

How Right-Wing Populists Engage with Cross-Cutting News on Online Message Boards: The Case of *ForoCoches* and Vox in Spain

Online message boards have arguably become important conduits for fringe ideas to get injected into mainstream politics. Critics contend that message boards draw people in using memes and humor critiquing and engaging with mainstream media (Moore 2018; Phillips 2015; Zannettou et al. 2018b)—or worse, forms of “dark participation” (Quandt 2018)—which in turn have a corrosive effect on civic life. The rise of right-wing populism around the world has also been linked to the use of these message boards, however, these relationships are not well understood (Colley and Moore 2020). Clarifying how these movements’ supporters use message boards is important to understand their role in the global rise of the far-right (Mudde 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017).

This study focuses on one such political party in Spain (Vox) and its supporters’ use of *ForoCoches*, a site for car enthusiasts. Like other prominent message boards such as 4chan and 8chan aligned with right-wing populism, observers of Spanish politics have heavily focused on the relationship between *ForoCoches* and the electoral successes of Vox, accusing the message board of amplifying the party’s rhetoric or even being used by Vox as a tool for organizing and campaigning.¹²³⁴

This study uses an original corpus of *ForoCoches* posts from threads referencing Vox between 2013-2019 (N = 121,783 messages). We examine the URLs users shared in these threads and the contents of their posts to understand how message board users and party supporters communicated on the site. While popular press coverage of the message board and prior theories about online discussion networks suggest communication patterns on the platform might resemble an “echo chamber,” we find patterns of discussion that look considerably

different. Users exchanged links to both mainstream news media as well as cross-cutting information sources. What's more, they tended to do so as part of discussions about policy and politics—forms of deliberative talk most similar to those championed as normatively ideal from a democratic perspective (Cramer Walsh 2004; Gamson 1992). Thus, our findings suggest that political message board discussions—even in contexts where supporters espouse illiberal, regressive, and extreme political positions—can nonetheless resemble normatively positive deliberative spaces. These results complicate conventional notions about the value of political talk, especially online, as a democratically desirable end in and of itself.

Online Message Boards as Both a Positive and Negative Force in Liberal Democracy

Online message boards pre-date social media as repositories for structured dialogue, but they continue to attract users and play an influential role in politics. Message board affordances like anonymity, minimal formal site regulation, and limited access to small-group interactions can foster political mobilization (Beyer 2014) while serving as safe spaces for deliberation, community-building, and dissent (Jenkins 2006; Moore 2018). Prior research on message boards, however, has focused primarily on a handful of English-language sites (Daniels 2018; Hawley 2017; Zannettou et al. 2018a) and has sometime neglected ways in which these same affordances may also promote extremism, attract disaffected individuals, or otherwise contribute in negative ways to democratic life through providing spaces for “dark participation” (Quandt 2018). In this section, we offer two competing (if not incompatible) theoretical perspectives about the role played by online message boards in democracy: first, as spaces for illiberalism and extremism; second, as spaces for deliberation and dissent.

Spaces for Illiberalism and Extremism?

Most recent scholarly attention paid to online message boards has focused on the prominent roles they have played alongside the growth of extreme right-wing movements. Large

numbers of 4chan users, for example, campaigned for Donald Trump in 2016 (Hine et al. 2017) and the site was fertile ground for the “alt-right” (Colley and Moore 2020; Daniels 2018; Nagle 2017; Moore 2018). Similarly, 2chan, Japan’s largest message board, hosts far-right and ultra-nationalistic messages, which have been connected to xenophobic attacks (Yamaguchi 2013). Like the anti-New Deal radio broadcasters in the US in the 1930s (Culbert 1973; Douglas 2013; Goodman 2011) and the rise of right-wing talk radio 50-years later (Jamieson and Cappella 2008), today’s online message boards allow communication on the fringes of public life (Douglas 1987), benefiting from low barriers to entry, nearly ubiquitous access, and digital affordances that place “the people” at its center (Baldwin-Philippi 2019; Blassnig and Wirz 2019).

Research emphasizing the harms caused by message boards has often focused on anonymity, which allows hate speech to proliferate (Hine et al. 2017).⁵ Moore (2018) argued that 4chan’s power resides in the platform’s toxic culture, its users’ disinhibition and desire to transgress, compete for attention, and troll through scandalizing with mockery (Moore 2018; Phillips 2015; 2018). Extremist discourse travels into mainstream media when memes become viral, providing these users with additional media and political influence (Colley and Moore 2020; Moore 2018; Phillips 2015, 2018; Zannettou et al. 2018b). Such features extend to message boards broadly (Colley and Moore 2020), including the focus of this article, *ForoCoches* in Spain.

Thorsten Quandt (2018) has termed this negative side of engagement on digital communication platforms “dark participation,” or “the evil flip side of citizen engagement” online (37). Quandt argued that prior work on digital media failed to consider the many ways in which affordances of new communication technologies might be used in “dark” or harmful ways

by political extremists or state actors. Research on online news comment sections, for example, once considered them an idealized Habermasian public sphere (Ruiz et al. 2011; Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). More recently, however, scholarship has begun to examine comment sections through a less favorable lens as spaces where incivility is rampant (Coe et al. 2014; Muddiman and Stroud, 2017) and anonymity corrodes the quality of the exchanges (Santana 2014).

