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Interpretive communities of resistance: Emerging counterpublics of immigration alarmism on social media

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Abstract

Debates over immigration have become a defining political cleavage closely related to moral values, perceptions of threat, and the rise of online anti-immigration networks and agitation. Based on in-depth interviews with immigration alarmists, this article discusses how the participants' anti-immigration position is sanctioned in their everyday social networks and how they find alternative networks online for information, community, and support. This online community takes the form of an emerging counterpublic, characterized by active curation and different levels of participation aimed at optimizing the trade-offs between gaining visibility (moderation and mobilization) and creating an alternative moral community (a “safe space” for peers). Combining notions of interpretive communities of resistance with the theory of counterpublics, the study provides insight into the internal life and values of emerging anti-immigration online communities.

Keywords

Anti-immigration, counterpublic, Facebook, interpretive community, qualitative interviews, stigma

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They are citizens deeply worried over negative developments in society but find that established news media and political elites fail to address the issue. When they raise their voice to discuss the critical threat, they feel condemned as “immoral” and silenced through social sanctions. Over time, they start looking for someone who shares their concerns and understands their position. In this article, we analyze how and why one group of such alarmed citizens, labeled *immigration alarmists* in this study, become part of and contribute to online anti-immigration communities that take the form of an emerging counterpublic.

The analysis departs from the insight that attitudes toward immigration have become a defining political and moral cleavage in the last decades (Gethin et al., 2022), characterized by incendiary political debate and affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2023; Hovden and Mjelde, 2019; Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2022). Existing research on online immigration debates have documented how the far-right have taken advantage of the affordances of social media platforms (Benkler et al., 2018) to spread vitriolic messages that validate extreme-right views, racist discourses, and multiculturalism as a threat (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). This literature, predominantly based on network and content analysis, provides vital knowledge about the uninhibited, toxic, and flaming forms of communication in this online discourse (Titley, 2019), what Quandt (2018) broadly characterizes as “dark participation.” It does, however, provide limited insights into the motivations, lifeworld, and experiences of people engaging in online immigration debates and anti-immigration networks. The lack of sociologically grounded studies of practices and motivations characteristic of “dark” engagement and anti-immigration sentiments online is a question of both methodology and analytical perspective (Hall, 2022; Hochschild, 2018). The few interview studies that exist primarily focus on representatives of right-wing extremist groups (Baugut and Neumann, 2019) or online “trolls” (Ihlebak and Holter, 2021), whereas studies among groups of “ordinary citizens” with strong anti-immigration positions (critical to mass immigration and integration policies) are largely missing.

We argue that an analysis of how individuals within this group of citizens search for and get involved in anti-immigration communities online, needs to reflect the broader social and political environment in which online immigration debates take place.

First, studies of how people navigate their engagement in a controversial issue like immigration must take into account the highly affective and polarized nature of this issue (Benson, 2013; Hovden and Mjelde, 2019). Despite the many complexities and competing values in the immigration issue, positions on immigration are often morally framed as categorical and uncompromising matters of right and wrong (Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2022). Debates over immigration taps into deep moral values and perceptions of existential threats, which tend to trigger emotions of righteousness, anger, and anxiety, galvanize groupthink, and reduce willingness to compromise (Haidt, 2012; Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2022). As argued by Alexander (2006) and Haidt (2012), to be classified as deviant, on the wrong side of decency and goodness (or merely being associated with by such positions) is painful and emotionally disturbing for most people. Such perceptions of social risks tend to be elevated in a polarized opinion climate (Hayes et al., 2006), and this effect is particularly strong when the condemnation comes from

societal elites (Gethin et al., 2022) and/or people one feels connected to and with whom one shares common ground (Noelle-Neuman, 1993).

Second, the basic affordances of social media magnify the moral framing and social risk of online immigration debates. Studies of trolling and incivility online, have demonstrated how social media networks encourage uninhibited flaming related to aspects, such as anonymity, lack of moderation, the absence of social cues of real-life conversations, the formation of like-minded groups, and algorithms favoring affective and antagonistic messages (e.g. Hille and Bakker, 2014; Hutchens et al., 2015; Suler, 2004). At the same time, popular social media platforms are also constructed to optimize connectivity, social visibility, sharing and high reach, and users are often identifiable (Van Dijck, 2013). Studies show that this type of visibility and identifiability leads to a context collapse where the blurring of private and professional relations, and lack of control of the reach and reactions to a message (Robards and Graf, 2022) is associated with social inhibition, strategies of impression management, and passive forms of participation (“lurking”) (Kushner, 2016; Oh and LaRose, 2016; Sakariassen and Meijer, 2021). Although immigration debates seem omnipresent online, the large majority avoids taking part in political debates online for fear of being identified and misunderstood, ridiculed, loose face, or deemed racist (Sakariassen and Meijer, 2021).

