# MEDIATIZED
# CULTURAL
# ACTIVISM

## BECOME IMMORTAL!
### MEDIATIZATION AND MEDIATION PROCESSES OF EXTREME RIGHT PROTEST

## RIKKE ALBERG PETERS

## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a case study of the German neo-fascist network **The Immortals (Die Unsterblichen)** who in 2011 performed a flash-mob, which was 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 analyze the protest form, the visual aesthetics and the discourse of **The Immortals**, the paper mobilizes three concepts from media and communication studies: **media practice, mediation, and mediatization**. It will be argued that the current transformation and modernization processes of the extreme right can be conceptualized and understood through the lens of these three concepts.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Bautzen, Germany, 1 May 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 title "Werde unsterblich!" (*Become Immortal!*). Within the first week, the clip had more than 20,000 views, it was disseminated on Facebook and Twitter, and similar events were soon performed and filmed in a number of other German cities (Staud and Radke, 2012, p. 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 article, which is an empirical case analysis of the "Become Immortal" campaign that spread throughout Germany in 2011, I will explore extreme right activists' relationship with new media and show how the extreme right youth movements in Germany have recently adopted an approach that falls at the intersection of online and street activism. 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 examples – a lot of positive attention has been given to the emancipatory effects and participatory potentials of mediatized cultural activism. Accordingly, mediated social and political protests generally refer 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 ICTs and web 2.0. Also actors with explicit anti-democratic and anti-pluralist agendas use the participatory potentials of new media technologies to increase the impact of their political action and discourse. As far right web activist Don Black, founder of the virtual community "Stormfront", said to *The Guardian* as early as 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 from Copsey, 2003, p. 222). Political action has become much easier and faster to organize through new media, especially for loosely organized small groups, including extremist networks (Copsey, 2003; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Cammaerts, 2012).

The relationship between extreme right activism and new media has attracted some scholarly attention in recent years, exploring e.g. the opportunity structures for discourse and action repertoires (della Porta et al., 2012); the creation of online public spaces through blogs (Cammaerts, 2009); or right-wing extremist video activism as an example of alternative and activist media practice (Ekman, 2014). By applying three concepts

from media and communication theory – *media practice, mediation,* and *mediatization* – this article investigates the impact of new social media on extreme right activism and discourses. My argument is that the protest form and political discourse of *The Immortals* must be analyzed as part of the more general transformation and modernization processes of the European extreme right described by a number of scholars within the last ten years (Atton, 2006; Sommer, 2008; Rydgren, 2005; Peters 2012; Botsch, 1012). However, the conceptualization of these changes as a turn towards *ethno-nationalism* and *right-wing populism* only to some extent covers the new trends of the youth scene as represented by groups such as *The Immortals*.

So far, this transformation process has only been analyzed from a social science perspective. I suggest that we apply a cultural and media-focused framework in order to also investigate these changes as part of broader media transformation processes, which affect the protest form, the cultural-aesthetic self-representation, as well as the political discourse.

The article is structured as follows: I will first outline the sociology 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 three dimensions: the protest form, the visual aesthetics, and the political discourse. In the final section, I will contextualize the case by relating it to the general transformation processes of the extreme right and discuss how these changes could be conceptualized through the lens of 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 1 May 2011, have been identified by the German intelligence agency as members of the National Democratic Party's youth organization: Young National Democrats, activists from the Autonomous Nationalist milieu and a neo-Nazi youth organization called "Widerstandsbewegung in Südbrandenburg", who on their homepage *Spreelichter* took full responsibility for the coordination and organization of *The Immortals'* first demonstration (Verfassungsschutzbericht, 2012, p. 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 representation as a group on various social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr, could suggest that this is a well established nationalist far right organization, their subcultural and heterotopic form indicates that this is rather a form of collective action or a protest phenomenon than an actual group,

lest a political or social movement. Young activists from the above mentioned networks have found common ground in what they perceive to be 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 power, 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 (Radke, 2012).