Spaces for Deliberation and Dissent?

Prior research on online message boards' positive features should not be entirely disregarded, however. This work focused on message boards' potential to enhance the public sphere (Rheingold 2000), facilitate political mobilization and social change (Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2008), and promote the formation of affective communities bonded by common interests (Baym 2000). This research generally focused on ways these platforms allowed for large-scale collective action and efficient transmission of information, which can foster cultural and political grassroots organizing toward more egalitarian societies (Jenkins 2006).

A main reason why message boards can be a positive force for democracy is that such platforms create spaces for informal political talk to flourish alongside other non-political interactions (Wright 2012). As political talk in and of itself is often heralded as normatively positive (Cramer Walsh 2004; Gamson 1992, but see Schudson 1997), open digital spaces that allow for an unfettered, diverse exchange of ideas likewise have the potential to be a positive force for enriching democracy (see Mutz 2006). The same minimal inclusion barriers and anonymity, which can be so corrosive, have also been shown to allow dissent to flourish in ways not always possible offline (see Van Duyn 2018).

Nevertheless, we know little about how to characterize the nature of political talk in contemporary online message boards and whether online message boards in practice actually

serve as spaces for deliberation and dissent. Popular press coverage about online message boards often assumes that conversations there look more like “echo chambers” (Sunstein 2007), spaces for like-minded individuals with shared worldviews to trade information that aligns with and reinforces their pre-existing ideas. This “echo chamber” hypothesis, while rooted in well-documented tendencies toward selective exposure (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2010), has been challenged by research showing that most people online are exposed to a relatively diverse range of sources (Flaxman et al. 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). Only about 5% of internet news users are found in ideologically one-sided “echo chambers” (Fletcher, Robertson and Nielsen 2021). But online message boards may attract precisely the sort of politically engaged individuals who are most likely to experience one-sided news media consumption (Dubois and Blank 2018; Guess 2021). They are emotionally charged digital spaces fueled by anger, also shown to facilitate “echo chamber”-like media consumption habits (Wollebæk et al. 2019).

Understanding political discourse in such spaces means grappling with the relationship between digital platforms and the broader media environment. What gets shared on online message boards does not occur in a vacuum, nor is its reach limited to the platform itself (Beyer 2014; Phillips 2015). Scholars have emphasized feedback loops of influence connecting social and mainstream media, public opinion, and elite messaging. Information flows in multi-directional ways across the “hybrid media system” (Chadwick 2007; 2017; Wells et al. 2016). Even Trump’s successful candidacy in 2016, as synonymous as it became with Twitter, cannot be understood in isolation from conventional media coverage, which Wells et al. (2016) show was highly intertwined with social media interactions.

We place *ForoCoches* in the context of Spain’s hybrid media landscape. Spain makes a compelling case study to examine how right-wing populist supporters use online message boards

for three reasons. First, although Spain is the last European country to see a far-right party obtain representation in Congress, the political successes achieved by Vox have been sudden and significant. In six years, the party capitalized on anti-immigration attitudes and opposition to Catalan secessionism (Pardos-Prado 2020), obtaining representation in the Andalusian regional government in 2018 and becoming the third strongest force in Congress in 2019 (see Alonso and Espinosa-Fajardo 2021 for an illustration of Vox's influence in policy-making even when out of office). This was the first time a far-right party obtained representation in Spain since the country's transition to democracy, challenging Spain's exceptionalism in its resistance against the far-right (Pardos-Prado 2020). Second, Vox's rise has been closely connected to the largest Spanish-language online message board: *ForoCoches*, which translates literally as "Car Forum." The site has been described as a "4chan wannabe"⁶ and criticized for its misogynistic culture and embrace of populist, right, and far-right ideologies.⁷⁸ The message board has also been linked to "dark participation" in pop culture (e.g., votes in talent shows) as well as politics. Third, while previous research has examined political talk in online message boards in the US (e.g. Colley & Moore, 2020), the American two-party system and fragmented commercial media environment make it difficult to generalize to other political information environments. Evidence from Spain offers a comparative counterpoint necessary to understand these phenomena better.

Research Questions

This study focuses on three questions aimed at better understanding how right-wing message board users communicate with each other on the site. Specifically, we focus on the links users referenced in the messages they posted in Vox-related threads. Whereas previous research (e.g., Pak et al. 2020) has looked at links to observe relationships between media outlets, here we use links to analyze the sources of information users engaged with while conversing with each

other and how such links were referenced in these exchanges. Our aim in doing so is to identify (a) the kinds of information that *ForoCoches* users in Vox-related threads engage with (i.e., whether news media, political parties, or other sources) and (b) whether such sources are ideologically diverse or mainly one-sided. Put in terms of research questions, we first focus on whether users shared news content from mainstream or alternative media sources versus links to political party-sponsored websites or social media accounts (**RQ1**. Which kinds of links are shared by *ForoCoches* users?). We ask a second related research question (**RQ2**. How ideologically diverse are the news sources shared by users?) aimed at assessing whether the news sources users shared can be characterized as ideologically diverse or instead one-sided.

We frame each as research questions rather than hypotheses because prior research does not offer a clear expectation about the degree to which users on a message board like *ForoCoches* might share links to news content or other political information. Nor does it provide a consistent threshold for evaluating what constitutes an “echo chamber” versus simply an unbalanced news environment or media diet (for a discussion of this problem, see Guess 2021).

