Talking ‘about’ the far right as researchers: between responsibility, safety and neoliberal success

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Abstract

While much work on the far right has understandably focused on explaining its rise, there is growing interest in the implications of how these actors are framed in public, media, and academic discourses. Taking the concept of talking ‘about’ the far right to refer to how such groups and ideas are discursively constructed, this article explores the challenges researchers face when communicating their work. Considering the pressures of the neoliberal academic environment alongside our ethical duty and personal safety, we argue that the former can encourage harmful practices. This article maps out such tensions within the UK context, emphasising how neoliberal pressures of competition and impact (exemplified by the Research Excellence Framework) shape engagement with funding, publication, and impact. When our framing can legitimise the far right and dissemination activities can cause risk for researchers, minoritised communities are most likely to suffer the negative effects.

Key messages:

- Pressures generated by neoliberal UK higher education undermine considered ethical reflection.
- Researchers risk causing harm whilst researching a harmful topic like far-right politics.
- These challenges materially impact both who can research and what can be researched.

Whether it is university metrics, funding applications, job adverts or other staples of the academic experience, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of dissemination and 'impact' in our work. This wider engagement is of course a crucial part of the research process, influential in knowledge exchange, but the pressure for ever-growing visibility brings with it a series of ethical questions related to both our topic and our own position as researchers. When we share our work in conference papers, journal articles or the public sphere through traditional or social media, we contribute to how these issues are understood and build our own profile around them. Consequently, we have a responsibility to consider the implications of our dissemination practices, especially when dealing with issues related to injustice. For the field of far-right studies, therefore, these concerns are of central importance, yet they have only recently attracted more focused attention (Ashe et al., 2021; Böckmann et al., 2024; Vaughan et al., 2024).

In this article, we propose an ethics of talking 'about' the far right that encourages collective reflection and action on how we communicate our work. We argue that competing pressures mean that ethical questions are not just *raised* in these scenarios, but our responses to them are potentially actively *hindered* where the demands of neoliberal success metrics often run counter to both our ethical responsibilities and personal safety needs. Indeed, if we prioritise communicating our findings in the most 'impactful' way, which is in turn tied to our own career progression, our choices may not be centred around the principle of 'no undue harm' as the core pillar of ethical research (Morrison, Silke, & McGowan, 2021). While no simple solutions exist in relation to these structural issues, we suggest that our collective commitment to ethical practice must push beyond the bounds of what the neoliberal university demands and fundamentally shape our approach to dissemination activities.

To do so, this paper maps out the tensions that arise within the UK context, emphasising how the neoliberal pressures of competition and impact (exemplified by the Research Excellence Framework) create an environment that can encourage harmful practices.[1] We first consider the ethical implications of the marketisation of higher education, especially in relation to dissemination and far-right studies. We then introduce the idea of an ethics of talking 'about' the far right as a way to understand and consciously reflect on the impact that our discourse as academics may exert in this area. We highlight two critical concerns, relating to (1) responsibility, in how we frame this form of politics, and (2) safety, in how we minimise harm to ourselves and others. In both cases, where our framing can serve to legitimise the far right (through euphemisation, amplification and exceptionalisation) and where dissemination activities can leave researchers at (personal and professional) risk, minoritised communities are most likely to suffer the negative effects. As such, it is vital that we engage critically with our ethical responsibilities during dissemination in an attempt to mitigate the potentially serious impact on groups at the sharp end of far-right politics.

Neoliberalism, dissemination, and ethics

Academics exist within an environment increasingly informed and shaped by neoliberal aspirations, including competition, individualism, and marketisation (Tight, 2019). These principles inform how and what research is valued, and the behaviours required to secure funding and progress in the industry. There has been a recent push towards dissemination and impact as goals for researchers, with new metrics developed to 'measure' these components at the institutional level, which means that academic and

[1] It should be noted that while these discussions are situated within this specific context, they certainly have wider significance for questions around ethical dissemination practices and far-right research ethics.

professional success is tied more closely to public-facing responsibilities (Väliverronen, 2021). While we certainly do not deny the marked value in taking our research beyond the confines of the university, we suggest that when these demands are linked so closely to our own progression, they may run counter to our ethical responsibilities both in relation to our topic and ourselves. To set the scene, we first discuss the way that neoliberal values shape institutional priorities and feed into existing inequalities. We then consider how these dynamics have played out in the UK context, before exploring their implications for far-right studies specifically.

Neoliberalism in the academy

Owing to its 'contested and nebulous nature' (Dawes and Phelan, 2018, p.2), neoliberalism certainly proves a challenging concept to pin down and neatly summarise. Competing conceptualisations and evaluations have emerged from different traditions, with 'neoliberalism' the subject of much critique within academia and beyond (Phelan, 2021). As Jana Bacevic (2019, p.387) highlights, somewhat paradoxically, our knowledge about this topic emerges within the conditions that it is actually influential in creating: 'The fact that contemporary knowledge of neoliberalism is itself produced in the context of neoliberal academia means, simply, that we have to view it as not exempt from the conditions that shape other forms of knowledge.' In writing this piece, therefore, we must acknowledge that we are hardly capable of stepping outside its influence as we work within this system too. Ironically, while we critique the implications for our field, this piece as an output is part of the way we are evaluated using the very same metrics.

