

Flashback as a Rhetorical Online Battleground: Debating the (Dis)guise of the Nordic Resistance Movement

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Social Media + Society
January-March 2019: 1–10
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305118823336
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Abstract

The right-wing Swedish Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) is increasingly active on social media. Using discursive psychology, this text explores the rhetorical organization of text and rhetorical resources used on the Swedish online forum Flashback. The aim is to reveal and problematize truth claims about NRM made by antagonists and protagonists. Questions are (1) how and what do NRM antagonists and protagonists convey in Flashback posts about NRM, and its ideology and members? (2) how do NRM antagonists and protagonists make truth claims about NRM in Flashback posts? The empirical material consisting of 1546 Flashback posts analyzed to identify typical discussions on “NRM’s true nature”; accomplished social actions stemming from the posts. Findings show that the Flashback thread can be understood as being a rhetorical battle that concerns the “truth” about NRM, where a variety of rhetorical resources are used to render statements credibility and those involved legitimacy.

Keywords

extremism, online fora, Flashback, discourse, truth claims

Introduction

In 2014, the Neonazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) was granted a mandate in the local government assembly in the Swedish municipality of Ludvika located in the region of Dalarna (Eng., Dalecarlia). This fact and more recently the local, regional, and Swedish elections in September 2018 have increased both NRM’s level of activity and their visibility in Swedish political discourse.

In its current shape, NRM rests on an almost century-long history of Swedish Nazi and Neonazi activism. In particular, it is an offspring of the Swedish Neonazi movements in the 1980s and 1990s (Löw, 2015). NRM is a relatively small neo-Nazi organization (estimates suggest it to have less than 1000 members) and has been (in accordance with Swedish law) registered as a political party since 2015 (Löw, 2015). To attract members and sympathizers, public demonstrations and local town rallies, as well as intensified presence on social media have been important tools (Kaati, 2017).

Over the years, the media debate on NRM has been heated and has not revolved merely around its ideology or political aspirations, but rather around its “true roots” and around what is described as its “true nature” or guise. Much of this debate has taken place on Internet fora such as the Swedish website Flashback and not in traditional media. Such online

debates have thus far not been the focus of academic analysis. For this reason, this article reports on a study of 1546 Flashback posts in the discussion thread “All about NRM” that were written by critics; people on the far left, sympathizers, and members between the years 2008 and 2017. By making truth claims, the authors of these posts debate the true nature of NRM, thus risking the credibility, legitimacy, and recognition of NRM. It is an ongoing digital debate where antagonists use rhetorical resources to contest NRM’s self-projected image, at the same time as the protagonists use rhetorical resources to justify their statements and to contest the antagonists’ notions about NRM. As such, the article uses the labels antagonist and protagonist since the focus is the debate and the truth claims, and not the individuals themselves.

Social media serves as an important platform for activists and movements to facilitate mobilization and recruitment (Cammaerts, 2012; Conway, 2017). NRM’s website *Nordfront*

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reports on what they call alternative news (conveying distrust to mainstream media and supporting NRM's ideology), their own activities (e.g., the distribution of flyers), history, and lifestyle, and they webcast municipal council meetings in Dalarna (a rural county in Sweden). These activities aim to create a commonly known and favorable narrative about the movement, which is important for NRM's self-image and cohesion (Ekman, 2018; Kaati, 2017; see also Bratten, 2005).

Research shows how social media (re)produces right-wing extremist discourse in online fora. In these fora, extremist groups use hate speech and typically target migrants and refugees in order to both mobilize the movement through the recruitment of new members and organize street rallies (Baumgarten, 2017; Ekman, 2018; Kreis, 2017). Thus, Nordfront functions as a site for mobilizing the movement by calling on members/sympathizers to share photographs with NRM's political messages on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Flashback (Ekman, 2018). In addition, research has been done on cloaked websites that disguise political agendas and propaganda questioning the truth in terms of historical fact—e.g., the denial of the Holocaust (Daniels, 2009).

The use of extremist discourse, which characterizes the online conversations between members and sympathizers, comprises narratives about personal experiences, rumors of criminal refugees (often accused of rape), or claims that refugees “do not belong here”—conversations that “construct them as others” (Angouri & Wodak, 2014; Baumgarten, 2017; Ekman, 2018; Kreis, 2017). These discursive strategies or rhetorical resources do not merely justify and legitimize the exclusion of or racism toward these “others” but create a sense of “we-ness” and identity among members and sympathizers as well as the movement they represent (Atton, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Ekman, 2018; Kreis, 2017; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015).