Pointing at the social mechanisms of controversial debates in general and on social media in particular, our concern is not first and foremost to criticize or re-evaluate the operative moral boundaries of online migration debates per se. Our point is rather that the polarized, affective, and moral nature of immigration debates do matter for if and how people engage and how they perceive risk, a premise that is largely overlooked in extant studies of online immigration debates. The present study explores the experiences and perceptions of these types of perceived social risks among citizens with strong anti-immigration sentiments. It provides insights into the motivations, evaluations, and experiences of those who hold strong negative perceptions of immigration levels and policies, display low trust in established news media and government, but who *do not* identify with or participate in extreme right-wing movements nor support undemocratic means, violence, or online trolling (incivility and harassment). Based on 24 in-depth interviews, the study gives insights into how and why immigration alarmists perceive that their anti-immigration position is sanctioned in their everyday social networks, and how they find an alternative moral community online. We ask: *How do immigration alarmists experience mainstream immigration debates; how and why do they engage in this issue online; and what are the internal functions of this online community?*

To analyze this phenomenon, we have used insights from theories on interpretive communities and online counterpublics, an analytical framework outlined in the following section. This theoretical lens yields insight into the participants’ processes of seeking, finding, and building loosely organized online interpretive communities in opposition to mainstream immigration debates and policy. Over time, these networks gain importance, provide meaning and a sense of belonging—a process we label “emerging” *counterpublics*. Comprising *both* the motivations of immigration alarmists who participate actively in online debates *and* those who are connected to online debates without giving active voice themselves, this study generates new knowledge about how such alternative online communities emerge and what they mean for those participating.

Analytical framework: emerging online counterpublics

The Internet's potential as an arena for public debate has fascinated public-sphere theorists since its beginning due to its potential for interactivity, transnational reach, low costs, and potential of many-to-many communication (Rauchfleisch and Kovic, 2016). Individuals who would otherwise not be aware of each other's existence can find each other and form groups and networks based on shared interests and identities. They can, in other words, form online *interpretive communities* (Fish, 1980) based on shared meanings and values, develop internal norms and standards, and can become each other's significant others (Berkowitz, 2019). Specific for *online* interpretive communities is that they are based on curated flows of information (Thorson and Wells, 2015) produced, selected, filtered, annotated, and framed by a network of individual actors, organized interests, and machines. Based on such curated information flows, "members" or "participants" often share a group-specific interpretation of key events where mutual narratives reaffirm and legitimate their community and self-perception (Berkowitz, 2019). In particular, social media has been found to facilitate emotional engagement and mobilize larger groups of affective publics based on feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015). Interpretive communities vary in terms of how intentional and self-conscious, geographically concentrated, and homogeneous they are. They can form subdivisions of a broader public sphere, representing a supplement more than a contrast or antidote to the broader civil community for their members. Interpretive communities can, however, also have the character of a community of resistance, where opposition to the established media and politics on particular issues form the basis for shared narratives (Rauch, 2021). As argued below, this type of interpretive community takes a similar form and share vital functions to that of a *counterpublic* (Fraser, 1990).

The theory of counterpublics originally emerged as a critique of the idealized, bourgeois Habermasian approach to the public sphere (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1990). Contending that the public sphere is not equally open to all members of stratified societies, this theory holds that *subaltern counterpublics* will form parallel discursive arenas to formulate and circulate counter-discourses in opposition to a dominant superordinate "public at large" (Fraser, 1990). Counterpublics develop interpretations in opposition to the dominant public sphere and provide oppositional understandings of minority identities, needs, and interests. Within a democratic social order, they work to expand discursive space and challenge dominant positions (Fraser, 1990). Counterpublics serve two interrelated main functions (Fraser, 1990: 68): Counterpublics can serve as "safe spaces" for withdrawal, regrouping, and the development of alternative identities. It is particularly this inward-oriented function of counterpublics, in which participants circulate counter-discourses and "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs" (Fraser, 1990: 67), which overlaps with interpretive communities of resistance (Rauch, 2021). Counterpublics can also have an outward-oriented, agenda-setting function, as they seek to challenge the structures and discourses of the dominant public sphere, gain attention, build alliances and engage new audiences. Hence, rather than ignoring the mainstream public sphere, counterpublics pay attention to engage with, and criticize the established media and broader public sphere, seeking to influence perceptions of the issue at stake (Kaiser and Puschmann, 2017).