While the contradictions are numerous in how neoliberalism is conceived and in how we engage with it, we focus here on some of its most rudimentary features to then examine

its influence in UK higher education and far-right studies specifically. Simon Dawes and Sean Phelan (2018, p.21) summarise:

> *Across its variegated articulations, neoliberal regimes are consistent in affirming the value of market competition in different social scales and contexts (the state, the organisation and the individual), and in treating economic efficiency as the primary calculus of public value.*

We can see how these values have come to shape academic life, with interconnected implications at the individual, departmental and institutional level. For instance, researchers are almost required to embrace this vision because it shapes the priorities of key stakeholders, including the academic institutions and funding bodies that make research possible (Gunn and Mintrom, 2018).

Notably, the resulting pressures, alongside associated market developments such as increasing precarity, can compromise academic freedom (Ferreira, 2022; Blell, Liu & Verma, 2022), particularly for groups already facing institutional injustice. For instance, Rodrigo Rosa (2021, p.56) notes how ‘the construction of “excellence” is gendered’, with higher education institutions imagining an “ideal worker” ‘lying behind the neoliberal governance model’. As Rosa (ibid.) indicates, hegemonic masculine ideals and gendered divisions drive the qualities that are demanded, celebrated and advocated in this context. Jon S. Iftikar (2017, pp.149-50), meanwhile, illustrates how neoliberal values of individualism feed further into already-existing notions of ‘colourblindness’ within higher education, ignoring the impact of structural oppression to favour the idea of ‘meritocracy’. Dounia Bourabain (2020) emphasizes that ‘while academia is profiled as the institution of knowledge, rationality and truth reached through merit’, it is instead an ‘inequality regime’.

This system is composed of ‘loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial [as well as other] inequalities within particular organizations’ (Acker, 2009, p.201). Those subject to interlocking oppressions are therefore multiply marginalised through this system.

Conversely, there are of course those who benefit from it (and who have long benefitted through previous ones too). Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen (2016, p.242) argue that ‘the neoliberalization of the U.S. academy has changed the understanding of not only what higher education is but also who should be doing that labor’. We must be careful not to overemphasise the newness of these notions as a result of neoliberalism (Iftikar, 2017) because it is well documented that ‘academic circles operate as inhospitable sites to faculty of color’ (Vidal-Ortiz, 2024, p.184), for example. While neoliberalism brings specific demands, therefore, the implications are certainly not completely novel, as academia has long been tied to coloniality, capitalism and their injustices (Gopal, 2021). Neoliberalism simply brings a new inflection or mode of articulation for these disparities to persist and evolve.

The marketisation of UK higher education and the push for ‘impact’

Embedded in this neoliberal ethos, Zacharias Andreadakis and Peter Maassen (2019, p.91) underscore how UK higher education ‘is characterised by a strong underlying competitive, market-oriented vision, which stimulates and rewards performance’. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), which has been in place in various forms since the 1980s, offers a clear example of how these qualities are valued and incentivised. Described as ‘the UK’s system for assessing the excellence of research in UK higher education providers’ (UKRI, 2024), Liz Morrish (2019, p.236) is clear about the way that

this evaluative tool has fundamentally shaped institutional and individual approaches to research:

> *It is impossible to overstate the determining influence that the REF holds over UK universities and the academics who work within them. Each academic who has research as part of their contract of employment is now under enormous pressure to publish 4* internationally-leading research in high-ranking journals which will bring in maximum revenue to their university.*

Harry Torrance (2020, p.774) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that its consequences 'are many and varied, for whole institutions and for disciplines, subject departments, and individuals.'

While the REF's influence is wide-reaching, we are specifically interested in its consequences for dissemination here. In the 2014 and 2021 assessments, institutions were required to submit 'impact case studies' for this evaluation, with the weighting of this component increasing from 20% to 25% during that time. As Torrance (2020, p.773) suggests:

> *[T]he applied, practical utility of research is also now very significant – its economic, social, and cultural impact – and this in turn will drive different researcher behaviors (as the weighting is intended to do).*

The evaluation of what equates to 'top-level' and 'impactful' dissemination influences how, why, and where we communicate our findings. Growing emphasis on this component as a metric for measuring performance places greater pressure on researchers to publish 'well' and 'far', targeting both high-impact journals and public-facing engagement. Again,

this is not something entirely new or only related to the REF, as longstanding work on the mediatisation of science attests to (Weingart, 1998). And of course, the desire to share research with wider audiences is a constitutive and important part of academic work. However, there are concerns that 'REF incentivise[s] the production of "measurable impact factors", rather than research that academics consider[…] to be "socially and politically important"' (Murphy and Sage, 2015, p.33). Notably, these pressures can be at odds with ethical practices, where the pursuit of impact takes precedence over other concerns. It must be noted that efforts such as The UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics have sought to shape how metrics are used to ameliorate some of the unintended harmful consequences, with some institutions adopting their recommendations.