Furthermore, other research has focused on the use of rhetorical resources used to contest extremist discourse. Such studies have explored the use of humor—specifically, “satire” and “ridicule”—to counter extremist narratives (Goodall, Cheong, Fleischer, & Corman, 2012) or to target collective extremist narratives with counternarratives suggesting alternative discourses, which gradually can lead to different identities (Archetti, 2015; Cheong & Halverson, 2010). Then again, the use of satire in online racist discourse has been studied and understood to be a subtle affective articulation of racism (Malmqvist, 2015).

Despite the cited research, there remains limited research as to how actors use rhetorical resources in online interactions to make *truth claims* about the “nature” of extremist movements on online platforms.

In the case of NRM and the Flashback debate on the “true nature” of the movement, both extremist discourse and anti-extremist discourse, as well as counternarratives, are present. This debate can be understood to be “a digital tug of war” (Lööv, 2015). This said, and using NRM as a case, focus in this article is on how antagonists and protagonists negotiate

the way in which NRM should be portrayed and perceived in computer-mediated discourse (CMD).

CMD is the communication produced when individuals interact while using a digital communication device. CMD varies depending on the properties of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems used, and on the social and cultural context that embeds the Flashback thread (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

Rationale, Aim, and Research Questions

Drawing from discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996), this text explores the *rhetorical resources* used in the Flashback thread “Everything about NRM.” The chosen approach focuses on the rhetorical organization of text and talk, that is, how discourses frame the telling context and the identities of individuals and make sense of events and the way in which words can serve as social actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). Language use is viewed as a social practice—as soon as you speak, you do something (e.g., praise, accuse, argue, entertain, patronize, or contest) within a given context (Billig, 1987/1996; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996).

In this article, the discursive approach involves an analysis of how the parties who are cited relate to the extremist discourse when participating in a “digital tug of war” while they make truth claims about NRM. The aim is to reveal and problematize different truth claims that antagonists and protagonists make that relate to NRM and its ideology, members, and legitimacy—that is, discerning the rhetorical resources that antagonists and protagonists use to justify their statements. The following questions are in focus:

- How and what do NRM antagonists and protagonists convey in Flashback posts about NRM, and its ideology and members?
- How do NRM antagonists and protagonists make truth claims about NRM in Flashback posts?

By answering these questions, this text will contribute to an understanding of how actors use rhetorical resources to make truth claims in a digital tug of war—and what such accounts accomplish in a given digital context (Flashback). In a broader sense, the study may contribute to the understanding of extremist rhetoric on online fora and the way such rhetoric is used to mobilize and recruit sympathizers, and thereby promote democracy and work against extremist movements, their ideology and legitimacy.

Theoretical and Methodological Starting Points

Characteristic of discursive psychology, first developed by Edward and Potter (1992), is its action model (an action and

epistemological orientation). This model can be used to analyze how accounts are constructed to achieve social action(s) in a given context. Thus, when analyzing how an account accomplishes social actions, the local context must be accounted for (“indexicality”; Potter, 1996). Besides accounting for the local context, which here is a Flashback thread, additional contextual layers must be considered when antagonists and protagonists make truth claims (Potter, 1996). Here, this means accounting for the social and political context such as the polarization of left- and right-wing extremist groups, the increasing presence of the right-wing in politics (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016), and the media portrayal of NRM as a threat to society (Blomberg, Båtefalk & Stier, 2018).

Since the Flashback posts are embedded in a wider context, there is much at stake when antagonists and protagonists debate the true nature of NRM. This fact adds another analytical focus to this study, namely, how *dilemmas of stake* are handled (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). In interaction, there is always interest and there is always a stake. Hence, when people argue for their actions and/or versions of truth, there are personal, organizational, and financial or power considerations to account for (Potter, 1996). For instance, if NRM protagonists are perceived to be promoting self-interest by expressing *overt* concern for the movement’s legitimacy, they may lose credibility in interaction that is online. However, it is not only the credibility, legitimacy, and recognition of the movement online as well as offline that are at stake but the identity of the movement. For the same reason, the antagonists need to be trustworthy in their critique of NRM and pursue their version of truth. Keeping this in mind, quoted actors need to display neutrality by balancing *accountability* with *factual accounts* (constructing a reality beyond oneself; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). This means that the quoted actors need to construct their accounts as being statements about a factual reality, for them to be perceived as trustworthy and to be taken seriously in a debate. The action model (with its double-oriented analysis) can discern how quoted actors in the posts use different rhetorical resources to display neutrality.