More recently, counterpublic theory has been applied to different types of online networks and groups (see, among others, Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2019; Rauchfleisch and Kovic, 2016; Toepfl and Piwoni, 2018). Based on Kaiser and Puschmann's (2017) conceptualization, online counterpublics: (1) are issue-specific (formed around engagement in particular issues), (2) oppose a hegemonic view, (3) are excluded by "the mainstream" (established news) media and broader public sphere, and/or (4) exclude themselves from the mainstream. They are not formal membership organizations or groups; rather, they are created by communicative acts situated in specific contexts (Kuo, 2018; Renninger, 2015). The Internet enables unprecedented networking among potential members of (counter) groups, along with the rapid spread and amplification of their collective identities. This may mobilize new networked counterpublics and can also radicalize group members, strengthen intergroup bias, and form communities with extreme positions (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2019). The more radical position a counterpublic holds, the more challenging it is to set an agenda that combines inward- and outward-oriented aims.

Existing studies of online counterpublics primarily analyzes the phenomenon through textual, content, or network analysis. One strand of literature has emphasized the networked dynamics of online counterpublics by analyzing technological affordances, network topology and role of initiators, the role of group-oriented hashtags, and systematic blocking of opponents in contested online debates (e.g. Kuo, 2018; Renninger, 2015). Another approach has studied counterpublic dynamics in the comment sections of established mass media, demonstrating how hyperlinks contribute to forming alliances of antagonism; how counterpublic discourse(s) mobilize(s) against dominant mainstream positions; how critical commenters systemically oppose established news media; and also, how counterpublics circulate selected mainstream media posts (Kaiser and Puschmann, 2017; Lien, 2022; Toepfl and Piwoni, 2018).

Extending these studies of online counterpublics, the present article foregrounds the informational, social, and moral functions of an emerging online counterpublic *as experienced* by its participants. By employing qualitative interviews, we study the motives, experiences, and trajectories of participants, rather than manifest content or technological infrastructures (affordances) of these counterpublics. In this way, we can shed light on the less studied aspects of online counterpublics, that is, their function as providers of identity-confirmation, community, and protected social spaces. Building on insights into how users navigate affordances of identifiability, networked information access and community-building on Facebook (e.g. Halpern and Gibbs, 2013), we take an *affordances-in-practice approach* (Costa, 2018). Facebook's *networked information access* enable curated flows of information (Thorson and Wells, 2015), with vital informational, social, and moral functions (Rauch, 2021). The *identifiability* of Facebook, on the other hand, is associated with positioning and gaining, and also with different forms of digital inhibition (Sakariassen and Meijer, 2021). In this article, a main ambition is to shed light on how alarmed participants in online networks find strategies to control their (in)visibility, and fine-tune their level of engagement to balance the need to reduce social risk with the rewards of giving voice, and taking part in a community that provides moral ("you are a good person"), social ("you are not alone"), and informational ("you are reasonable") confirmation.

There are ongoing critical discussions on the application of counterpublic theory to groups that do not belong to historically repressed groups (for a critical discussion, see

Jackson and Kreiss, 2023). Furthermore, the problematics of distinguishing between different degrees of marginalization and gauging the consolidation of a counter-narrative within groups and over time (Squires, 2002) is critically assessed in newer conceptualizations of public contestations in social media (Kavada and Poell, 2021). These debates are relevant to this study. It is clear that the online counterpublics characterized by anti-immigration sentiments studied here do not comprise historically marginalized groups or a group that is without political representation. We argue, however, that the analytical framework of counterpublics is valuable to understand the participants' experiences of moral condemnation, their motivation, and formation of online communities and how they seek to carve out a less exposed discursive space and interpretive community with like-minded peers. We argue that this perspective, emphasizing the human need for social and moral confirmation, is particularly important to understand the position of alarmed citizens who do not associate with extreme movements, but rather have multiple broad public and private connections (see "Methods" section) and who seek to integrate their dystopian, alarmist views with their daily lives as active "ordinary" citizens.

Case: immigration and anti-immigration in Norway

Norway is a small, stable, established welfare democracy. Comparatively, Norway is a newcomer with regards to immigration, but from the late 1960s onwards, work, family, and forced migration have been significant (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli, 2008), with immigrants reaching 19% of the population in 2021.¹ The immigration issue has mobilizing potentials with immigration being one of the political issues about which voters are most concerned (Hagelund, 2020). It is particularly the populist Progress Party, which has capitalized on immigration protest in the Norwegian context, reflecting the party's strong issue-ownership on immigration. The party, which is described as more moderate than other populist/protest parties in Europe, has been integrated into the political establishment and took part in the conservative coalition government (from 2013 to 2020). The party remains a controversial political player and has lost voter support in recent elections.