These are certainly positive steps, but we must acknowledge the wider embeddedness of these mechanisms within existing power structures and their resulting perpetuation of them. Through epistemic injustice, certain approaches, methodologies, and broad topics are placed as benchmarks for 'high-quality' outputs (Masaka, 2017), in part because they can fit within the criteria (for example 'applied' research not 'blue sky' or multidisciplinary work – see Manville et al, 2021 for more detail). By monetarily and reputationally incentivising such standards, the REF further entrenches this hierarchisation of knowledge. These effects can be particularly pronounced when there are expectations around not only the principle of 'publish or perish' but what Esa Väliverronen (2008, p.10) calls 'promote yourself or perish' through dissemination. To understand how these demands can perpetuate inequalities, Heather Savigny (2019) notes how gendered and racialised hierarchies are reinforced through 'impact' initiatives, where women (and women of colour especially) are most likely to face online abuse following media

engagement. This has the potential to affect whose voices are heard or silenced in these debates.

Furthermore, the drive for outputs and neoliberal competition can feed further into processes of epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2019), tied to coloniality and the appropriation of indigenous knowledge. Ideas are plundered ‘in order to promote and transform them into economic capital, or appropriate them into the Western academic machinery to earn symbolic capital’ (ibid., p.208). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (in Klein, 2019, p.4) suggests,

> *when people extract things, they’re taking and they’re running and they’re using it for just their own good. What’s missing is the responsibility. If you’re not developing relationships with the people, you’re not giving back, you’re not sticking around to see the impact of the extraction. You’re moving to someplace else.*

We can see how the extractivist principles of coloniality are influential within the academy, where it can ‘devour’ knowledge for its own good (Osbourne, 2022) and claim it as its own. Through performance metrics, dissemination becomes even more about personal and institutional progression, as opposed to exchange, co-creation, and serving communities.

It could be argued that the growing place of ‘impact’ within the REF demonstrates a desire to embed knowledge-exchange practices, given its assessment of the tangible contribution that research makes outside the academic domain. While the importance of knowledge exchange on its own may certainly still drive individuals’ motivations, we can see how such values can become instrumentalised when tied to measures of

performance at the individual, departmental and institutional level. In a study of university mission statements, for example, Helen Sauntson and Morrish (2010, p.79) note the commodification of knowledge through the emphasis on dissemination, where rather than something that is being developed knowledge is instead 'constructed as a fully formed product which can be passed on by the university', reinforcing extractivist principles. What makes the best 'product' according to neoliberal principles invariably does not incentivise the most ethical practices of dissemination, when the objective is to 'sell' to consumers.

Researching the far right ethically

These questions around communicating our work hold particular importance when dealing with topics related to injustice, so it is crucial for far-right studies to engage critically with such issues. We define the far right as 'a position characterised by a generalised commitment to inequality, with racism at its core (Mondon and Winter, 2020). This may be accompanied by a broader 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2020) which encompasses various forms of exclusion targeting different marginalised groups' (Brown, 2023). With far-right politics therefore tied to multiple intersecting oppressions, there is an elevated shared ethical responsibility to ensure we do not inadvertently contribute to exacerbating them.

Before turning our attention to ethics specifically, it is worth noting that some scholars have linked the wider rise of far-right politics with neoliberalism itself. Neil Davidson and Richard Saull (2016) argue that neoliberalism 'has helped create the conditions for the re-emergence of the far-right', highlighting economic insecurity and the emphasis on the individual as key factors. This is particularly vividly evidenced in their consideration of the alignment between 'the racialized effects of neoliberalism' and the racism of the far right.

We can certainly see, for example, how anti-immigration discourse is often centred around notions of competition over jobs and resources. However, one of the pitfalls in this explanation lies in the emphasis on economic precarity and the so-called ‘left behind’ driving far-right support. Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020, p.12) argue that the notion of the ‘left behind’ has ‘been used to justify the legitimisation of racism and the far right as some sort of democratic wish.’ They further highlight how it can overlook the role and responsibility of the mainstream and elite actors in normalising far-right ideas. This is one such example, tied to neoliberalism, pointing to the importance of how we talk ‘about’ the far right.

Moving to broader ethical issues in research on the far right now, once again, funding bodies are a driving force in how ethics is conceived, with their priorities filtering through to institutions and individuals. Many councils produce their own set of ethical guidance, and projects may be required to be assessed by ethics boards. While in no way minimising the importance of ethical scrutiny – quite the opposite – there are real questions about the effectiveness of such systems when they are dictated by an ethos that emphasises the economical nature of research, and liability (Halse & Honey, 2007; Vaughan, 2023). As such, the priorities of funding councils can in turn scaffold the education and application of ethical principles as both the producers of guidance and the holders of the purse (Hedgecoe, 2016).

Within studies on extremism or ‘risky’ topics, there have been a number of important critiques of the ethical review process as it currently stands. These critiques emphasise how a lack of knowledge on ethics boards introduces risk into the process rather than helping to minimise harm. This lack of knowledge can result in projects receiving

inconsistent review, leading to vastly different requirements (Winter and Gundur, 2022) or problematising certain topics and methods as inherently risky (Wood, 2024; Morrison, Silke and McGowan, 2021). Similarly, insufficient knowledge may introduce risk for the researcher by uncritically mandating informed consent from potentially harmful participants (Fuchs, 2018; Segers, Gelashvili & Gagnon, 2023). Of relevance to this article, Antonia Vaughan's (2023) previous work interviewing early career researchers of the far right and manosphere highlights how the neoliberal institutional environment has had material impacts on the quality and effectiveness of ethical review by focusing on legality and liability over contextual and informed evaluation.