Third, we also seek to understand (c) the nature of the conversations on the message board when links are shared. In so doing, we extend beyond the concept of “echo chambers,” which focuses mainly on information exposure, and instead analyze how links are used in exchanges between users—intentions that are important to clarify in the context of increasing political polarization internationally (Bruns, 2019). Since exposure alone to cross-cutting information on the site does not necessarily mean users are engaging with sources in good faith—they may be counter-arguing (Bright et al. 2020), which may motivate further extremism (Bail et al. 2018), or not (Mutz, 2002)—we examine users’ discursive practices in conversations where links are shared (**RQ3**. What discursive practices do users engage in when sharing links?).

By discursive practices, we refer to dimensions of discourse that entail a text's production, distribution, and consumption, and which depend on the social contexts in which these activities take place (Fairclough, 1992). In examining how links are used, we seek to account for the context surrounding the way links are used, assessing why and how users might distribute links to these sites, and how users engage with the sites linked in the posts analyzed.

Our purpose here is to offer much needed empirical, descriptive evidence about what kinds of news and information *ForoCoches* users share on the site in Vox-related threads and how such links are used in conversation in order to gauge to what extent use of the online message board resembles prior theories about its positive or negative impact on democracy.

Methods and Data

To study political talk about Vox on *ForoCoches*, we collected a large, original corpus of threads mentioning the party on the site. In this section we detail the procedures followed for assembling and analyzing our data.

Thread Selection and Message Scraping

This study draws on a random sample of *ForoCoches* threads, making use of the platform's architecture, which assigns a numeric code to each thread sequentially in the order it is created. Using a random number generator and a Python script, we assembled a list of 1 million threads created between January 1, 2013, and June 4, 2019, (out of a total of more than 4 million possible threads).⁹ From that larger list, we identified 2,438 threads in which "Vox" was mentioned in the title—approximately 0.35% of all threads on the site during this period, excluding deleted threads. Roughly 80% of those Vox-related threads were publicly accessible to non-members of the forum ($N_{threads} = 2,007$). Private threads were excluded from the analysis.¹⁰ We then scraped the contents of all messages in these public threads, producing a corpus of more

than 120,000 Vox-related messages by more than 22,000 unique users ($N_{messages} = 121,783$; $N_{users} = 22,718$).

We focused specifically on the URLs shared by users in these posts (see Fig. 1 for summary of the study's design), which we extracted using an automated method and then manually coded for the type of content they referred users to. We found that the volume of posts generally increased in the days following major events involving the political party Vox with most posts occurring in 2018-2019, which adds to our confidence that our sampling methods captured the most relevant threads involving the political party (see Appendix C in the Supplementary Information file).

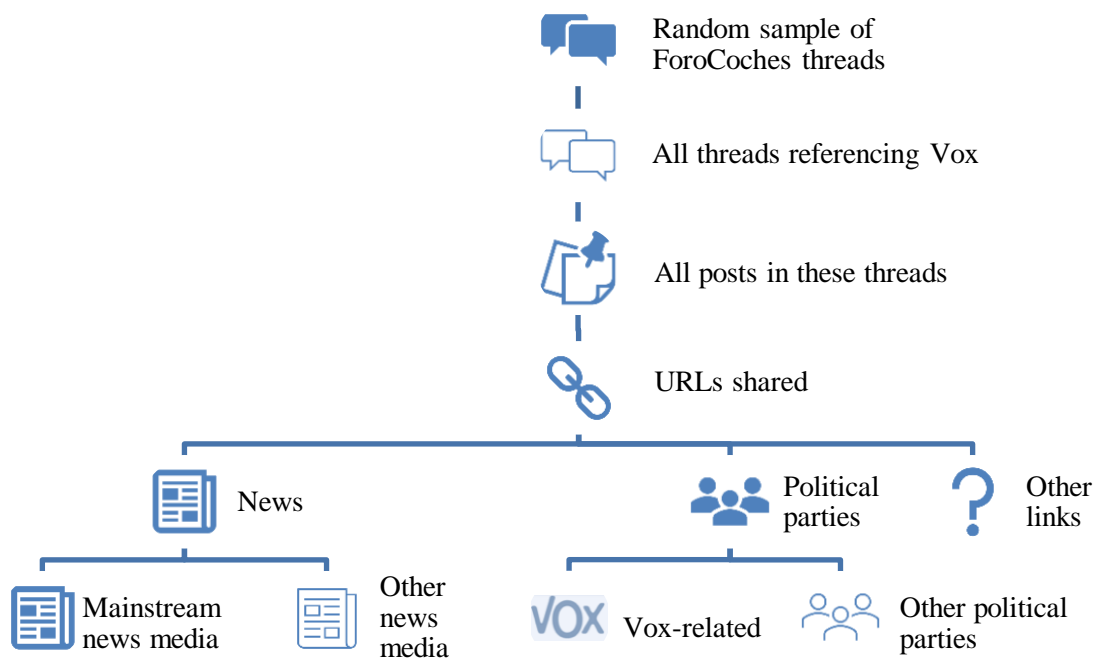


Figure 1. Data scraped from *ForoCoches* posts used in this study.