Based on the understanding that they use rhetorical resources to accomplish social actions, focus is on this rhetorical organization in texts. Common resources in managing dilemmas of stake are factual accounts, for example, pronouns and numbers, and the absence of agency to create an *out-there-ness* (a reality beyond oneself). Other resources used to create credibility and authenticity are *metaphorical expressions* (talking about a subject as a symbol of something else), *categories* and what is associated with the category, *category entitlement* (how certain categories of people are treated as knowledgeable), *extreme case formulation* (extreme, magnifying, and generalizing expressions such as “always,” “total”), and *place* (as a physical setting and/or sense of place with its symbolic; Pomerantz, 1986; Potter,

1996; Stokowski, 2002). Similarly, there are rhetorical resources that undermine factual versions, such as *ironizing* (to joke about and/or emphasize the deceptions; Potter, 1996).

The Empirical Material and Methodological Reflections

To study this “tug of war,” where participants use rhetorical resources in online interactions when making truth claims about NRM, the social media forum Flashback was selected as a case. The reason for this choice is that the Flashback thread “All about NRM” is likely to include both NRM protagonists (supporters and members) and antagonists (critics and enemies). At the same time, it must be noted that it is not possible to discern if posts in the thread originate from *actual* members of NRM, because on Flashback it is possible for anyone to express themselves anonymously—and, for that matter, to remain untruthful about their identity. So, trolling is quite common on Flashback. Therefore, focus in the study is on the debate and truth claims, and not on the individuals themselves. In addition, it is an online form where the use of an extremist rhetoric may mobilize and recruit sympathizers since the forum is open for everyone. This said, everyone uses an alias (fictive signatures such as *goran 77* or *party-with-marty*) when they publish posts.

Flashback is a rather unique Swedish online forum where individuals are free to express and share opinions as long as they abide by its rules. For instance, threats and hate speech are not allowed; nor is the spread of illegal links/material (e.g., child pornography). Rule violations may lead to temporary or lifelong suspension.¹

At present, the website claims to have 1,175,310 members, and on any given day about 30,000 Flashback members can be logged onto the forum (excluding nonmembers who are merely present on the website). A ticking counter on the front page shows the number of new subjects and the number of posts that the various discussion threads contain. By providing this information, and by continuously updating the websites status, the forum is conveyed as a popular website.

The Flashback discussion threads consist of a wide variety of subjects such as sports, hobbies, cultures, and politics—oriented toward people who want to initiate or take part in discussions on such subjects. The website allows visitors to search for subjects, to choose between subjects from a list (affordances, see Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014), and to see both recently discussed subjects in a variety of threads and new posts (uploaded from 12 s ago up to 20 min). Only members can create posts, and on the front page, membership applications are available. Forum moderators are (usually) active in the debates and have both the right and obligation report to the administration if the forum’s rules are violated.

From its start in 2008 to December 31, 2017, the studied Flashback thread, “All about NRM,” contains in total 17,246 posts (and continues to increase by the day). The chosen empirical material consists of 53 posts from the start of the thread and 150 posts during 2015; thereafter, there were 2866 posts for the entire year 2017, and these have been read and sorted. The inclusion criteria for the data collection—a sample of 1546 posts—were that the posts in some respect must discuss the “true nature of NRM” and must involve a rhetorical battle between antagonists and protagonists. Posts that did not fulfill these criteria were omitted. The time period was chosen because the start is important, and the year 2015 because an NRM member held a municipal council position (in a small town for 1 year), which may have impacted on the debate. Finally, the posts from the year 2017 are the most recent in the debate.

The data were analyzed in three steps. First, to identify the typical discussions on NRM’s true nature, the posts were read and reread multiple times. Second, the focus was to identify the accomplished social actions—how and what the posts convey about NRM as they are directed toward each other. In the thread, it is possible to discern how the accounts in the posts are written for a *presumed* audience, consisting of curious individuals, potential members, current members, sympathizers, or critics—both inside and outside the NRM. As it will be shown, this entails a potential dilemma when the organization it portrayed with two contradictory faces; one turned outward toward the general public and the other turned inward toward members and supporters. The face toward the public need to be palatable to outsiders, as democratic when forming a political image—a face that is likely to contradict the face toward supporters/members when discussing internal matters such as strategies.

The third step entailed identifying how dilemmas of stake were handled by the antagonists and protagonists, through the use of rhetorical resources to create account credibility and neutrality (Potter, 1996).

The presentation of empirical data is structured chronologically on the basis of actions achieved in the thread and its constituent posts—i.e., “who is entitled to speak for the organisation?”; “constructing a political image—forming opinion”; and “the upcoming political election—success or not?” The data are then discussed in the light of discursive psychology (see third step above) as well as of the specific characteristic of Flashback, an Internet forum.

Ethical considerations have been taken into account.

As empirical material, Flashback posts are located in the public domain and are, therefore, accessible. The analyzed posts are regarded as *naturally occurring text* and were not written within a research context (Potter, 1996).