These limitations are especially significant when we think about the range of ethical considerations related to researching the far right. Many concerns mirror those dealt with by researchers of similar topics, including the potential impact of research on the participants, the researchers, the academic community, and society more broadly. Researchers of the far right can have an impact on each of these groups throughout every stage of the research process, whether that be the discipline and epistemology (Ashe et al., 2021), the choice of topic (Vaughan et al., 2024), the method (Tebaldi & Jereza, 2024), the participants (Braune, 2024), or how the findings are framed and disseminated (Newth, 2024). Often, this literature reflects on a research project or practices and trends observed within academia, highlighting the need for contextual research ethics and offering suggestions to improve practices (Massanari, 2018; Segers et al., 2023). This engagement may not result in harm being completely removed, but we should of course seek to minimise it as far as possible.

There is growing interest in the final component, related to the ethical implications of communicating our work. Definitional debates are a hallmark of academia, but such discussions become more fraught and critical when the choice of term can contribute to overhyping an issue (Glynos & Mondon, 2019) or euphemising harm (Newth, 2024). However, these discursive constructions are also visible in ethical reflections on how we understand and engage with former members of extreme- and far-right groups (Braune, 2024; Pearson, 2023; Clubb et al, 2024), conduct interviews (Williams, 2024), or work with policy experts (McNeil-Willson, Vaughan & Zeller, 2024; Meier, 2024). Despite these important interventions, discussions around ethical dissemination often remain implicit or invisibilised, indicated through (in)action rather than explicitly addressed. This may in part stem from the way that ethics processes are framed around physically conducting the research project rather than the phase that follows its completion, with the contentious perception of ethics as a 'box-ticking' practice (Franzke et al., 2020, p.4). Of course, these discussions are not completely absent in the field, where there is an emphasis specifically on ensuring the anonymity of participants (Hoerst & Drury, 2024), yet such considerations rarely extend to the impact of framing our topic and ourselves. As the previous section indicated, these concerns are particularly relevant in light of increasing mediatisation in academia. It is to these themes that our paper seeks to speak.

Talking 'about' as ethical practice

To encourage conscious and open reflection on our dissemination practices, we apply the idea of talking 'about' (Brown, 2024, p.15) as a way to assess how we discursively construct the far right. This could include the terms that we use to describe it, the concepts that we employ to characterise it, or the way that we position it in relation to other political identities. While prior research has explored the role of mainstream political actors (ibid.),

media (Brown & Mondon, 2021) and the far right itself (Brown & Newth, 2024) in talking 'about', we argue that academics are not separate from these processes and must consciously reflect on the implications[2]. Certainly, we do not suggest that such concerns are completely overlooked as it stands, but the pressure to publish, generate citations, and create impact does not necessarily incentivise this form of careful reflection. While we discuss some potential avenues here, these factors are not exhaustive and should form part of wider and evolving reflections on best practice in the field. In this way, such considerations can stimulate a mode of conducting more ethical, safe research and pushing back against the idea that knowledge is simply a product for us to sell.

Underpinning our reflections on talking 'about' must always be an acknowledgement of the potential impact on minoritised communities, who face the effects of the far right and wider oppression most acutely. Many people are targeted in exclusionary politics, such as racialised groups, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, disabled people and working-class populations. In line with Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly's (2021, p.2) call to work 'in service to communities of resistance', we must ensure that our choices when communicating research do not give credence to the discourses that perpetuate such harms, and instead actively counteract them. While most researchers would certainly position themselves in opposition to far-right politics, our intentions do not preclude us from feeding into harmful perceptions and practices, especially when there are incentives to share our work widely and gain social capital as a result. In the following sections, we explore how talking 'about' can play into the very processes that we are discussing, potentially serving to mainstream far-right politics or place researchers

[2] Although this article talks about the academic context, many of the critiques contained are equally relevant to practitioners and policymakers such as the discussion of terminology. For an example see Anna Meier's (2023) work on 'Salad Bar Extremism'.

themselves at risk if not carefully navigated. We therefore look first at our responsibility in these scenarios, followed by the implications for researcher safety. As prior discussion indicates, there is of course no simple solution to problematic forms of talking 'about', encouraged as they are by the neoliberal structures in place, yet by engaging in such reflections we can start to build collectively towards more ethical practices.

Responsibly talking 'about'

With academics largely regarded as authoritative voices on societal issues, it is clear that this reputation implies a position of some discursive power both within the sector and beyond. Of course, internal hierarchies around which voices are seen as most respected (Settles et al., 2021) are often reproduced in these scenarios, but as a general point, the potential power of academic discourse to shape wider perceptions should not be underestimated. As Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003, p.3) indicates, academia 'do[es] not simply elucidate the world but establish[es] regimes of knowledge and truth'. If we consider the impetus to produce 'impact-worthy' outputs, these concerns become even more pertinent; not only are we influencing academic discussion but actively pursuing greater reach for our work beyond these confines. Ian Welsh and Brian Wynne (2013, p.546) underscore how the way that science is perceived means that it can sometimes avoid appropriate scrutiny:

> *the term science is used as a catch-all signifier of authority (or rather, aspired-to authority), with slippery and normatively imbued associations which sanction the evasion of accountability, deliberation and negotiation.*

Thus, if the status of our work means that it is seen broadly as reliable, then we have a duty to ensure that the message we convey is both responsible and ethical.