Although immigration policies have built on broad party-political compromises, immigration continues to be a heated, polarizing and much-debated topic. As in other Western countries, liberal positions on immigration correlate with voting for left-wing and green parties, higher education, and liberal professions, such as journalism (Steen-Johnsen and Enjolras, 2016) and academia (Enstad and Thorbjørnsrud, 2022). Studies find that mediated immigration debates have become more salient and more politicized in recent decades (e.g. Hovden and Mjelde, 2019). News audiences positioned markedly to the political left or right are more critical of immigration coverage (Moe et al., 2020), and particularly right-leaning voters have lower trust in the established media (Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2022). Furthermore, Norway has seen the rise of immigration-critical alternative media that systematically stresses the negative effects of mass immigration, the impact of conservative Islam, and criticism of the mainstream media and political establishment (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019). Although Norwegians rank at the top of indices for the use of new technology and digital platforms, only a small percentage engage in political debates on social media sites. Fear of being ridiculed,

misunderstood, or taken out of context is reported as explanatory factors for this reluctance (Sakariassen and Meijer, 2021), and as many as 95% report they will not give engage in debates if they believe that someone could deem their opinion to be racist (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017).

Methods and data

The 24 interviewees in this study self-identify as “immigration critics,” positioning themselves as strongly negative toward current Norwegian immigration policies and how the established news media cover immigration. The interviewees criticize what they see as failed multiculturalism and the form and scale of non-Western immigration, pointing to the perceived negative influence of conservative religious practices (connected to Islam), the challenges of integrating low-skilled immigrants, and the pressure on welfare services. Informants see themselves as committed to liberal values, and they avoid, and also criticize generalization and dehumanization at the individual level, which they regard as off-limit (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2022). They do, however, insist that immigration at the group level represents a dangerous threat to a secular welfare society, sentiments that tend to be met with condemnation and warning from established political parties and liberal elites (Gethin et al., 2022). With regard to their lifestyle and public connections, the interviewees are “ordinary citizens” with families, careers, professional, and social networks: They are engaged in their local communities, participate in elections, and express support for basic liberal values (freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and gender equality), distinguishing them from extremist far-right actors. The way they see “the immigration crisis” as the most pressing societal issue of our time do, however, set them apart from a majority population who do not share the same state of alarmism. This article contributes insights into how these interviewees negotiate their alarmist position on immigration with their everyday private, social, and professional lives.

Qualitative, close-up enquiries enable insights into motivations and experiences that could not have been gathered by analyzing social media content (Hall, 2022: 718). To obtain insights into these processes, we seek to understand positions, analyze them in line with relevant theories, and treat them in a non-judgmental way (Hall, 2022; Hochschild, 2018). Taking people seriously and studying their positions in-depth does, however, involve asking critical questions to probe the implications of their opinions.

Potential interviewees were found based on a combination of strategies. Our primary recruitment strategy was to monitor debates on social media and contact people based on their activities and online profile. Second, we asked interviewees to propose names of others in their network, so-called snowball sampling (Tjora, 2017). To supplement the number of interviewees, we also contacted people engaged in immigration critique through local political debates. The recruitment was challenging and time-consuming, given the sensitivity and politicization of immigration. After contacting around 60 potential informants, we ended up with 16 male and eight female participants. We searched for interviewees representing variation regarding gender, age, education, and professional background. Those who did not respond or declined to participate did not have a specific profile that set them apart from the interviewees, although requests for interviews were

more often successful when they were based on a recommendation by other participants. This proved particularly important for recruiting those who avoided publicly fronting their views on immigration outside of their online community (as this group can be difficult to identify and reach).

Half of the participants lived in the capital, while the rest resided in the south and east of Norway. All were adults (ages 20–70) representing a range of professions (including teachers, civil servants, IT consultants, local politicians, musicians, librarians, writers, craftspeople, and farmers). The great majority used Facebook as their main social networking platform and information source on the immigration issue, and we have therefore focused the analysis on these curated Facebook flows and their meaning for the participants. A majority had higher education, others vocational education, and some were students. Many of the interviewees voted for the Progress Party; others voted for social democratic or conservative parties or did not have a clear party identification. Around half of the interviewees kept their position on immigration largely to themselves or participated only in “safe spaces” online, whereas others were publicly engaged in the issue.

