of a failure than I wanted to realize” [NiD230627]. Former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt is presented as someone who previously supported a generous immigration policy, but now “seems to finally be fed up with immigrants” [NiD230802].

The feelings of indignation and fear have both a predictive, present, and retrospective discursive value. Some are represented as a “predictive affective experience” (Harris, 2018, p. 259) in the sense of being expressed in anticipation of a negative development culminating in the future. Others express imminent fear of present conditions, and some are retrospect in the sense that they point to an undefined moment in the past when something could have been done to prevent the current situation. One article emphasizes that the party-leader of the Sweden Democrats identified Islam as “the greatest threat against Sweden since the Second World War” already 15 years ago and adds “and the threat has only increased since” [SN230730]. The emotions perform a discursive “self-validation” (Koschut, 2018, p. 334) by a “told you so!” and “if they only had listened”-rhetoric. Emotions, past, present, and predictive, are circumstantially validated by references to a tragic political development that could have been avoided if far-right politics had been

given more attention at an earlier stage. One editorial is looking forward to a future day when applied far-right politics “create a much better society than we have today”. It concludes: “However, that day feels long in coming, and it may be so far away, that when it finally comes, it will be too late, and Sweden will be beyond rescue” [SN230804].

Far-right	Left-wing
Rational	Irrational
Appropriate	Inappropriate
Balanced	Exaggerated
National interest	Ideological interest
Masculine	Feminine/Childish
Earnest	Hypocritical
Moderate intensity	High intensity
Reflected	Spontaneous
Important	Ridiculous

Table 10: Characteristics of representations of far-right and left-wing emotional experiences in Swedish far-right alternative news media

Conclusions

Representations of emotional experience in Swedish far-right alternative media perform discourse primarily by adding an emotional dimension to the construction of a qualitative division between “‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’” symptomatic for far-right populist rhetoric (Mudde, 2004). They are drawn into that divide by being sorted, not only according to how they express differences in political affiliation, but more outstandingly along the lines of character-indicating opposites. The left-wing feeling subject is constructed as “a psychological type, with sensitivity, intolerance, sense of entitlement and immaturity being the dominant traits” (Alyeksyeyeva, 2017, p. 10) corroborating Törnberg’s (2022) characterization of contemporary ideological polarization.

Polarization on digital media is driven by conflict rather than isolation, affording a form of politics rooted in identity rather than opinion. Digital media intensify polarization not as echo chambers but as a sorting machine, fueling a runaway social process that destabilizes plural societies by drawing more and more issues into a single expanding social and cultural divide (Törnberg, 2022, p. 10).

Müller (2022) states that populists “assert that all other contenders

for office are illegitimate” based more on flaws in character than policy (p. 14). Swedish far-right alternative media elaborates on that assertion by declaring representatives of left-wing elites unfit to govern by portraying them as putting sentimentality, misguided emotions, and ideological affiliation ahead of rational thinking and national interests.

Scholars argue that emotionality in general, and fear in particular, are main elements of the political rhetoric of far-right populists (Tarchi, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Swedish far-right alternative media adopts the populist strategy to produce and reproduce fear, provide simple solutions by identifying scapegoats and enemies responsible for those fears, and thus legitimizing exclusion as a proposed policy (Wodak, 2015). But this study shows that it also discursively constructs a dichotomy of two types of fear. Left-wing fear is constructed as naïve, short-sighted, feminine, hysterical, and hypocritical, whereas rational and insightful thinking is attributed to the fear felt by far-right populists. Research indicates that populist messages cater to negative emotions instead of logical reasoning (Betz & Oswald, 2022; Wirz, 2018). The news sites studied use representations of emotional experiences in news reporting as a way to discursively counteract that notion.

The represented feelings create a political “identity of shared grievance” (Nguyen, et al., 2022) over an illusory society that was, and could have been, but has been ruined by immigration, leftist elites, public service media, etc., thus playing a role in the formation and reinforcement of a particular *emotional community* (Rosenwein, 2016; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Swedish far-right alternative media constructs an intersubjective communality where far-right minded audiences are given the opportunity to feel comfortable and reassured as emotionally likeminded and discreet, since the emotional experiences with which they sympathize are constructed as appropriate, and justified, conceptualizations of morality and justice (Rosenwein & Cristiani, 2018, p. 46). That performative process also turns the news platforms into an *emotional refuge* (Reddy, 2001), or *emotional incubator*, where a specific set of emotions, that may have a negative moral connotation in other parts of the political landscape, are nourished, and allowed to thrive and grow without being directly censored. The accumulated discursive value of the expressions soothes internal goal-conflicts between humanitarian concerns and a nationalistic outlook by articulating emotional acceptance of the non-humanitarian aspects of right-wing politics and identifying humanitarian reflections and empathic reactions as misguided and naïve. The representations thereby suggest and facilitate a *cognitive change* (Konijn, et al., 2022, p. 35), which means an emotional reinterpretation of events,

pictures, and utterances that demobilises potentially empathetic reactions towards the objects of far-right populist discontent. Converts who used to feel “wrongly”, but now feel the right way, are personalizing and idealizing that cognitive change.

Far-right alternative media audiences are offered emotional gratification as both reinforcement of ideology (we are right), emotional intersubjectivity (we are united), and experienced cognitive prowess (now I understand). The discursive value of constructions of emotional expressions offers potentially “rewarding experiences of insight, and reflexivity” (Konijn, et al., 2022, p. 34) as to the make-up of social reality, and thus generates “collective effervescence” (Collins, 2004) – a collectively generated emotional flow that is the result of a socially shared pleasure informed by values and ideology (Freistein, et al., 2022, p. 6).

Limits of the study and suggestion for further research

The method used does not capture all dimensions of emotionality in the texts examined. Represented emotional experiences are not the only elements contributing to discursive patterns of news texts. The temporal and local setting, as well as the limited sample, make for a low degree of generalizability and allows for only a limited scope of conclusions to be drawn concerning the role emotional expressions play in the construction of societal discourse. Further research into how a wider range of emotional elements concur in forging far-right populist discourse, as well as into how such elements are perceived and interpreted by audiences over a longer period of time, may therefore be of value when testing temporal generalizability. A comparison with constructions of emotional expressions in legacy media and radical left media would also put the findings of this study in a wider context.

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