By adopting such as worldview, they are ideologically in line with the broader European extreme and populist right movements, although – as we shall see – their organizational structure, mobilization strategy, and protest form differ from traditional right-wing organizations and parties, such as the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), the British National Party (BNP), the Danish People's Party, the German Defence League, or the so-called free fellowships. According to Rydgren (2005; 2007), extreme right-wing and populist parties share a political worldview centered 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 Immortals*' political message is that a national socialist Germany with no or a very limited number 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.

Ethno-nationalism is based on an essentialist, ethno-pluralist doctrine of ethnicity and culture as fixed and unchangeable entities, and it dictates that an ethnic community, i.e. 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 in order to preserve the unique character of different peoples. Today, ethno-nationalist themes are broadly being picked up by anti-immigrant populists 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 10-15 years, ethno-nationalism has become a major master frame with which the extreme right forms its collective identity and by which a social policy of welfare chauvinism is promoted (Spektorowski, 2003; Sommer, 2008; Rydgren, 2005). As Rydgren (2005, p. 428) has pointed out, the ethno-nationalist worldview held by extreme right movements or parties marks a shift away from "biological racism" to "cultural racism". It allows extreme right-wing and populist parties to

mobilize on political discontent and to promote xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes without being stigmatized as racists.

The "Become Immortal" campaign is primarily a short-lived protest phenomenon with no lasting impact. In the second half of 2012, *The Immortals'* activities and marches had already started to decrease, and at present the only sign of their existence is the documentation on YouTube and on the webpage (see note 1). Still, it is interesting to study this phenomenon for at least two reasons. First of all, it is a good indicator of how the extreme right has been going through a massive modernization process, which has changed the old neo-Nazi and skinhead subculture into a more mediatized and politically "respectable" movement (Atton, 2006, p. 574), which has the potential to attract followers far beyond the traditional right-wing milieu (c.f. Schedler and Häusler, 2011; Sommer, 2008; Botsch, 2012). Secondly, the case of *The Immortals* should, however, also attract the interest of scholars from outside extremism studies, as their protest activities serve as an interesting empirical case through which we can analyze the actual impact of media technologies on activism and in particular the role of new social media for activist performance and political framing. 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.

## METHOD: EXAMINING THE ACTIVISM AND DISCOURSE OF EXTREME RIGHT GROUPS FROM A MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

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 on the relationship between media, culture, and society by which to study long-term processes of change (Hepp and Krotz, 2014, p. 3). As a concept used by a number of scholars in media and communication theory, it describes the processes in which media become increasingly influential in many different spheres of society and play an important role in emergent processes of socio-cultural change (Hepp & Couldry, 2013; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014). However, it should not be confused with the concept 'mediation', which is a more neutral term for communicative interaction, which takes place through various media. Mediation refers to social interaction in which media facilitate the flow of discourses and meanings in society (Couldry, 2008; Silverstone, 2002) but do not necessarily change social institutions or social practices (Mattoni and Treré, 2014). In contrast, mediatization signals a much more complex meta-process through which social and political institutions and cultural interaction gradually change and assume media forms 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 indi-

vidual 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 will be discussed later in this article, the current changes of the extreme right – that is, the active attempt to gain a position in mainstream political culture and the media landscape – can be analyzed through the lens of mediatization.

As Couldry (2008, p. 377-378) has critically remarked, we should be careful not to use mediatization as a catchall 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. Cammaerts (2012) has shown that mediation is also a very useful concept when capturing the connections between media and communication on the one hand and protest and activism on the other. By focusing on the opportunities for protest action as well as the constraints offered by new media, he creates a framework with which activist identities, narratives, and performances can be analyzed. One of the key processes of mediation is "remediation" and "reconfiguration" described by Lievrouw (2011, p. 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 one communication resource among many. Mediation processes challenge the distinction between producer/user (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 156-157; see also Cammaerts 2012, p. 118-120). In today's media-saturated culture, mediation becomes constitutive of as well as constituted in the practices of activist performance and narratives.