To preserve the interviewees’ anonymity and distinguish them from one another, they are identified via pseudonyms (common Norwegian names). The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2019 (13 interviews in 2016 and 11 in 2018/2019). All the semi-structured interviews (lasting 60–90 minutes) were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed by research assistants. The project was reviewed by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) and adheres to ethical guidelines regarding privacy protection, confidentiality, and fair representation.

The authors conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews (Tjora, 2017). The interview transcripts were coded in Hyper Research. Initial broader thematic codes reflected the main topics in the interview guide, including perceptions of the opinion climate, experiences of debating immigration, information sources, and activity on social media. Codes were later split or merged according to the theoretically informed codes that emerged from an abductive methodological approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), focusing on experiences of stigma, practices of curation and digital inhibition, strategies to balance voice versus visibility, and community formation. The coding was continually discussed by the two researchers and modified in line with analytical insights.

Analysis

Experiences in the mainstream: condemnation of immigration-alarmist positions

Although their experiences of debating immigration vary quite significantly, all interviewees report experiences of being condemned for their position when they have brought up the issue in different social contexts. Several emphasize how international events like the cartoon crisis, Islamist terror attacks and the 2015 refugee crisis functioned as “wake-up calls” with regard to their alarmed state. Others emphasize how their experience of living in multicultural neighborhoods alarmed them as they felt raising concern over reversed minority–majority relations, gender segregation, and the impact

of conservative religious practices, became increasingly difficult without being labeled as prejudice or racist (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2022). Many experience that friends, colleagues, neighbors, teachers, or other people in their everyday networks are unwilling to hear them out, uncomfortable with the arguments they present, or reluctant to even open the issue for discussion. Several have experienced their peers cutting them off at the beginning of a discussion or statement or reacting with uneasiness and silence. The reaction can also be abrupt and spontaneous (“You cannot say that!”), tends to characterize them as deviant (“That is racist!”) or discredits their sources (“You are misinformed!”). Typically, such denunciation disturbs them: “To discredit skeptics, putting very ugly labels on them makes people frustrated and pissed and sad—really pissed!” (Klaus). As explained by Ingrid, who had been active in political debates at school, such responses are perceived as unfair:

I have experienced it many times. I try to keep it factual, and then I am met with accusations in the way of “people like you celebrate when refugees are drowning in the Mediterranean,” things like that. And then you have lost. It doesn’t help when you say, like, “No one celebrates when people are dying”; it’s of no use.

In general, the interviewees experienced that their position is often linked to questions of morality and humanity, setting the issue of immigration apart from other political topics where disagreements and strong opinions are considered everyday affairs. This quote from Klaus, who works as a writer, illustrates how being perceived as immoral affects perceptions of self and social relations:

We can disagree over health politics and agricultural politics and other issues, but when it comes to immigration and integration—your human worth is questioned and scrutinized. And if you cannot deliver the phrases that will save your skin in these situations, you will be pushed into the dark.

Many, in particular, interviewees who used to associate with a progressive and liberal left, characterize the feeling of being dismissed for their opinions as shocking, particularly the first time they experience being positioned on “the wrong side,” the side of “racists” and “extremists.” Knut, who works as a teacher, describes it as overwhelming: “I had touched on something extremely ‘politically incorrect’, and it was emotionally draining suddenly finding myself on the wrong side. It was very hard [. . .] I’m not angry, but quite frustrated and exhausted.” Some claim that their public opinions on immigration have made them semi-outcasts in their everyday social networks. After becoming an active voice in online immigration debates Gry recounts how her family was punished for her viewpoints: “It has had consequences; all of a sudden my kids were not welcome to visit classmates and things like that.” Others believe that their position put their careers or professional role at risk, particularly those who are self-employed or freelancers. This quote by Sigurd, who is an entrepreneur, illustrates such concerns over professional risk:

[I run my own company] and I am dependent on incoming orders. And I believe that very few can speak out [on immigration] without losing customers. [. . .] I know people who have lost their job [. . .] and I have also lost [. . .] There are customers that I have known for 20 years who have dropped me.

Employees also fear sanctions at work. Torunn explains that she was confronted by her superior after her co-workers informed him about the content of a post on social media. Her boss did not reprimand her directly but made it clear that her co-workers had reacted strongly to her views:

It was deeply unsettling—they know my opinions and I know theirs. But to me, the fact that they vote for the socialist party is just as extreme as my opinions are to them; I respect them anyway. Learning that they had reported me to our employer, I cannot imagine doing such a thing . . . You feel betrayed; it is a breach of trust.