To ensure language precision and accuracy, a native English-speaking translator was employed. In the illustrative examples presented, original text content has occasionally been omitted: this is indicated by “. . .”

Findings

The Start of the Thread: Who Is Entitled to Speak for the Organization?

To begin with, it is important to look at the start of the thread (2008). At that point, there is negotiation as to who will lead the thread and who has the right to say anything about the organization (SMR in the post is the forerunner to NRM). This is the first post in the thread by the signee (Saprofyt):

I thought that in this thread we could put questions to people who are active/were active in SMR. This is not to be regarded as a kind of gossip thread—just a regular question thread, exactly like the Ku Klux Klan thread that the moderator [ikh] started.

I’ll begin here:

Is there a thing called “motståndsdaler”? What is required to be a full-fledged member? (Flashback, 2008, January 16, Post 1)

Post 1 asks those who are active and those who were active within the organization to answer questions while making clear that it is not a *gossip thread*. The person initiating the thread asks questions that suggest curiosity as well as a lack of knowledge as a means to demonstrating that it is a regular question thread. The term “regular question thread” signals a climate of openness and willingness to have a discussion. Rhetorically, the use of the term and the seemingly curiously asked questions works to increase the credibility of his or her invitation. Post 1 receives the following response by signee (ikh) who is the moderator:

Keep a close eye on this. If it starts to get out of control and gets filled with loads of lies, the thread will be closed down. We try to avoid smear campaigns on this forum.

Saying that, you shouldn’t expect a man of resistance to answer questions in the thread since as far as I know, there isn’t an official spokesperson in this forum. (Flashback, 2008, 16 January, Post 2)

In Post 2, the moderator (ikh) makes it clear that a response from a *man of resistance* cannot be expected. According to the post, an *official spokesperson* in the forum is lacking—at statement which conveys that (ikh) has insights into the organization and, more indirectly, that the answers are certainly not typical for NRM. Post 2 receives this response from (Saprofyt):

It’s not a requirement. We are quite happy with the previous men of resistance 😊 And as far as I know, you’re not an official spokesperson for the Ku Klux Klan either, in which case it’s not a big deal. (Flashback, 2008, 16 January, Post 3)

Any concern about not receiving a response from an official spokesperson is dismissed with a smiley 😊 and the

statement about being quite happy with the *previous* men of resistance. At the same time, the significance of an official spokesperson is undermined by the indirect criticism aimed at the signee/moderator (ikh); with the statement that he or she *was not an official spokesperson* for the *Ku Klux Klan* despite his or her position as moderator. This indirect criticism is corrected by the (ikh) statement:

There you are really wrong, I have had a number of titles within the KKK. For instance, I have been given the title Grand Titan (. . .) which also gives me the right to be a spokesperson for the organisation. (Flashback, 2008, January 16, Post 5).

However, the fact that a former man of resistance could come to be the spokesperson for the organization, and (ikh) serving as a moderator leads to the following response in Post 4 by signee (langaocb):

How the hell did you get to be the moderator?!? I'm really interested to know what XXX (or whatever his name was) has to say about smr. You are their sympathiser—so for you to be able to decide what is “mud-slinging” or not is insane!!

I'm going to try to get some guy here who has good insight into the organisation, but whatever he says about the Organisation or the Leader will no doubt be seen to be lies and mudslinging by a former man of resistance. (Flashback, 2008, January 16, Post 4)

The moderator position of (ikh) is challenged: he or she is accused of sympathizing with a former man of resistance, which according to the post makes (ikh) less trustworthy in deciding what is true and what is *mudslinging*. In the post, the signee (langaocb) points at the constant and current disputes between different extremist groups about how NRM can and should be understood. There thus exists a fear that the organization and its message are cast in a negative light whenever its sympathizers or members are not there in the forum to defend them.

Also questioned is why supporters of NRM are not more detailed in their responses, if, according to the organization, people are unable to think and feel as they want and how NRM is a sect. The following is a response to this thought:

I can think and feel exactly what I want and no, it's not a sect. Saying that, I have no greater loyalty than to the Organisation, and I have not been given the job to lead its discussion. Instead, I work to drive forward the fight that is necessary. Instead of sitting rotting in front of a computer screen, I prefer to be out active in the streets. (Flashback, 2008, February 6, Post 103)

Post 103 by the signee (D. Zachrisson) dismisses the claim that the organization is a *sect* by saying he or she is free to *think* and *feel*. However, the change in thought in the post with its talk of a strong *loyalty* to the organization with a capital O and *the fight that is necessary* serves to create a picture of a closed culture within the organization. Further, this mirrors a picture of the world as being one in which the

movement must battle an undefined enemy. At the same time, (D. Zachrisson) makes clear that he or she has not been selected to speak for the organization. This suggests that the organization may be concerned about who are spokespersons and how they are portrayed, since the online forum is a place for mobilization and recruitment (Cammaerts, 2012; Conway, 2017).