These imperatives are especially relevant in the field of far-right studies, where we are dealing with a form of politics that seeks to entrench inequalities. The harmful nature of the subject that we are dealing with, targeting multiple and intersecting minoritised communities, means that there are added responsibilities to avoid unreflective dissemination which could bring further harm to such groups. Studies of talking 'about' in other settings (i.e., politics and media) show how these discursive constructions can contribute to processes of mainstreaming, where the far right (in its various forms – parties, discourses, attitudes, etc.) comes to be seen as increasingly legitimate (Wodak, 2020). For example, Michał Krzyżanowski and Mats Ekström (2022) underscore the entanglement between media representation of the far right and its normalisation, while Luke Shuttleworth et al. (2024) show how harmful messages that legitimise the far right are conveyed in documentaries on the subject. Academia, while operating in a different sphere (though increasingly intertwined with media through impact requirements), must remain conscious of its own potential contribution to mainstreaming and actively seek to avoid it.

There are numerous possible effects of unreflective dissemination within this field, but to illustrate here, we point to three interrelated examples before suggesting how we might amend our practices accordingly. They are: euphemisation, amplification, and exceptionalisation. The first of these, euphemisation, refers to the use of less stigmatising language to describe the far right, either in the labels (e.g., populist) or the concepts (e.g., nativist) that we use. While definitional debates are of course prominent in the academic setting, we suggest that we must centre both accuracy and ethical concerns when making decisions at this level. For example, a significant body of literature points to the problematic dominance of 'populism' within academic and public discourse to refer to the

far right (Dean & Maiguashca, 2020; De Cleen, Glynos & Mondon, 2019; Katsambekis, 2022), where it is often used as a proxy for such groups. As Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton (2022, p.627) indicate, 'research on the European radical right subsumes this party family as "populist," which is then applied unhelpfully as the primary label with which these parties are categorized.' While there are examples of more critical approaches (Norocel et al., 2020), and populist discourse may indeed be employed by far-right actors (and other groups alike), it is not their core defining feature (Glynos & Mondon, 2019). Crucially, despite still largely being used negatively (Goyvaerts, 2021), it has more potential for positive inflection than traditional labels for the far right because if not defined carefully, it can legitimise their claim to represent the popular will and prevents engagement with other core features of their politics (Hunger & Paxton, 2022).

Euphemisation can also extend to the concepts that we use to characterise the far right. Aurelien Mondon (2023, p.827) notes how the field has been 'reluctant to engage with the concept of racism', with others echoing this position as they note its pronounced absence within such work (Newth, 2024; Sengul, 2024). Instead, the concept of 'nativism' has predominated, which although somewhat useful in capturing the constructions of so-called 'native' in-groups and 'non-native' outgroups in far-right discourse, generally fails to account for the role of racism within these constructions (Newth, 2023). Racism is key to understanding the exclusionary politics that these groups pursue and their impact on different racialised groups (Beaman, 2024; Mondon & Winter, 2020), so when we fail to engage with it as a concept, we may legitimise the far right's claim to 'not racism' (Lentin, 2020, p.56 – discussed further shortly). Thus, by euphemising far-right politics when talking 'about', we potentially facilitate attempts to reconstitute its image as arising from popular sentiment and being driven not by racism but national interest. These concerns

speak to wider issues in the field, where neocolonial biases have seen an overwhelming Eurocentric and Global North focus reproduce power asymmetries (Masood and Nisar, 2020).

When making decisions about how to label and define such politics, we must consider whether we are using the most appropriate terms and concepts, with particular attention to how the far right wishes itself to be conveyed and perceived. We have seen examples of far-right actors openly embracing ‘populist’ as a label (Brown & Mondon, 2021, p.287) and pushing back against claims of racism in the media (Naughtie, 2024), so we should not be afraid to counter these desired portrayals. If we go to use the term ‘populism’, we must question if it is indeed what we are describing or whether ‘far right’ might instead be more accurate. If we base our analysis on nativism, we must consider and openly discuss its entanglement with racism, and perhaps instead use this as our defining concept. We can therefore make conscious and political choices at this level which seek to counter mainstreaming and normalisation processes.

Next, amplification refers to the way that pervasive talking ‘about’ can build excessive hype around the far right and overemphasise its importance. The aim with this critique is clearly not to suggest that we should abandon far-right studies or that the far right is unimportant but that there is a need to reframe how we situate such groups within their wider context. Certainly, the field is a vital one, especially given the current conjuncture, yet there is a danger that we focus too much of our attention on these groups at the expense of wider critique and an acknowledgement that the main sources of oppression are much closer to home. As Mondon (2022, p.877) notes, ‘far-right parties are historically far more researched than their right, centre and left counterparts, even when they are marginal in terms of politics or electoral support’. The result is that their perceived

relevance is higher, where there is a narrative that the far right is constantly on the rise and could do well at the ballot box. If we are talking about it incessantly, we further feed into the notion that it is worthy of our attention.