For many of the interviewees, experiences of moral condemnation from their everyday social networks are particularly pertinent on social media platforms. Interviewees recount posting what they consider alarming information about the immigration crisis inviting some type of response from their friends and network. The resounding silence contrasts with other frequent, informal Facebook interactions, spurring a perception of being “avoided” and silently condemned. As explained by Eline who works in the public sector:

This weekend was typical. I first shared a status update where I wrote that I enjoyed a glass of wine and some cashew nuts. That update got a lot of likes. Then I shared a post against female circumcision—and it was dead silent. Nothing! It says a lot because I do not believe that anyone [in my network] actually supports female circumcision—but they do not want to be associated with my post!

For most interviewees, an active immigration-alarmist position is therefore considered a high-risk social project, with social media being considered especially risky because of Facebook identifiability and potential context clashes, (unpredictable) audiences, lack of control, and a fear of being exposed through screenshots and hostile sharing. Among others, Eline, takes such a watchful, reluctant approach:

I have neighbors and parents from school that have added me on Facebook, but I’ve been reluctant because I do not want my opinions on immigration to be spread in these circles. I worry that my opinions may push them away.

Although strategies of withdrawal, online inhibition, and impression management are common among our interviewees, online networks have at the same time been a paramount driver behind their alarmed state and deep engagement regarding immigration.

Emerging counterpublics: seeking alternative moral communities online

For the interviewees, Facebook has been the primary platform where immigration alarmists curate information that keep them informed, amplify their opposing position, deepen their engagement, and connect with like-minded peers (affordances of networked information access and community-building). In their curated flows, they recount collecting a plethora of anti-immigration information, linking foreign news, far-right alternative media, (counter) opinion leaders and “experts” shared by Facebook acquaintances and

friends. Many have ended up with an extensive network of immigration-alarmist peers, providing a dynamic interpretive community of (immigration) resistance. Torunn, the economist, explains how she gradually came across immigration-critical writers and bloggers, and how they became as important to her as her old friends. She elaborates:

I do not have a very large network of “friends,” about 450—I would guess maybe 200 of them are so-called “political allies” or the type of friend-you-have-never-met-in-person. And of course, what my network finds interesting affects my news feed.

Another interviewee describes the process of actively curating an immigration-critical network. Sigurd recalls: “I don’t know how I bumped into the first [anti-immigration voices]. I made some friends who used this forum or tool to discuss serious things. And then I started approaching them, deliberately and seriously.” Interviewees vary in how intensively they follow these networks, from continuous, around-the-clock monitoring to checking in to supplement other news sources. Many shifts between monitoring news from the established media and actively seeking alternative information on immigration, based on the assumption that vital facts are omitted in mainstream immigration coverage. As explained by Helge, which works in the technology sector:

I usually scroll the headlines in national and local newspapers, but when events like terror or violence occur, I go on Facebook. I sit in front of the computer all day, so the platform is always kept open. Someone in my network will share a link to some site, and then it’s there—that the perpetrator “shouted Allahu Akbar,” information not even mentioned by the Norwegian press!

Others are constantly connected and updated through their curated flows, as illustrated by this statement from Torunn: “I must admit that [even] when I watch television at night, I always keep one eye on the TV and one eye reading [Facebook updates]. So, I spend several hours a night!”

In general, interviewees find that by joining an immigration-alarmist counterpublic, they find an interpretive community of peers, one that offers updated information that substantiates their perspectives and also confirms their self-perception as moral and rightfully concerned individuals. As such, these online communities provides group-specific interpretation of key events where mutual narratives reaffirm and legitimate their community, self-perception, and opposition, both for those who actively voice their opposition and those that are more selective of where they express their counter position. This is a type of moral confirmation and emerging community that allows for a passive presence by “lurking,” as demonstrated by Even (a lecturer):

To me, my Facebook feed is vital . . . I mean, I can’t say what I really mean to anyone at work. But on Facebook, at least I see people who think like me . . . I am nearly invisible; I occasionally push the “like” button, poke my nose out there. But first of all, I’m there as a reader, to catch up on what I believe is important stuff. Sitting there with my cup of tea late in the afternoon, I take in that there are other people out there who share my perspectives.