The next post, 104 by (Sapfyrot), in the thread—a response to the above post—questions how all members in the organization are not of equal worth:

Why can't “regular” members in the “Organisation” say anything? What is it you can say that can be damaging? Aren't all members equal in worth? (Flashback, 2008, February 6, Post 104)

The quotation marks used with *regular* members and the *organization* suggests both direct and indirect criticism—indirect when it is shown that a distinction is made between members within NRM and whether or not NRM really is an organization. The direct critic comes with the question as to why regular members cannot say anything as well as the question *what* they (the members) can *say* that can be *damaging* to the organization? This criticism directed at the organization and its members receives a response by the signee (ikh):

I explained this to you in another thread, and it is because everyone interprets things differently and expresses themselves more or less well. And this creates opportunity for misinterpretation, something that is never good. (Flashback, 2008, February 7, Post 106)

Post 106 demonstrates that (ikh) once again defends his or her position as to who has the right to interpret or speak within NRM. The Post 106 also shows that there is a risk that there be *misinterpretation* if more individuals can be vocal and determines *that is never good*. The stance, in response to the criticism, is somewhat general and can be applied in many contexts, which means that the statement becomes difficult to undermine or criticize (Potter, 1996).

Here, the credibility, legitimacy, and recognition of NRM (Potter, 1996) is at stake. In start of the thread, this stake depends on how the delicate invitation to discuss “Everything about NRM” is handled and developed. As the forum is open for everyone, it is in the interest of members and supporters of NRM, when recruiting new supporters/members, to present the organization in a way that is palatable to many people. Therefore, a continual negotiation takes place, as to the right to express oneself about NRM throughout the entire thread (not only in the start). The online interaction, presented above, can be understood as a tug-of-war as to the claim of truth and the understanding of NRM. In the thread, this is done by giving direct and indirect critique, accusations, and justifications. Alongside this wrangling as to the truth, a sense of fellowship is established between the NRM

protagonists, which serves, as we will see, to strengthen a favorable narrative about the organization (cf. Ekman, 2018).

Constructing a Political Image: Forming Opinion

It becomes apparent that since 2015, NRM has established a stronger position and provides a greater opportunity for protagonists to express themselves in the forum. On more than one occasion in the thread, it becomes clear that NRM is concerned with the building of opinion, as exemplified in a post that calls on NRM members to demonstrate their “toughness” by posting information about the date and time for taking action:

If you feel that the organisation takes too few risks and is not sufficiently “tough” then that’s up to you, but that is irrelevant since we are concerned with the forming of political opinion, and (defensive) violence thus becomes a means that at times must be used and not a goal unto itself. (Flashback, 2015, September 25, Post 12,334)

This call to demonstrate toughness is brushed aside by the comment that *we are concerned with the forming of political opinion*. As a *we* is established—how they stand united—it becomes apparent how they employ or are forced to use (*defensive*) violence as a means and not a goal unto itself. In the post by signee (M. Saxlind), a distinction is made between defensive and offensive violence—i.e., when violence is used only for the purpose of defense. The post serves to represent the organization as politically engaged while placing the responsibility of offensive violence on others.

Continuing throughout 2017, it becomes clear in the thread the way in which NRM employs different media in its opinion-forming efforts, such as Nordfront with its news reports, television, and radio. Frequently, protagonists share links to Nordfront’s articles and video clips that support NRM actions and messages—what is more, there is a wish to see more current news and/or video clips. One direct question in the thread “No broadcast from May 1 in Falun?” (originally an annual workers’ day, but now a wider manifestation of Swedish political parties taking place in several communities and cities in the country; Flashback, 2017, May 1, Post 15,206) receives the following response from signee (Eddan839):

LIVE BROADCAST: Radio Nordfront will broadcast live on web-radio from the Nordiska motståndsrörelsen’s May 1 demonstration in Falun, and Nordfront will also publish pictures, film, and text updates as they happen. (Flashback, 2017, May 1, Post 15,207.)

Block capitals in LIVE BROADCAST marks the fact that developments from the event could be followed live. The use of an abstract actor such as *Radio Nordfront will broadcast live* and *Nordfront will also publish* presents NRM as being

well-organized and as having media resources. Rhetorically, this image of NRM contributes to strengthen the protagonists’ sense of belonging with an organization politically moving forward.