In a recent study, Mattoni and Treré (2014) have suggested a multi-facetted conceptual framework with which to analyze the complex interactions between activists and media, which encompass *media practices, mediation,* as well as *mediatization*. By focusing on the specific qualities and limitations of all three concepts, it becomes possible to systematize and structure an 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, p. 259). On a theoretical scale, this focus is situated on a short-term micro-level, addressing the actual media use and the social practices performed by actors during specific moments of protest. This is a necessary first step for the outlining of 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 media-tion processes on a meso-level focusing on a wide array of media practices and including more groups or networks, i.e. how actors create new meanings from already existing media products (Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 260).

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 how media have come to play an increas-ingly important role in protests over time and in shaping the political discourse on a macro-level. 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, p. 265). On this level, the focus is on the media's wider effects on social organization in a cross-time perspective (Couldry, 2012, p. 137).

In the following, these three concepts will be brought into play interchangeably as I conceptualize and discuss my findings. The analysis in the next section focuses on three different dimensions covering different empirical materials from the case. First, I analyze the protest activity and political mobilization of *The Immortals* by studying how the group appropriates new media technology and addresses its audience/followers. Sec-ondly, I analyze the video clip on YouTube in order to describe the visual aesthetics and subcultural style of the group. And third, I examine and discuss the political discourse as manifested in the textual communication on the webpage. By focusing on the discursive and symbolic as well as the technological aspects of the mobilization, it becomes possible to carry out an in-depth analysis of the case and open up a discussion of what happens to radical political action and discourses as they become mediatized and entangled in processes of mediation and remediation.

## PROTEST AS MEDIATED ACTION

The first street march in Bautzen serves as a brilliant example of a new activist practice in which media play a key role in the very moment of protest, as street and web activism become entangled and can no longer be separated. It was organized as a flash mob via text messaging and took place without any warning, which made 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 2011, 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. As a short, spectacular, and performed 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 the public space, although the citizens who did witness this rally in the middle of the night probably felt emotionally disturbed.

The street march in Bautzen was designed, performed, and adapted for dissemination via YouTube, or to put it simply: for the event to actually be immortalized by virtue of being spread first on YouTube and subsequently through circulation on other social media platforms.

As Ekman (2014, p. 94) has argued, the primary purpose of extreme right-wing video activism is to achieve and increase public visibility and to attract and connect with a large youth audience outside the usual channels of communication. YouTube and the internet serve as alternative media platforms (Atton, 2002) by which extreme right actors can circumvent the power of traditional mass media where they have limited or no access. This is why the success of a protest campaign such as this should not only be measured on its mobilizing effect on a street level, but also by its viral traction on various social media platforms. Video activism on YouTube is a way of showcasing beliefs and mobilization capability (Ekman, 2014, p. 95). But it also provides a new opportunity of participation, which is not limited to real life protest activities, since it can be played out virtually (see also 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 for how to organize and broadcast a similar street performance on social media channels. The webpage delivers an instructional *how-to* for activists who are attracted to 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 through various media channels without any organized expertise apart from a few basic instructions and organizational clues. In contrast to traditional neo-Nazi rallies with very formal demarcations between the organizational and participatory levels, this protest form is regulated through loose organizational routines and ties. On the webpage, 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 (to be downloaded from the webpage), they must document the action on the internet, and they must refrain from using any form of violence or bullying. Although *The Immortals* created the campaign and the vocabulary, produced the initial video, and set up the webpage, they rely on their viewers and 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 mindset of the Autonomous Nationalist movement and as such marks a deep contrast to more traditional extreme right groups whose ideas of strong organizational ties, hierarchical order, and a firm leadership favor a thoroughly authoritarian mindset (Schedler and Häusler, 2011). By joining the informal network of *The Immortals*, one can become part of an ultra-nationalist, authentic, protest action, which takes place in physical as well as in virtual spaces, without having to give up one's commitment with other social movements or having to join the extreme right movement permanently. This is a protest form, which does not rely on the total obedience or devotion of its followers, but rather on momentary and fragmented support – be it through direct action or virtual, by liking, commenting, and sharing on other 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 the webpage informs us.