In other words, the morally supportive function of these emerging networks contrasts with the sanctioning and strategies of digital inhibition characterizing the interviewees’

everyday social networks. The feeling of balancing two very different networks is illustrated in this quote from Eline who works as a librarian:

I have a large [immigration-critical] network that supports me on Facebook, people that I do not know personally. [. . .] And then there are all the other friends who do not agree with me and never respond to anything—except for the very few who occasionally bother to speak up against me.

Balancing voice and risk

The confidentiality of personalized Facebook flows is crucial for the immigration-alarmist interviewees. The platform offers settings that allow different levels of publicness, and many interviewees use these settings actively to reduce harmful exposure and social risk. Even though they are deeply engaged in the immigration issue, interviewees describe a type of self-monitoring and self-reflexive inhibition, where they shield their everyday networks from their anti-immigration engagement. Such strategies are exemplified in the following quotes:

I'm not one of those who pour out [criticisms of immigration] [. . .] I do share things that I am deeply concerned over and find really disturbing . . . but I make a selection and I remove professional contacts. I have this permanent list that I leave out—no good comes of [including them]. I have so many friends on “the other side,” but yes, it is [a] kind of cowardice (Torunn).

Immigration is a topic replete with taboos and stigma. I keep a low profile, I watch my step to avoid being labeled, but also out of respect for all my 400 other friends on Facebook, who might not be that interested [in the topic of immigration]. I take some care in showing that my life is more than endless discussions on FB . . . I feel kind of exposed when I share my opinions. I don't want to flood people with [immigration] posts. (Lars-Erik)

The interviewees' roles in these networked anti-immigration information flows vary from passive information seekers to active curators and aspiring opinion leaders. Whereas, many prioritize to keep a low profile on contested issues, others seek to find their own voice and position themselves on the issue of immigration while controlling the degree of disclosure. Navigating Facebook's affordances, they take a certain amount of risk to be noticed by immigrant alarmists they deem important, while at the same time keeping out people who can damage their social reputation. Sigurd explains the importance of being vocal and taking a certain amount of risk in this way:

The thing with Facebook is that you do need to show off to some extent—to provoke a response and, vitally, to make people accept your friend request. And when you do that, and get accepted, you become part of this online community.

The most active interviewees, with thousands of followers and friends, often have sophisticated systems to secure the necessary balance between inhibition and risk. They share their views and immigration critique regularly, and also find it necessary to control their reach and who is allowed to participate in the discussions they initiate and moderate. To

illustrate, Klaus—an experienced and very active initiator of Facebook immigration debates—has organized his posts to control which groups get which posts:

I keep three levels when I post something. Occasionally, I use the global setting. Then I have a level that includes about 3,000 friends, and then there is the 100 “discussion friends.” A good deal goes out to them exclusively . . . The things I write can be controversial and in need of a friendly interpretation from a sympathetic group.

Outward-oriented strategies: online boundary work and self-mediation practices

Among the most active and vocal interviewees, some seek to challenge the structures and discourses of the dominant public sphere, to gain attention and win support from a larger audience. These aspiring “alternative opinion leaders” often combine being active both on social media and in the established news media; some have a background as semi-public figures or professionals within the media, cultural or university sectors. For the most active debaters, patrolling the boundaries between themselves, their followers, and those actors whom they deem to be too extreme is imperative. Lars regrets not moderating more actively when striving to build an audience as he feels his Facebook network has developed a “monotonous immigration-alarmist undercurrent,” which has lowered the quality of the debate and pushed his old personal network away. Interviewees seeking to become opinion leaders among immigration alarmists thus express a need to define their own moral stance and, in doing so, clarify the moral position of a counterpublic attempting to become more accepted in the superordinate public sphere. They stress the need to exclude actors who break with this aim. In practice, this boundary work includes both weeding out deviant voices and attending to the tone and message of their own posts, as illustrated in these quotes:

My aim is to keep it rational and decent [. . .] To me, when people start writing, “Get those pigs out of the country!” and things like that [. . .] I mean, people use the kind of language they have access to, but I have to tell them: “Now, you generalize too much! Do that somewhere else. Pull yourself together!” Most of the time it works (Sigurd).

When I started getting really many followers on Facebook, it became a bit difficult to handle. I got an “echo chamber feeling,” and I had to block people who went too far to the extreme right. But then I restricted who could comment down to “accepted friends”; the rest are followers, and now I actually seldom feel the need to interfere (Lars).

Active moderation is also motivated by the risk of being exposed and condemned by political opponents or by the established news media. This particularly applies to those interviewees who are vocal immigration critics, such as Hermann, who is active in local politics:

We need to be really careful, and I have screwed up sometimes myself. But that is what you learn from: always check with someone before you post—is this OK? Remember that “they” will always try to use anything we say against us. [. . .] After you have posted something, it’s too late, a screenshot is taken, and it doesn’t help to edit anything.