Coding shared URLs

To analyze the links shared in these posts, we aggregated URLs at the domain level, tabulated the total number of links posted from each domain, and classified domains using

coding guidelines we developed, which are described in Table A1 in the Supplementary Information file. We classified domains based on whether they belonged to news organizations or political parties (Vox and others), including their social media pages. News domains were further classified into mainstream news media (including public media) and other news media, which included other mainstream journalistic sites, non-mainstream news sites, and “fake news” sites. This last category was used sparingly to label only those sites that had been widely accused of misinforming by legitimate news sources and/or judicial proceedings.¹¹¹² News sites were also categorized based on whether they served local, national, or international audiences.

Nationally-focused news sites ($N_{URLs} = 456$) were then placed on a 7-point ideological scale from far-left (pro-communism/Marxism) to far-right (supporting Vox, embracing Francoist ideals or attacking liberal public figures).¹³¹⁴ Where possible, to categorize domains ideologically, we drew on previous analyses of the Spanish media environment including studies conducted by Cardenal et al. (2019) and Majó-Vázquez and González-Bailón (2019). Cardenal et al. (2019) used audience perceptions of media slant to categorize outlets, while Majó-Vázquez and González-Bailón (2019) inferred news outlets’ slant from their audiences’ self-reported ideological leaning. The approaches were correlated with each other but led to some discrepancies. To break ties or classify sites not analyzed in prior studies, we followed Almirón’s (2006) and Pineda and Almirón’s (2013) method, which assigned ideological slant to Spanish media by consulting secondary sources including domain registration sites, commercial registers, media reports, editorials, and editors’ opinion pieces. We elaborate on our approach in Appendix B in the Supplementary Information file.

Finally, to understand users’ discursive practices when sharing links (RQ3), we performed a discourse analysis on posts in a subsample of threads that either contained Vox-

related links ($N=192$) or links to center-left and left-leaning news outlets ($N=242$). Practical constraints prevented us from examining the entire corpus, so we instead focused on a strategically selected subsample for theoretically driven reasons. Threads containing links to Vox-produced content allowed us to examine whether message board participants uncritically shared party messages or engaged in more open-ended conversation about it. Likewise, examining link-sharing of left-leaning news content allowed us to assess the apparent intention behind such theoretically unexpected sharing and how other message board users reacted to information such information. We took a qualitative discourse analysis approach, as opposed to a more typical content analysis approach, because of the complexities of the characteristics we sought to examine. As Colley and Moore (2020) argue, discourse analysis allows for examining the deeper, nuanced and culturally rooted meaning underlying communicative exchanges. We followed a process as outlined by Fairclough (2001), which first entails describing the text, then uncovering assumptions in the interaction through interpretation, and lastly considering how the apparent social context shapes the exchanges.

Findings

We organize our findings in two parts corresponding to our research questions. In the first part, we examine URLs shared in Vox-related threads (RQ1) and assess how ideologically diverse the news sources were within these exchanges (RQ2). In the second part, we present results from our discourse analysis of these messages (RQ3). Results show that most links in these exchanges pointed to mainstream news sites and domains that were relatively diverse ideologically—undercutting the theory that political conversation in online message boards resembles an “echo chamber.” Results from the second part show that users generally shared

links as evidence to back up their arguments or forms of communication that most closely resemble normatively positive deliberative exchanges—albeit for illiberal ends.

Examining the kinds of content (RQ1) and ideological diversity of news sources shared by message board users (RQ2)

To better understand how and what information diffused among *ForoCoches* users, we first examined what kinds of URLs users shared. We found links to conventional news sources constituted nearly 40% of all links in Vox-related threads while general information sites (e.g., Google, Wikipedia) and social media websites (including Twitter and YouTube) followed far behind. Websites associated with Vox, including their social media accounts, was the fourth most shared type of link among the sampled messages. (For a complete list of the 30 most frequently included domain names, see Table A2 in the Supplementary Information file.) In Fig. 2, we plot the share of links posted for each category, which shows the important role played by conventional news media as well as the prominent role played by the party in disseminating its messages on the site.