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' to address the audience emotively and to engage them in a dialogue:

> Have you watched the Immortals and become interested? […] You ask yourself why do we actually call ourselves The Immortals? Immortal is that person 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 of the media practices used in this protest that are of particular importance: first, the producer-audience relationship is fundamentally altered, since the audience is not only encouraged to participate and give support to the action but to start a similar action and creatively produce new clips and posts themselves. A group such as *The Immortals* 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 discourse. Such a strategy is characterized by the blurring of the divides between producers and receivers, between activists and followers. This ultimately serves as propaganda and as a means of mobilization, reaching out to a much wider group of potential followers and supporters. Followers who do not necessarily belong to the far right milieu or are involved in any extreme right organization, but who are somehow attracted by the radical ideas and the visual aesthetics of *The Immortals*. With its 154,000 views, 1174 likes, and 1460 comments thus far, the first Immortals-

Bautzen clip did in fact reach a relatively large audience much beyond the 200-300 participants in the actual street performance.[5]

Secondly, this media practice in which online/offline street protest are 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 Mattias Ekman 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 (Ekman, 2014, p. 82).

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, p. 8-9). 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. This conclusion is supported by Ekman 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" (Ekman, 2014, p. 94). The protest actions of *The Immortals* are good examples of what Lievrouw (2011, p. 150) refers to as "mediated mobilization" in so far as new media are not only used as a practical means of networking and communication but are 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 political change.

## VISUAL AESTHETICS AND SYMBOLIC PRACTICES

When analyzing 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 strategy does not correspond very well with the highly staged performance and semi-professional production of the film clip, which was uploaded onto YouTube. 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 a mythology of an enormous faceless national socialist resistance movement on the rise and marching through the streets at night in a number of German cities, although the actual number of demonstrators did not exceed 300 (Radke, 2012). In contrast to many of the later rather amateurish copycat 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 soundtrack from the film *The Matrix*. 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, p. 151). The intense music is combined with a voice-over of one of the activists proclaiming the political message of *The Immortals*, momentarily drowned 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 posterity does not forget that you have been 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, p. 152), over the last fifteen years May 1st has become an important nationwide demonstration date for the extreme right in Germany. 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 honor of Hitler and the national socialist regime. Indeed, one of the distinctive characteristics about classical fascism was its appeal to emotions and its capability to activate emotions in order to generate political activism reflecting a "politics of the will" (Heywood, 1998, p. 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 (Benjamin, 1979). 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), thereby creating an eclectic cut-and-paste aesthetic.

## POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND FRAMING

The website functions as the group's primary tool to communicate, frame, and broadcast their beliefs. Looking closer at the discourse presented in the manifesto on the webpage, we see a clear political agenda which revolves around four main issues: anti-multicultur-

alism, anti-immigration, anti-capitalism, and anti-globalization wrapped up in an ultra-nationalist and populist 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 world views.

It is clear that the agitation is presented as a democratic discourse with no encouragement of violence, no abusive or racist language. Based on ethno-nationalist arguments, the manifesto warns of the cultural mixture of different peoples, which inevitably leads to degeneration and cultural decline. Throughout the manifesto, the idea of an "ethnically pure" community is promoted as a counter concept to a pluralistic or "multicultural" society paralyzed 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 and social decline. Furthermore, politically "thin" populist world views – for example, the idea that German society consists of two antagonistic groups, the *pure* German people and a corrupt political elite in conspiracy with foreigners – are being used as arguments to reject the parliamentary democracy (see also della Porta et al., 2012, p. 190).

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, p. 313; Spektorowski, 2003, p. 119-120). Indeed, the identity category the "people" (*das Volk*) is an important component in the ethno-nationalist world view presented by *The Immortals*:

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

Ethno-nationalist arguments are in focus when advocating for a necessary segregation of different ethnic and cultural groups. Similar to the social policy of the NPD, the "social justice", i.e. the distribution of welfare benefits referred to in the manifesto, is restricted to ethnic Germans.

Despite its clear populist and ethno-nationalist master frame, the manifesto does contain a number of underlying fascist references and allusions to national socialist ideas. 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 cultural and/or biological extinction due to the genetic mixture of different races (Griffin, 1991). This neo-fascist imaginary of decadence is 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, p. 32-33) and it constitutes *The Immortals*' ideological core, although racial-biological arguments have been replaced by cultural/ethnic ones, according to the ethno-nationalist frame.