Participation in Almedalen (an annual event for all political parties), as a means to spread their message, is discussed by both antagonists and protagonists, and with both praise and criticism to the NRM speakers:

The live broadcasts at the tent gave the best results: there, you broke new ground. If the foremost goal now is to form opinion, then this type of material needs to be extremely current, the direct verbal confrontation and debate with the leftists. Interesting, stimulating, and compelling with often great entertainment value (. . .). (Flashback, 2017, July 15, Post 15,687)

The use of the metaphorical expression *broke new ground* the signature (Ensamkrigaren) conveys an increasing interest in NRM and what it stands for. Fellowship with NRM is made apparent in proposed strategies for future opinion-forming strategies that involve verbal battles in the public realm to mobilize the organization. Such battles are described using words such as *interesting* and *great entertainment value*, praising NRM for its work at Almedalen. This means, how protagonists, by praising and suggesting strategies NRM, legitimize its ideology and organization—something that may appeal to potential supporters.

The discussions about NRM and Almedalen by antagonists in the thread continue on the theme of great entertainment value, yet with a different emphasis:

Is there such a thing as the “best of almedalen” just for a laugh? (Flashback, 2017, August 7, Post 15,583)

These words *best of almedalen* and the chance to have a *laugh* serve to ridicule and undermine NRM. Post 15,583 receives the following response by signee (ClinicallyBlaze):

I can recommend Magnus Wardmo’s speech. Very funny. (Flashback, 2017, August 7, Post 15,584)

In the subsequent post, one NRM speaker is described as entertaining—*very funny*. After this, the link to the speaker is shared in the thread, where another signee (AcademicMan) continues in the same spirit:

He needs someone to write his speeches. Or something intelligent to say. (Flashback, 2017, August 7, Post 15,595)

In the three posts above, satire is used as a rhetorical resource to criticize NRM’s involvement at Almedalen. It ridicules and belittles the organization and its opinion-forming ambitions (cf. Goodall et al., 2012).

When constructing a political image, the credibility, legitimacy, and recognition of NRM online (also offline) are at

stake (Potter, 1996). To manage this dilemma of stake, the protagonists use rhetorical resources such as the pronoun *we*—creating a sense of *we-ness*; *metaphorical expressions*—to create authenticity as well as *out-there-ness* (Potter, 1996). Likewise, sharing links and clips to demonstrate that NRM is well-organized may have similar rhetorical effects. Even if the protagonists have a stronger position in the thread, the antagonists are making their voice heard by questioning, belittling, and mocking the efforts and competence of the protagonists.

The Upcoming Political Election: Success or Not?

In the discussion forum, the protagonists continue to spread the organization's message and the picture of NRM as opinion former, not least when the posts take up the upcoming election in 2018. There are antagonists who counter the protagonists' foretellings of success. In the post below, Dalarna, Ludvika, and Borlänge feature as places of significance for NRM within Sweden:

Three Sweden Democrats expelled in Borlänge.

They have departed from the party's platform in their statements and according to shared information in their associations. I would guess that NRM is part of this somewhere and somehow. I don't know exactly who the three are and what their status within the community is, but one of them was a top figure in the previous election. Potentially extremely good news ahead of 2018 and efforts in Ludvika–Borlänge.

I have always believed that NRM can make headway in Ludvika based on its own mandate. This may also open the door into Borlänge. (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,704)

The post by the signee (baggebo1) shows that there are politicians (i.e., Sweden Democrats) who have voter support and sympathize with NRM. The signee (baggebo1) indicates that voter support and the connection to NRM may bring a possible success for NRM. Rhetorical resources, such as the extreme case formulation *potentially extremely good news ahead*, and places such as *Ludvika–Borlänge* are used to claim an upcoming success. The signee (baggebo1) also demonstrates his or her loyalty toward the organization, and confidence in its ability to make headway in Ludvika. The following post by signee (wurhan) criticizes and downsizes the hope for potential mobilization:

Actually, I think you're going to be left feeling disappointed after the election considering the suspicions about the bombing.² Generally speaking, people don't look particularly favourably on such things. (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,706)

By referring to a suspected act of violence and to the general category *people*, the message in this post is that NRM will not be successful in the election. In this post, NRM is

also associated with serious crimes. The response by (baggebo1) is as follows:

Even if the three suspects are behind the three explosions, NRM has nothing to do with the issue. Especially not the politicians in Ludvika and Borlänge. People there, are likely more frightened of the extreme mass-immigration and the extreme mass-criminality that followed in the communities. Three bombings that injured one person, one bicycle, and one window frame in Gothenburg. Compare that with all the gang rapes, murders, abuse, etc. that the *blattar* [derogatory term for immigrants in Swedish] are responsible for in Ludvika and Borlänge and then you'll see that it won't matter at all to locals. (. . .) Unlike ordinary people, the [political, *our note*] establishment doesn't like the party (. . .). (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,707)