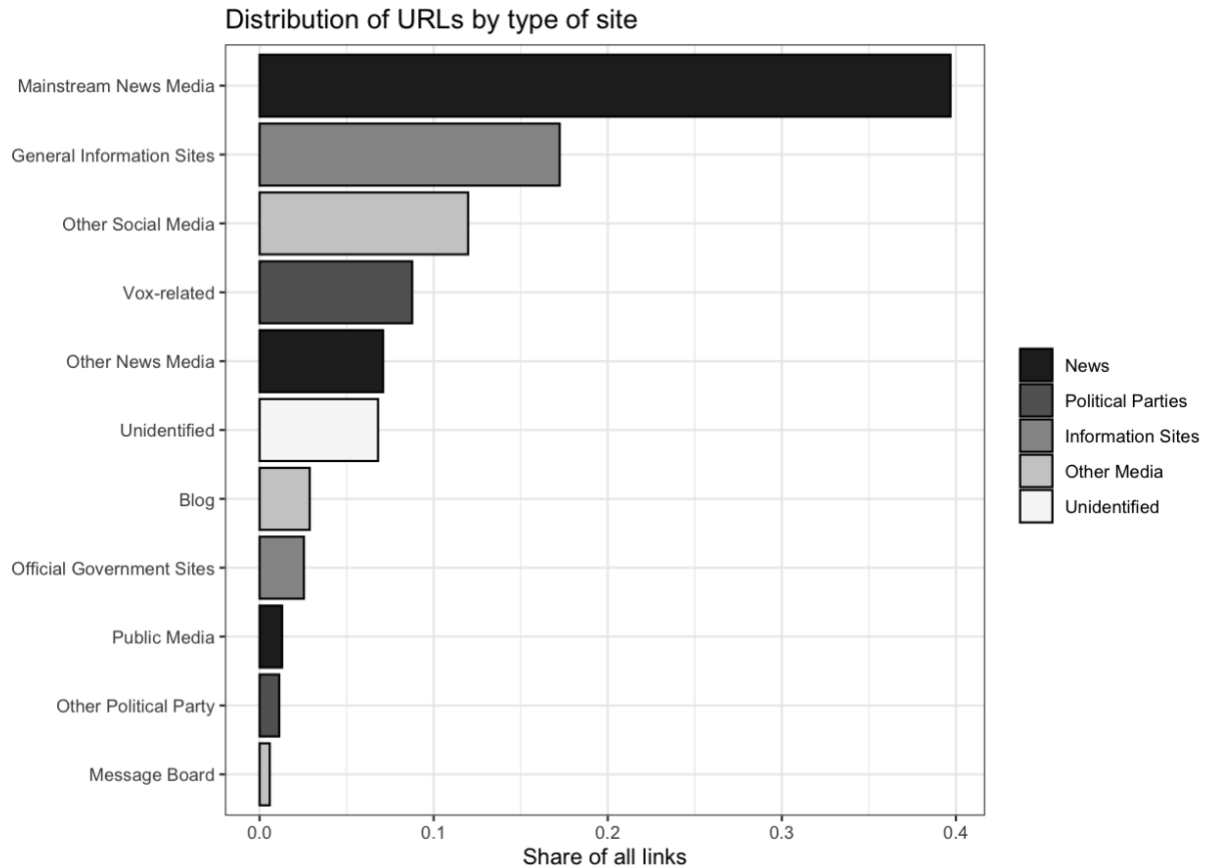


Figure 2. Links posted by type in messages on *ForoCoches* threads including “Vox” in their title. Links to social media sites where the username was identified as a Vox-related account, or another political party are coded under the relevant heading, while the rest was coded under “other social media.” A total of 2,396 links were posted in these messages.

Next, we evaluated the ideological diversity in online conversations on the message board by examining the specific links users shared to news sources. While the “echo chamber” hypothesis suggests we would find a preponderance of links to news sources aligned with Vox’s far-right ideology, alternative theories about message boards as more deliberative spaces that open up opportunities for dissent suggest more diverse news sources might circulate instead.

We plot the results of our analysis of URLs’ ideological leanings in Fig. 3. Although right-wing sources were somewhat more likely to be shared, our results reflect a wide-ranging distribution of sources and do not resemble an “echo chamber” of like-minded content. These

results do not substantively differ when we limit our coding of websites' ideologies to those used solely in previous studies (see the Supplementary Information file).