In essence, high-profile figures in the immigration-alarmist counterpublic seek to provoke debate and public reaction, to expand their reach and push the boundaries of what are perceived as legitimate arguments and criticism in the wider public sphere (Tittley, 2019). These outward-oriented strategies partly seek to provoke the mainstream to expand the space for immigration critique, to distance the immigration-alarmist position from more radical actors that are seen as *threatening* extremist actors, and to strengthen the identity and moral of the immigration-alarmist online community by “talking back” to those in power.

Conclusion

The alarmed citizens studied in this article see the “immigration threat” as the most pressing societal issue of our time. For them, mainstream immigration debates do not reflect the severity of the situation, the moral condemnation and stigmatization they experience for their anti-immigration position in their social networks and everyday relations. This motivates them to look for alternative communities online, seeking recognition, belonging, and resistance.

We argue that analyzing the participants’ experiences and motivations is imperative to understand the individual trajectories, which together form emerging online counterpublics. The in-depth interviews with immigration alarmists show how the interviewees’ personalized Facebook feeds gradually can grow into an online interpretive community of resistance (Rauch, 2021). Rather than being organized into specific groups or representing a (digital) social movement, this loosely organized counterpublic take the form of personally curated information flows and networks that appear through individual feeds. The negative sanctioning of participants’ anti-immigration position by the everyday social networks and elites they normally associate with, combined with the alternative interpretation of key events they are exposed to in their new immigration-alarmist networks, make many seek toward the shielded online “safe space” for informational, social, and moral confirmation.

Another key finding is how the negative sanctioning of the anti-immigration position by peers and everyday networks, is perceived as “unnuanced,” “unfair,” and “disturbing” by the interviewed immigration alarmists. Being cut-off, denounced or exposed does not seem to change the interviewees view on immigration. Rather, it makes them search for others who share their concern of “a looming immigration crisis”—new peers, that serve as a substitute for their everyday networks. Based on different types of protection and inhibition strategies, this emerging counterpublic is shielded from the full exposure and feedback from a more diverse debate environment. A main reward of being connected to this type of resistive community is the internal validation that they as immigration alarmists, are not alone, not evil, and not irrational or misguided in their fear and frustration.

The way informants in this study experience the climate of opinion, does in many ways resonates with studies describing immigration debates as polarized and defined by binary moral values (Haidt, 2012; Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2022). The interviewees report little room for dilemmas, conflicting values, and compromises in these online dynamics, indicating a debate climate that poorly reflects the ambiguous co-existence of idealism and realpolitik of real-life European immigration regimes (Brochmann and

Kjeldstadli, 2008: 16). In practice, immigration policies are characterized by the competing values of human rights, international solidarity, and cultural diversity on one hand, and the protective realpolitik of the national state, involving arguments for economic sustainability, social cohesion, and local stability on the other (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017). When the debate is framed in the categorical moral frames of good versus evil, the social risk involved in participation increases and more moderate voices tend to stay out of the conversation (Collier, 2014).

Although interviewees are concerned over the low tolerance for nuance, doubtfulness and moderation, the emerging selective, curated immigration-alarmist network nevertheless do seem to magnify their feelings of an impending external threat even further, intensifying their state of alarm. How such dynamics evolves in a time with more networked social movements (e.g. antiracist, feminist, LGBTQ+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] mobilizations) and counter-movements (e.g. conservative, misogynic counter-mobilization), increasing online contentions and polarization, is outside the scope of this article, but should be investigated in future research. On a macro level, semi-public, protected communities of resistance may contribute online ideological fragmentation if they emphasize the internal functions (Bright, 2018), but can also contribute to affective and political polarization if they become more confrontative and outward-oriented (Gidron et al., 2023). Studies of online communities of resistance can contribute much needed empirical insight into dynamics of such online radicalization (Marwick et al., 2022). More studies are needed to investigate different types of counter-publics focused on other contested issues, such as climate change, gender identities, vaccination, animal rights and globalization, to explore how other groups of alarmed citizens experience and reflect on these dynamics. To obtain an informed perspective on their degree of isolation and deviance versus their affiliations and connections to broader professional and social networks is not only of empirical importance: degrees of diffusion will, for better or worse, have vital implications for how these communities develop and how they should be approached by society at large.

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Note

1. Immigrants or those born in Norway with immigrant parents (Statistics Norway, 2021).

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