Notably, this clamour of interest has the potential to bleed into or back up media hype around these groups, especially when we are encouraged to engage in dissemination activities. For example, in the build-up to 2024 UK general election, Nigel Farage was the third-most covered individual in media reporting (after the former and current prime ministers), despite having never previously been elected to parliament (Loughborough University, 2024). Farage's trajectory, and that of the far right more broadly in Britain, cannot simply be attributed to the far right's own activities but must acknowledge the role of mainstream politics and media in creating favourable conditions for its growth. With academics often invited to contribute to reporting or reflections on these political events, it is vital that we do not amplify the far right at the expense of broader engagement. Again, this is not to deny the growing influence of the far right in various settings, but it remains just one part of the story. If our eyes are looking constantly to the right, then we may miss what is directly in front of us. It is therefore part of our responsibility when talking 'about' to remain attentive to the situatedness of the far right within its wider context.

Closely related to this, exceptionalisation captures how our modes of talking 'about' can place the far right as something well beyond the norm, far detached from the mainstream political order. Shuttleworth et al. (2024, p.8) state that it 'conceals the porous and malleable borders between extreme and mainstream and the more structural nature of oppressive politics which remain core to many liberal democracies.' While the relationship between the mainstream and far right is attracting increased attention (Akkerman, De Lange & Rooduijn, 2016), there often remains a perceived fixed separation between

them. If the mainstream is afforded any responsibility in mainstreaming, it is often through notions such as accommodation (Meguid, 2005), where mainstream actors are said to adopt far-right policies to attract further voters. Implicit in the idea of accommodation is the notion that the mainstream is appropriating positions otherwise unnatural to it, yet strong critiques of these binaries underscore that this perception undermines the mainstream's long complicity in exclusionary politics (Gillespie, 2024; Mondon & Winter, 2020). For example, critiques of the foundations of liberalism and liberal democracy emphasise their reliance on structures of oppression since inception (Eklundh, 2020; Mehta, 1990; Mondon, 2024). We must therefore acknowledge the embeddedness of these forms of exclusion if we are to appropriately interpret the far right's place within them.

As an example, even if we do begin to use racism to rightly characterise far-right politics, to do so without reference to its structural foundations (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) is to reinforce its exceptionalisation. When only the most extreme cases such as physically violent hate crimes are denounced as racist, both within popular discourse and far-right studies specifically, understandings of racism are limited to its illiberal articulations (Mondon & Winter, 2020). This feeds into what Alana Lentin (2021) terms 'not racism', where racist incidents are 'presented as isolated and atypical', which allows racism itself to be redefined according to limited criteria. Crucially, such denial 'has become a central formulation for the expression and legitimation of racism', so if our own analyses play into these limited understandings of racism, we also perpetuate narratives of 'not racism'. Consequently, we must not exceptionalise the far right as where the problem of racism (and other exclusionary politics) starts and stops, placing the mainstream uncritically as the solution. Yes, the far right is an important site of this kind of politics, with particularly

violent implications for those at the sharp end, but it is part of something much broader. Talking ‘about’ the far right ethically therefore must include not talking ‘about’ the far right all the time too, or at least not *only* talking ‘about’ the far right. We should certainly still acknowledge its significance, but we must equally account for the role played by the mainstream in mainstreaming (Brown, 2022; 2024).

While these examples are just three of the ways that our practices of talking ‘about’ can feed into perceptions of the far right, they emphasise the potential implications if we do not reflect carefully on our dissemination practices. As researchers ourselves within the field, we certainly do not sit outside these processes, but rather hope to foster dialogue about how we can study this form of politics in responsible ways. Liam Gillespie’s (2024) recent intervention shows the potential for unintended implications even in critical approaches to the field, so we must continue to reflect on our practices and show openness to critique in the pursuit of shared emancipatory goals. When disseminating our research, we must seek to do so not simply through the perspective of generating impact regardless of the cost but with engaged attention to the implications for the processes and topics that we study. Of course, resisting neoliberal imperatives in this way is not evenly distributed because acting counter-hegemonically is certainly more challenging for some than others, like early career or minoritised researchers. When talking about these responsibilities, we do not mean to place burden on individuals, especially when it does not fall equally, but rather hope to stress the importance of building collective strategies to embed responsible dissemination practices in our work.

Safely talking ‘about’

Moving from responsibility to safety now, engaging with the academic and public spheres through dissemination activities carries risk as they increase the chance of coming to the attention of hostile actors (as evidenced by Pearson et al., 2023, Doerfler et al, 2021, Marwick, 2020). This holds true when talking 'about' the far right, whether researchers are publishing in journal articles, or discussing research through traditional or social media. The resurgence of the far right has infused these venues with increased risk, with researchers potentially subject to harassment and doxxing[3], among other harms. This effect has only worsened with the disintegration of moderation teams on X and the return of previously banned individuals. It is further exacerbated by the recent electoral successes of far-right parties across Europe, broadly conceived. Researchers have reported being harmed after producing journal articles, conference presentations, and social media commentary (Pearson et al., 2023; Doerfler et al., 2021) with the shape and severity of the harm varying depending on a variety of factors (as will be discussed). With the researcher as the visible and active agent engaged in these activities, and the one who experiences the harm, it has material impacts on the ethicality of research more broadly and our duty or ability to minimise harm.