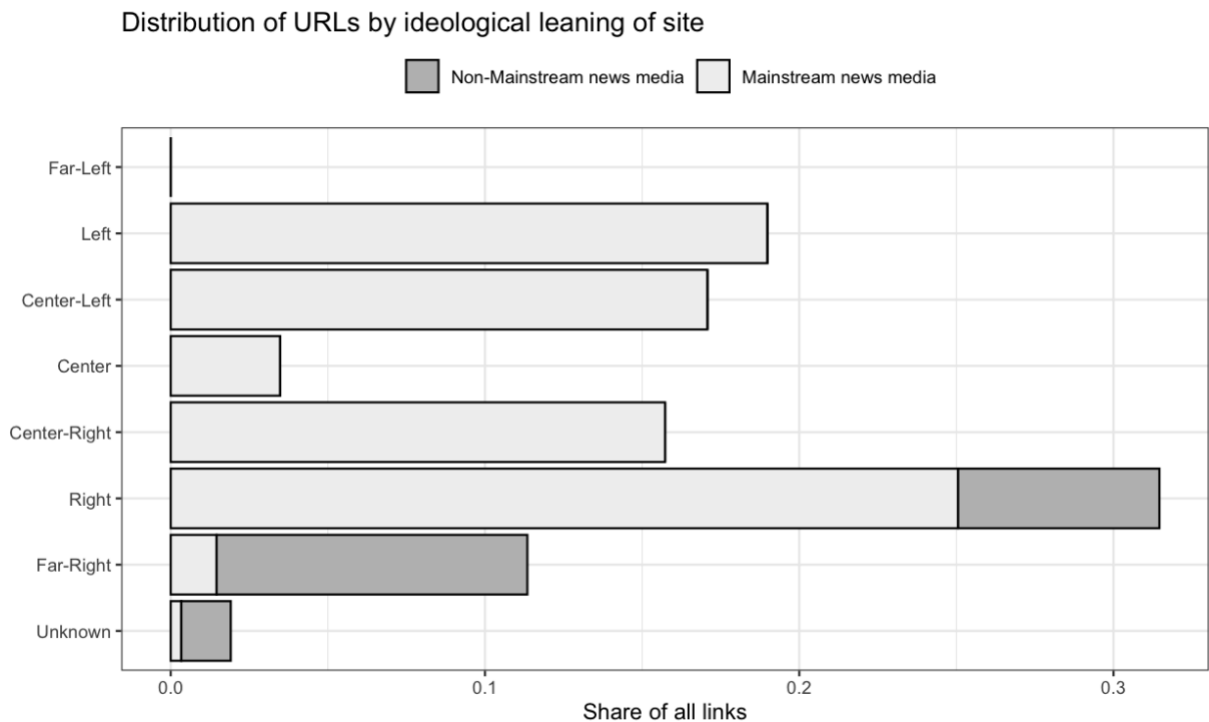


Figure 3. Share of news media links shared in Vox-related threads coded by ideological leaning, excluding all international and local news sites.

Defining discursive practices that users engage in when sharing links (RQ3)

A discourse analysis allowed for a further examination of the context in which users shared links on *ForoCoches* (RQ3). Our analysis revealed three main discursive practices that users engaged in when sharing these links: (1) opening debate, (2) argument-building and providing evidence, and (3) promoting the party. Where example posts are provided for illustrative purposes, we translated the messages into English.¹⁵

Opening debate

We found that Vox-related links were often shared in threads where users invited community members to debate specific subjects including their opinions about Vox, seeking to clarify the party's specific policies (regarding taxes, immigration, etc.) and their electoral

program's pros and cons. In some cases, users explicitly asked the community for information about the party:

—*Shurs*¹⁶, I would like to know what they propose, any kind
ForoCochoero?
—Here's their electoral program for the last general election [link
to Vox's document].

Additionally, users shared their experiences, for example voting for the party, and asked others to help them make sense of them.

I went to the polls and... I could not find Vox's ballot. What
happened?

Like with Vox-related links, *ForoCoches* users shared links to left-leaning news outlets to add to discussions and spur debate, which was particularly common among the threads analyzed. Users sharing links did not necessarily disclose their position beyond selecting literal excerpts from the news article shared. However, it was understood in the community that they were doing so as a form of political talk, providing evidence around issues being discussed, or implicitly inviting collective interpretation. This practice was well received by other users, as they proceeded to provide commentary, analysis, and their opinions. For example, a user opened a thread with the following headline from the newspaper *ElDiario.es*, and linked it to the full story:

“Ciudadanos’ [Citizens party] spokesperson at the Valencian
parliament: ‘Listening to Vox’ protests is scary’.”

Although the opening user did not include any comments, the post prompted political discussion, with the post immediately following stating:

“What they are really scared about is the fact that Vox will destroy
them in the next election.”

Argument building and providing evidence

When conversations evolved into discussions about the party's issue stances, electoral program or ideology, users often included links to Vox's website, party materials like press releases, and other Vox-produced media content to support their arguments:

[Link to Vox's site] Ctrl-F 'Abortion'. Only result:
[...]
Remove unessential surgeries from public healthcare (sex change, abortion...)
[...]
[Link to Vox's document]
[...]
Long term: to reach '0 abortion' after a calm social and scientific debate in a pro-life social context.

The language used in these posts, including the previous example, resembled that found in the linked pages, even including literal excerpts of the tweets, articles, and sites. In other words, users helped amplify and disseminate the party's official messages and positions.

Links to cross-cutting news outlets were also used as supporting evidence for users' specific political arguments. This applied to legacy media outlets like *El País* and to digital ones like *ElDiario.es* geared toward younger, digitally native audiences. Users supported their arguments with evidence from a range of news outlets with diverse political leanings. For example, the same user would provide links to *ABC* and *El Plural*, *OkDiario* and *El País*, or *Libertad Digital* and *ElDiario.es*:

Here come the patriotic defenders...The dude's last name is Smith [talking about Vox's Secretary General], a British pirate's last name.

Ortega Smith has an arrest warrant in the United Kingdom for one of the grandest feats for Spain and Vox in the last years: carrying a 30-kilo Spanish flag and swimming into the rock [Gibraltar], climbing it, raising the flag, and getting out of there like a Green Beret...did I say Green Beret? He was a Green Beret. [Link to *ABC*]. [Link to *El Plural*].

In another example:

I am cracking up with the globalist *progremitas* [derogatory; Podemos supporters] [...]. Calling Vox stale. When they are [...] persecuting those who think differently. [...]
[Link to OkDiario article about Podemos supporting an anti-homophobic demonstration in a high school where a Vox member teaches]
[Link to *El País* article about Podemos defending inclusive language].

Perhaps because of the pervasiveness of trolling and a continuous effort to challenge each other's claims, there appeared to be a norm on the *ForoCoches* message board of using links defensively as evidence to back up claims, with users often demanding such evidence when it was not provided. This norm around linking to sources could explain why users made sure to include a range of media outlets—to guard against being attacked for not doing so:

I'm not going to assess whether it's true or not...But do you expect to stir up any conscience when you didn't care that a certain far-left party was funded by you-know-who? [...]. —Any sources documenting such direct funding to Podemos?

In another example, a user explicitly called out another user for not including a link to an original source:

[Quoting thread's opening post] Why didn't you also add the original source?