In the post, the signee (baggebo1) is absolving NRM and local politicians of the accusations of violence. Instead, the responsibility is placed onto “non-typical” NRM members. By associating *extreme mass-immigration* with *the extreme mass-criminality* and is holding immigrants responsibly for *gang rapes* and *abuse*, the signee (baggebo1) also downsizes the consequences of the bombing and contrasts it to local problems. Places (e.g., Ludvika and Borlänge) and extreme case formulations are used as rhetorical resource to legitimize the prioritization of local problems instead of national problems, and to claim that immigrants are the ones committing crimes. When accusing immigrants, the signee (Bagebo1) constructs them as “the others.” By doing this, the signee legitimizes NRM ideology as well as strengthens the political establishment between protagonists on the thread (cf. Baumgarten, 2017; Ekman, 2018). At the end in the post the political establishment is described as possible hinder to success, the message is that *ordinary people* recognize the actual worth of NRM and the possibilities that come with it. In another post, the signee (baggebo1) builds on the argument of there being good chances of success in the election:

In Ludvika and Borlänge, NRM has a tremendously well-functioning organisation and has demonstrated over a long time that it is on the side of the people. The public has a lot of confidence in these public figures. (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,709)

Using extreme case formulations, *a tremendously well-functioning organization*, the post expresses how NRM has established itself in local places where it has a great deal of support among the *general public*. The two posts are contested:

Who do you mean by “ordinary people”? I think you need to get out of the bubble you seem to be living in. I think there are very few people who actually like Nazis (. . .). (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,710)

The signee (wurhan) of Post 14,710 is critical to the use of the category *ordinary people* referred to by the former signee (Bagebo1) in his/hers posts. In claiming that (Bagebo1)

does not have the true opinion on reality of the majority, (wurhan) uses a metaphorical expression: *need to get out of the bubble you seem to be living in*. When stating that *very few people who actually like Nazis*, the signee (wurhan) also takes the position of being part of the majority.

Another attempt to demonstrate progress for NRM is the post by signee (Rouen) and the link it includes, “Read and learn. https://sv.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pär_Öberg” (Flashback, 2017, July 23, Post 15,813). The post is met by sarcasm:

18 votes! Wow, NRM looks like it’s going to take power in Ludvika next year with that kind of progress. (Flashback, 2017, July 23, Post 15,814)

The signee (Kebabfysiker) uses the words *18 votes* to belittle the claims regarding power and the local successes that are depicted by the protagonists in several posts. The antagonists, for their part, continue with different arguments, talking about how NRM will not achieve success in the election:

Not a chance that NRM will get in in 2018. Just look at how things went for SvP [The Swedes Party, *our note*] the last time. Despite a serious attempt and—by their standards—a massive effort in the election campaign, things went so bad that they had to disband the party. And NRM is even more radical. They will likely be able to pull off a coup at the municipal level here and there, but they won’t get anywhere near parliament: they won’t even get anywhere close to 1%.

For this kind of party to be able to secure serious support, a complete system collapse is required. A national economy that has crashed, fierce unemployment, high inflation, demonstrations and riots on the streets (. . .). (Flashback, 2017, July 24, Post 15,840)

The signee (RiverStyx) claims that NRM does not stand a chance in the 2018 national election. This claim is reinforced by comparing NRM to the Swedes Party (SvP) and its political failure—and by claiming that NRM is more radical than SvP. However, the signee gives NRM some recognition for its partial success at the local level, but only through the means of a political coup.

Apart from foreseeing the possible success at the local level, to indicate NRM’s lack of success at the national level, a percentage is given: *they won’t even get anywhere close to 1%*. To underscore the claim of an election failure, the signee (RiverStyx) uses metaphorical expressions such as *system collapse, a national economy that has crashed, fierce unemployment and riots on the streets*.

Posts that are critical in nature appear in the posts when NRM’s success is openly questioned. One example is the one by signee (boobacar): “Does anyone in SMR *truly* believe that you will be in power one day? You’ve been up and running for over 20 years, and it wouldn’t exactly appear as

though you are about to win anytime soon?” (Flashback, 2017, November 30, Post 17,077).