Concerningly, researchers are often unaware of the potential for harm through these venues prior to being harmed (Pearson et al., 2023), especially those who are not researching an inherently harmful topic (Doerfler et al., 2021). This can be exacerbated by institutions who similarly lack the expertise to identify both the threat and ways to manage it (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021; O'Meara et al, 2024). Researchers have responded by producing an increasing array of guidance, both targeting the individual and

[3] Doxxing can be defined as "the intentional public release onto the Internet of personal information about an individual by a third party, often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual" (Douglas, 2016).

encouraging institutions to develop policies (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021; Segers et al., 2023; Marwick, Blackwell & Lo, 2016). However, much of the available guidance related to managing safety around dissemination can prioritise obscurity or a lack of visibility to varying extents, which runs counter to the pressure to be public (and thus impactful) (Vaughan, 2024). Perceived as a 'catch-22', neoliberal and career pressures interact with and complicate the personal need to be safe (Pearson et al, 2023; Vaughan, forthcoming).

Recent literature has highlighted the potential impact of this dynamic on the researcher and knowledge production, drawing on interviews with researchers of extremism (Pearson et al, 2023) and of the far right and manosphere (Vaughan, 2024). Pearson et al. (2023) conceptualised 'professional harm' to understand how the decision to withdraw from public spaces and engagement opportunities may have an impact on academic careers and opportunities. These decisions become, in part, necessary because there are few other means for researchers to safeguard themselves against harassment and abuse. Vaughan (2024) similarly posits that this harm exists because of an invisible antagonism between success and safety experienced by researchers. More specifically, with academia increasingly requiring visibility to be successful (promote or perish, publish or perish, impact), researchers' ability to be safe (by being obscure or selectively invisible) becomes an increasingly fraught task.

The likelihood, severity and shape of the harm (including professional) is affected by several factors including topic, approach, and the identity of the researcher themselves. Critical research is arguably more likely to prompt harassment from the very people it is challenging; likewise, feminist and unapologetically political approaches can attract hostility from audiences who attack the 'threat from within' (Sager & Mulinari, 2018).

Regardless of the scholarship itself, the visible or discussed identity of the researcher is a key factor. With the far right attacking minoritised communities, ‘a researcher that is publicly identifiable as falling into one or more of these categories is likely to prove a more attractive and persistent target for extreme right online harassment than those who do not’ (Conway, 2021, p.370). As a result, minoritised researchers experience the antagonism between success and safety more sharply as they face both institutional barriers to ‘success’ and online harassment. This feeds into existing hierarchies, where privileged scholars face fewer barriers to acquiring social capital as they are able to engage in these activities (and thus further their career) without risking external, or professional harm (Pearson et al, 2023; Vaughan, 2024).

The pervasive precarity within academia similarly exacerbates the antagonism between success and safety, placing heavy demands on early career researchers in particular. Pearson et al (2023) note that junior researchers were more likely to report harm and can be more vulnerable. Insecure contracts, competition for open positions, and the need to satisfy metrics such as the REF may incentivise visibility such as engagements with the media and policy – perhaps even more so than more senior scholars. However, the same factors that drive the need for public engagement—such as a lack of security, social capital, or seniority—also leave ECRs with fewer protections against harm. With harassment from the far right including attacks on credibility, rigor, and the quality of research, early career researchers are less able to fall back on their body of scholarship as a defence. Conversely, attacks on senior researchers may be somewhat mitigated by their accrued social capital or body of scholarship (this is not to diminish the severity of the harms they face, but it must be acknowledged that less established researchers are more vulnerable to harms). Exacerbating the vulnerability, institutions may place blame

on the researcher for ‘inciting harassment or talking publicly in the first place’ (Marwick, 2020). Echoing this, Meredith Pruden (2024) and researchers interviewed by Vaughan (forthcoming) both note that researchers receiving harassment may be perceived as ‘making a fuss’, unduly ‘controversial’ or ‘not worth the trouble’. Thus, ECRs may be disincentivised from critical research or public engagement because they cannot necessarily afford the costs of harassment at a precarious stage of their career. Yet at the same time, as noted above, ECRs are incentivised to engage in these behaviours.