As they are often clearer about what they oppose than what they support, their concrete political ideas are vague; instead *The Immortals* wish to promote what they coin "weltanschauliches Denken", a form of "worldview politics" that refers to a set of attitudes and a commitment to core ideas rather than a systematic ideological approach. Such an attitude is not far from traditional fascist ideas. As Heywood (1998, p. 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 in its core and placed the community above the individual. Also, in line with core fascist ideas, party politics are rejected as "a show" and a mere struggle for power in contrast to "real" political protests, which attempt to change hegemonic political beliefs and influence the public debate, be it through direct action or discursive-rhetorical strategies. This 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.

What distinguishes this German case from the established right-wing and populist parties' ethno-nationalist framing is that it injects left-wing stances into core fascist values, thus forming a kind of eclectic patchwork ideology similar to other European social right movements, such as the *Casa Pound* movement in Italy and *Bloc Identitaire* in France who radically and creatively transform left-wing issues into a social, far right-wing ideology. In these movements, fascist, ultra nationalist themes, for example the myth of cultural decadence, and populist and anti-immigrant issues, such as the alleged high unemployment and crime rate among immigrants, are linked with left-wing ideas, e.g. a decentralized anti-capitalist economy, welfare state concerns, and environmental issues. Not only in terms of discourse but also regarding visual aesthetics, extreme right groups have in recent years employed left-wing and anti-globalization symbols on their websites and in protest campaigns, for example by embracing a "social policy" and participating in May Day celebrations (Sommer, 2008; Virchow, 2007). The socially imbued populist/ fascist discourse of *The Immortals* is formed by an anarchist approach, which favors an anti-elitist and anti-authoritarian attitude: anyone who sympathizes with their ideas is encouraged to participate through direct action or online support.

To sum op: although the discourse does operate with anarchist, fascist, and even socialist ideas, it never refers to any racist doctrines and it explicitly discourages and condemns any use of violence. It primarily defines the people as an ethnic/cultural category and does not refer to the people in biological or racial terms, as in traditional Nazism. Implicit references to "forgotten forms of action" that must be reawakened (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. In the

next section I discuss how the media-oriented framework as presented in the method section can be used to theorize the protest activities and discourses of *The Immortals*.

## DISCUSSION: EXTREME RIGHT PROTEST SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIATIZATION AND MEDIATION PROCESSES

For the extreme right (as a "counter politics" balancing on the edges of legitimate politics), mediatization has caused a significant change in discursive strategies and protest action: with new media and networked communication technologies, it has become much easier to mobilize around potent master frames such as ethno-nationalism and to create new forms of participation that unite different actors across different groups and organizations. A nationalist discourse centered round ethno-nationalism becomes extremely potent because it offers a legitimate frame through 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 thereby generating what Couldry, with reference to Bohman (2004, p. 152), defines as separate publics linked together and forming "a public of publics around specific issues or political crisis" (Couldry, 2012, p. 123).

According to Couldry, the internet has created "new possibilities for non-formal political actors to form and build communities of practice online, challenging the boundaries of national politics" (Couldry, 2012, p. 120). It is, however, not only networks and communities that are affected by these new opportunities; also the protest action and the construction of world views must be analyzed as part of much broader processes, as 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 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" (Couldry, 2012, p. 137).

So, whereas previously the 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 any 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 loosely organized protest network such as *The Immortals* has adopted the ethno-nationalist master frame, although diffusing it with other anarchist and neo-fascist frames in creating their eclectic ideology.

However, the relation between media production, content, and political action is fundamentally different in this case. The old, organized parties have succeeded in adopting the successful master frame and attracting a broader segment of supporters while still

maintaining a very traditional, that is hierarchical and authoritarian, communication with their followers and voters on their website platforms as well as on social media sites (Atton, 2006). In contrast, new subcultural youth groups of the radical right such as *The Immortals* demonstrate a new type of media savviness and knowledge of how to create alternative public spheres using all the participatory and interactive potentials of social media including social broadcasting sites to communicate and interact with their audience.