In other cases, users simply included links to non-right-wing sources as a form of information sharing:

Metroscopia [polling agency] October: PSOE wins the election and Vox reaches 5.1% of votes. Sources: [link to *La Información*].
[Link to *ElDiario.es*].

While ironic use of these links was not pervasive, source credibility—and leaning—was included in users' debates found in the threads analyzed and used to discredit users' arguments. For example, users criticized a thread opener for including a link to *ElDiario.es*, to which the

initiator replied with another link explaining that the article's author was recognized with an award for journalistic excellence. Vox supporters on *ForoCoches* used left-wing news media to strengthen their claims, making arguments such as:

You are lying. Even *ElDiario.es* says Vox is right.

The discourse analysis on posts containing links to left-leaning news media outlets revealed that such news sources were used by a range of users: from those who were clearly identifiable as Vox opponents as well as Vox supporters. As per research on the "hostile media effect" (Gunther and Schmitt 2004), there were some isolated examples where links to left-leaning content were provided and cited as evidence of perceived media manipulation against Vox. For example, one user posted,

...*La Sexta* [...] did exactly the same, they lied [...], it was so shameless, especially knowing that they [Vox] have explained it repeatedly, so if you'd rather believe the media manipulation, it's your [expletive] problem.

Promoting the party

Lastly, we found that Vox-related links were generally used to open discussions in threads concerning Vox's perceived feats and successes. Take, for example:

... Iván Vélez, will be Cuenca's Vox candidate for Congress. [Link to Vox's tweet] Great signing.

Criticism was also at times present in these posts opening up threads:

[Link to Abascal's tweet] Here's Santiago Abascal, who has contributed less than anyone [to Social Security through work], the question is: what the [expletive] are you doing talking about Franco and practically defending him? I was sure I was going to vote for you but...

Often, users' party endorsements tended to be implied, which suggests an unstated norm on the message board that users were generally in support of the party. One user deflected criticism on the party's behalf, saying,

[People] think that Vox won the election or something and are now demanding they follow through with all their electoral program. They only have 12 seats.

In other cases, users made more explicit demonstrations of support, like a thread entitled, "I will donate 10 cents to Vox for each post in this thread," which included a link to the party's website in the opening post.

Discussion

Prior research on online messages boards suggests both positive and negative impacts on democracy. On the one hand, scholarship has pointed to ways in which platforms can invite open dialogue and dissent and mobilize people to participate in political life. On the other hand, more recent work has highlighted forms of "dark participation" such spaces might facilitate, especially as a consequence of anonymity and the degree to which they attract disaffected individuals. Given these alternative theoretical frameworks, in this study we investigated to what extent political discussions in Vox-related threads on *ForoCoches* resembled a deliberative space of open information exchange and discussion versus something darker: an "echo chamber," with a one-sided reliance on right-wing alternative sources of information much more so than mainstream media sources. Our findings point more toward the former than the latter: even in a context where ideologically slanted news is most likely to be found, we did not find that to be the case. Instead, most of the sources shared corresponded to ideologically diverse mainstream news sites. Moreover, in examining how links were shared, we found forms of communication on *ForoCoches* that resemble normatively positive deliberative practices theorized about by earlier

scholarship on message boards—with users largely engaging in evidence-based debate. Our qualitative discourse analysis shows users regularly considering cross-cutting viewpoints and using them to spur discussion, support their arguments, and promote their own positions.

These results present a challenge to overly simplistic understandings of digital media platforms as places where people with like-minded views solely engage with a narrow range of information sources. However appealing this finding may be in the abstract, it is worth noting that the contents of these political discussions generally promoted illiberal and extreme right-wing policies rather than the positive civic consequences sometimes expected by political talk theorists. Furthermore, discussions about news and politics were interwoven with dissemination of right-wing populist party messages. In other words, political talk included both debate as well as forms of information sharing that might mobilize the party faithful, draw in new supporters, or could even lead to radicalization. While we are unable to assess cause and effect using our methods, it is striking that discussion among users appeared to reflect norms around open dialogue and use of evidence in ways that allowed users to feel they were making up their own minds—a more subtle form of persuasion than more top-down party-driven methods.

In fact, additional supplementary analyses showed that the most active 5% of users were responsible for approximately 40% of all messages—a more horizontal structure than other social media platforms, which tend to be dominated by a smaller fraction of users (Bild et al. 2015; Wojcik and Hughes 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that message boards, including *ForoCoches*, provide distinct technological affordances that foster peer-to-peer communication, which in this case included party promotion in the guise of open and unfettered political conversation and debate. Considering the pervasiveness of links to Vox official social media accounts, message boards such as *ForoCoches* may be particularly important in extending

the reach of professionally crafted messages, which in turn benefit from the endorsement of users on the site.

Our results shed light on political discussion on online message boards, sometimes overlooked by digital communication scholars in favor of newer social media platforms. We show how legacy news media may still be highly influential even in the context of alternative media, building on Chadwick's (2017) arguments about the hybrid media environment. While previous research has revealed a relationship between populist attitudes and hostile media perceptions toward mainstream sources (Fawzi 2019; Schulz et al. 2020), our findings offer a somewhat more nuanced view. Vox supporters on *ForoCoches* willingly engaged with mainstream news when those links aligned with their discursive arguments. Supporters regularly engaged in debate and discussion about party strategy and policy, circulating news media from an array of ideological leanings. Although there are understandable concerns about platforms facilitating "dark participation" (Quandt 2018) among extreme groups that reject liberal democratic norms, the forms of communication we observed appear similar to conventional notions of deliberative democracy and citizenship. At the same time, we acknowledge the deeply illiberal, xenophobic, and misogynistic tenor of the threads examined. It is a reminder that not all forms of political participation lead to positive ends in the service of liberal democratic values.