In the online discussions on how to communicate the success or failure of NRM, place—i.e., the cities of Ludvika and Borlänge—is used as a rhetorical resource. Place is central, not only in discussing the upcoming election, but to legitimize the organization and its ideology when associating violence and crime with the immigrants in the local community. Similarly, the use of the category “ordinary people” hints at NRM’s local community support. By belittling and ridiculing NRM, critical voices challenge the idea of NRM’s local support, prospect of success in the election and claim of power. Once again, at stake for NRM is credibility, legitimacy, and recognition as a political actor at the national level with a strong base among ordinary people in the local community (Potter, 1996).

Discussion

The studied Flashback thread can be understood as an ongoing rhetorical battle between protagonists and antagonists when it comes to unraveling the “truth” about NRM. This battle over truth claims entails a potential dilemma as the organization is portrayed as having two contradictory faces; on one hand, NRM as a democratic, credible, and legitimate organization and, on the other hand, a violent, secluded, and nondemocratic organization. For both protagonists and antagonists, the credibility, legitimacy, and recognition of NRM is at stake. The antagonists handle the dilemma of stake by using rhetorical resources such as humor, ridiculing, and sarcasm—or by portraying NRM as an organization made up by violent criminals. By contrast, the protagonists use rhetorical resources to promote and establish NRM as a loud and frank voice in Swedish politics. In one of the posts, it is portrayed as law-abiding—but it is a conditional adherence to the laws and norms of society. The message is that it is up to “others” to decide whether NRM is to remain within the realms of the law.

Over time, the NRM protagonists strengthen their position in the thread, despite of measures taken by antagonists to accuse, discredit, ridicule, or belittle NRM. The use of ridicule and irony as rhetorical resources to undermine factual accounts and/or to counter the extremist discourse is consistent with other studies (Goodall et al., 2012).

The protagonists’ use of rhetorical resources to convey an image of NRM as a credible, legitimate, and resourceful political actor is a strategy to recruit new members and to attract sympathizers, particularly for the upcoming 2018 election. Despite the louder voices of the antagonists, the protagonists have taken more space—by sharing video clips and articles conveying their message. In a series of posts, NRM is portrayed as proactive and successful—something that is done with references to *place* and with its self-proclaimed access to media.

Furthermore, the use of place and the “local” and its stories as rhetorical resources, which circulate in social media, may pave the way for the spread of rumors, which, in turn may (re)produce notions of otherness, prejudices, and stereotypes related to different minority groups (Löow, 2015; Potter, 1996; Stokowski, 2002). One example that reappears in a post is this one: *the extreme mass-immigration and the extreme mass-criminality that followed in the communities. . . all the gang rapes, murders, abuse, etc. that the blattar are responsible for in Ludvika and Borlänge* (Flashback, 2017, February 8, Post 14,707). The depicted images of threat to the local community are frequent in right-wing extremist rhetoric and aim to legitimize the organization’s position and activities, as well as to communicate their strong bonds to and feelings for the district (Atton, 2006; Baumgarten, 2017; Löow, 2015). In the same way, antagonists can use place to stress the weak geographical position of the supporters—in this digital tug of war.

Conclusion

Unlimited and unconditional access to social media such as Flashback has enhanced the ability of nondemocratic movements in their efforts to attract and recruit new members, mobilize support, and influence public opinion. Keeping this in mind, the online presence of and access to NRM’s ideological projections, rhetoric, and arguments, may trigger an increase in the recruitment to and the support for NRM. In other words, what happens in the virtual world has consequences in and for the physical world and vice versa (see Löow, 2015).

The preceding discussion is an attempt to explain how language is used to make truth claims and, in such a way, how it creates our “reality.” What is more, it demonstrates how social media and a prevailing rhetoric characterize truth claims in the case of extremism. In line with Baumgarten (2017) and Löow (2015), it also shows how ideology and rhetoric can aim to promote or counteract recruitment to and mobilization of extremist movements. By doing these things, the discussion adds to the general understanding of how rhetorical resources can function, and how they can be used and handled by both protagonists and antagonists when they make truth claims on social media. Such an understanding is crucial given the intensified presence of various forms of extremist ideology in social media, the expansion of extremist right-wing groups, and political parties with such profiles, growing and gaining ground in Denmark, France, and Greece (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Angouri & Wodak, 2014) in recent years.

Finally, this text shows how intolerance and extremism can be expressed, how social media communication *is* action and how we, as human beings, live in a world of language, narratives, and rhetoric. This notion is essential when working against and combatting extremism in all its shapes and forms.

Authors Note

Ethical considerations have been taken into account using the Swedish Research Council’s Codex (www.vr.se) and the recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee on Ethics and Internet Research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. <https://www.flashback.org/regler>; important to note is that the servers are located in the United States, which means that the postings are consistent with U.S. legislation.
2. The signee (wurhan) is referring to bombing in Gothenburg that three NRM members were accused of.

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