A focus on the mediation processes allows us to see how new and especially social media play a key role in the mobilization, organization, and performance of protest and cannot be separated from it. In fact, 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*" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 161). In other words, the protest of *The Immortals* cannot be separated from the media practices related to it and shaping it. Protest and social media, online and offline activities are intertwined, thereby fostering a very creative, interactive DIY type of action that actively involves its audience and participants. This is a whole new trend in radical right activist performance. As demonstrated, this mediated mobilization also affects the political content and framing, which have become more eclectic, building on different frames and political ideas rather than just adopting the ethno-nationalist master frame associated with the extreme right and populist party family.

The question is how the political and cultural impact of this protest should be assessed. As mentioned in the beginning, The Immortal network is a short-lived youth protest phenomenon and a mere temporal media strategy for gaining visibility (in the streets and on the web) with no lasting impact. It is, however, not unlikely that new forms of action similar to this performance will occur, which may strengthen the mediation transformation processes of the European extreme right and in particular the extreme right youth scene. Although quite distinct from the traditional and politically organized right-wing opposition, the protest of *The Immortals* still reflects a more general transformation of the German extreme right in its attempt to attract and recruit new followers from beyond the traditional right-wing milieus. This strategy can take many different forms, and in this case it has been analyzed through the lens of mediation processes focusing on the relationship between protest, activist performance, and discourse.

Although *The Immortals'* mediated mobilization is anti-authoritarian and participatory and has adopted all the interactive forms found within progressive social movements, the protest is still closed around certain narratives and constructs, e.g. the definition of the German "volk", the "democrats", "foreigners" which are all based on chauvinist cultural and political stereotypes. This closure exists alongside the eclectic and participatory ideals of the group, thus resulting in a very contradictory radical right phenomenon, which obviously appeals to certain youth segments but in general remains marginalized. In contrast, within the last 10-15 years the popular right-wing parties have succeeded in penetrating the broader public sphere and gaining political representation by adopting a

mediatized ethno-nationalist and populist master frame that is compatible with mainstream media and politics.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, the protest activities, visual aesthetics, and discourses 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 be immortalized 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 various social media platforms, but has also significantly changed the mobilization and organizational 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. This 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 this particular case is that mediation processes also seem to affect the ideological framing of the group, thus resulting in an eclectic patchwork ideology that encompasses various ideas, such as anti-immigration, anti-capitalism, and anti-globalization.

The ultra-nationalist protest of *The Immortals* and their political rejection of mainstream democratic politics can however also be interpreted as part of a more general transformation and modernization process of the extreme right party family, which attempts to attract a broader audience and gain public visibility through different strategies. 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 of any racist or abusive rhetoric. This doctrine is also to some degree present in the discourse of *The Immortals*, which is however also influenced by anarchist and socialist frames, which in turn gives way to an eclectic and somewhat contradictory ideology.

Although *The Immortals* represent a new, interactive, and participatory approach known from progressive and left-wing social movements, the analysis demonstrates that the protest is still formed around a hermetically closed notion of cultural and ethnic identity similar to the fascist *Blut und Boden* idea. The "Become Immortal" campaign reflects a politics of the will characteristic of traditional fascist performances and ideas.

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## NOTES

1    The YouTube clip "Werde Unsterblich – Demonstration in Bautzen" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkU6KTjLTYU. Consulted on: 10 December 2014.

2    See also http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2188595/Neo-Nazis-dubbed-The-Immortals-embrace-social-networks-organise-terrifying-protests-German-cities.html http://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/dossiers/der_norden_schaut_hin/dieunsterblichen107.html http://edition.cnn.com/video/?/video/world/2012/08/13/german-neo-nazi-group.cnn&video_referrer. All consulted on 10 December 2014.

3    See the official webpage http://www.werde-unsterblich.info All quotations are my translation.

4    http://www.werde-unsterblich.info.

5    As viewed on 5 November, 2014.

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