Our study contains several limitations. First, our sample included only Vox-related threads, so we could not provide a sense of Vox's prominence in the message board compared to other parties. Second, we know little about the site's users beyond their usernames, and since we rely on public posts only, we do not know what they may have posted in private. Finally, our qualitative analysis was only conducted on a subsample of messages containing links to specific types of content, providing a narrow window into how users exchanged information on the site.

Some portion of the “general information sites” links, for example, may have included GIFs, images, and other memes, which may have conveyed important information that future research should examine more closely. Furthermore, our strategic sample of threads examined in the second part of the study (containing links to Vox-related content and left-leaning news sources) was specifically chosen to illuminate specific cases of link-sharing. The deliberative communication practices we observed in these threads may be less likely to occur in exchanges containing right-leaning news sources, although the analysis of threads containing Vox-related links offers some evidence of argumentation even when sharing ideologically congruent information.

This study of Vox-related messages on *ForoCoches* constitutes an important step in examining the connections between online message boards and the global rise of far-right populism—qualifying what are sometimes overly strong assumptions about platform determinism. Message boards like *ForoCoches*, 2channel, 4chan and 8chan have been accused of contributing to the rise of far-right movements and even inspiring acts of violence in countries as different as Spain, Japan, the United States, and Australia. While our findings cannot dispel such concerns as unwarranted, we found a more complicated story about how users communicate with each other in these spaces. Results point to message boards as spaces for political debate, discussion, and collective interpretation of offline events—not unlike earlier research into online message boards. It may be that through these kinds of interactions, message boards deepen engagement among like-minded activists, similar to what has been documented by previous studies (Beyer 2014; Rheingold 1993). While our focus in this study is on a single country, our findings highlight the need for future studies on message boards and their users across political

and geographic domains, and we expect future research to further clarify what connection (if any) they might have with the rise of right-wing populist politics.

¹ Alonso, G. (2018, August 27). Alex Marín, creador de Forocoches: “No tengo ideología, ni en política ni en fútbol”. *El País*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com>

² Negre, J. (2018, December 9). El joven propagandista de Vox que montó a Abascal en un caballo. *El Mundo*. Retrieved from <https://www.elmundo.es>

³ Palmer, J. (2019, August 4). How does online racism spawn mass shooters? *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com>

⁴ Meaker, M. (2019, April 28). How a 4chan wannabe galvanised Spain's far-right election upstarts. *Wired.co.uk*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.co.uk>

⁵ Palmer, J. (2019, August 4). How does online racism spawn mass shooters? *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com>

⁶ Meaker, M. (2019, April 28). How a 4chan wannabe galvanised Spain's far-right election upstarts. *Wired.co.uk*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.co.uk>

⁷ Alonso, G. (2018, August 27). Alex Marín, creador de Forocoches: “No tengo ideología, ni en política ni en fútbol”. *El País*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com>

⁸ Molins Renter, A. (2017, March 31). El reino de los ‘trolls’. *La Vanguardia*. Retrieved from <https://www.lavanguardia.com>

⁹ We selected January 2013 as a starting point for the data collection since Vox was officially founded that year on December 17 and we were interested in examining whether the party was mentioned in posts prior to that date. The end point of June 2019 was used because that corresponded to when data was collected.

¹⁰ The entire sample consisted of mostly public threads (56.8%) with 12.5% categorized as “private” (accessible only to registered users). The remaining 30.7% of threads were dead links from threads deleted before data collection. While lack of access to private threads may hinder our analysis, we have no basis for believing the content on these threads differs substantially from public threads. According to the help section in *ForoCoches*, membership is only possible by invitation, which allows users to access private threads. A post by the administrator explains that users can mark threads as private by labeling them with “+18” (content only for adults), “+hd” (only for registered or active members), or “+prv” (only for active members and those registered before the thread was created). In accordance with ethical guidelines around analyzing social media content (Franzke et al. 2020), we limit our analysis to threads marked as public.

¹¹ Peinado, F., & Muela, D. (2018). The business of digital manipulation in Spain. *El País*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com>.

¹² Ignacio Escolar lleva a los tribunales a “La Tribuna de España” por difamaciones. (2019, September 19). *Cuatro.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.cuatro.com>

¹³ Specialized news sites (e.g., legal, economics, religion), local and international media were not coded for slant. The category “not applicable” was reserved for public stations, government sources and social media.

¹⁴ We acknowledge that the left-right dimension oversimplifies Spanish politics, and that Vox’s success is related to the Catalan secessionist movement, which does not easily map to the left-right spectrum. However, our qualitative analysis revealed that discussion in these Vox-related threads was not limited to Catalonia.

¹⁵ In some cases, for clarity, we also corrected the grammar.

¹⁶ *ForoCoches* users call each other *shur* or *shurmano/a*, a variation on the term *hermano/a* (brother/sister).

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