Conceiving of the researcher as potentially vulnerable is a necessary addition to ethical reflections on dissemination. With much of the literature (rightly) considering issues such as pseudonymisation, privacy, and accuracy (ibid.), the researcher is often positioned as the most powerful actor, and it is for them to minimise harm to others. Alongside these necessary reflections, incorporating awareness of the potential (even likely) harm associated with these activities creates room for a consideration of how the researcher can be vulnerable too (Segers et al., 2023). Situating this harm within the context of neoliberal academia helps us understand how the environment may incentivise ‘risky’ behaviours or how harm can be associated with academic practices (elaborated upon in Vaughan, forthcoming). It could also prevent instances of harm resulting from institutions engaging in the impact agenda. One researcher interviewed by Pearson et al (2023) shared how their institution published a picture of her face whilst promoting her research, a risk she would not have otherwise taken. In this experience, the risks facing the researcher were not a factor in impact considerations, potentially explained by a lack of relevant expertise (Pearson et al, 2023). Beyond practical matters of increasing the support and tools available, making this room may help us to understand how safety has

broader impacts on knowledge production, including who can research and what can be researched.

However, conceiving of researchers as vulnerable can be a double-edged sword in a risk-averse institutional environment. Researchers interviewed by Pearson et al (2023) reported being prevented from researching certain topics due to an exaggerated perception of risk. Similarly, criminology researchers detailed “excessive” requirements put in place by ethics committees who had outsized perceptions of risk due to a lack of expertise (Winter and Gundur, 2022). This may be the result of institutions ‘red-zoning’ fieldwork sites and topics, acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to ‘protect the status quo’ (Sluka, 2020). Thus, increasing awareness of the risks involved in this research may have unintended spillover effects when interacting with risk-averse institutional processes, potentially curtailing necessary research. This curtailment may not be evenly experienced; if institutions conceive of certain researchers as more vulnerable than others, they may create barriers to research rather than supporting their safety. This will materially impact who can research, as ethical approval is a necessary step in many institutional contexts.

Critically for knowledge production, the emotional impacts of harassment (including pre-emptive fear) can fundamentally shape the topics researched and the methods used. Pearson et al. (2023) share how a participant avoided researching certain topics because of the risk associated. These decisions were also made by Vaughan’s (2024) participants, who avoided speaking or working on topics that they felt were too risky without support for mitigating them. Fear of harm related to dissemination actively shaped the vehicle of engagement, with researchers tending to prefer academic scholarship over public engagement. Participants found these to be necessary steps to protect themselves, particularly in the absence of institutional support or effective mitigations. However, such

emotions are often left out of conversations or reflections on dissemination, especially since the audience is imagined rather than actual and researchers may fear being seen as unreasonably concerned.

In advocating for an ethics of care for researchers doing ‘up close’ methods, Iris Segers, Tamta Gelashvili, and Audrey Gagnon (2023, p.4) emphasise that an ethical approach should incorporate ‘researchers’ emotional safety […] in a way that allows for engagement with emotions, instead of a detached research process’. Similarly, it is argued here that overlooking the safety considerations of dissemination where harm is elevated ignores how these emotions materially contribute to what research is produced. These decisions have become necessary in an institutional environment that encourages dissemination and impact but fails to equip researchers with effective tools to manage risk. The argument here does not suggest that researchers should engage in unsafe practices or not engage in public scholarship, but rather that considerations of the ethics of dissemination need to acknowledge the impact of experienced harm and lack of effective mitigations and support. While the neoliberal pressures within academia are not a recent development, nor is the antagonistic nature of social media, the convergence of these two dynamics is a relatively new phenomenon. This intersection creates a unique and challenging landscape for academics who must navigate both spheres simultaneously.

Here we can introduce questions for the community about what is ethical within academia more broadly, rather than questions for the researchers themselves. If risk or harm is associated with knowledge production, it becomes increasingly a feature of academia rather than a factor that can be eliminated. In highlighting this seemingly inevitable dynamic, the aim is not to diminish its importance but instead sensitise researchers

towards potentially invisible dynamics that materially impact the safety and wellbeing of researchers, affecting some more than others. Vaughan (2024) has theorised that this dynamic materially affects both the research that is produced and who can produce it (echoed in literature by Pearson et al, 2023 and Marwick, 2020), making the dissemination of research on the far right an issue of 'epistemic exclusion'. Arguably, we then have an ethical duty to consider the interaction of safety and dissemination as they have a direct impact on experiences of harm and knowledge production itself.

Responsibility and safety as ethical necessities

In both these discussions, it is clear that it is not a level playing field, where institutionally embedded practices discouraging responsibility and safety in dissemination are more likely to impact those already structurally more at risk. Whether it is our framing of far-right politics or the attention that we as researchers attract, minoritised communities face the negative effects of these activities disproportionately. As much as 'impact' has attracted growing attention through the UK REF, its narrow definition and commodification actually discourages sustained engagement with the varied forms of impact that research may have, both intended and unintended. While of course we should not overstate our influence, we must not underestimate it either. The way that we conceive and discursively construct far-right politics can feed into wider conceptualisations and understandings of these dynamics, with scientific voices often seen as authoritative sources. To act responsibly when disseminating our research, therefore, we can look again to Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly's (2021) work and their proposal to work specifically in service to *imagined* communities of resistance. In relation to this field specifically, alongside Mondon, they (Joseph-Salisbury, Connelly & Mondon, 2024) suggest that '[t]he diversity of work within far right and anti-racist studies necessitates a broader conceptualisation of

accountability that extends beyond those with whom we have direct contact.' In this sense, it is not just immediate research participants to whom we have a responsibility, but rather more widely those who are impacted by the groups we study and our framing of them.

We must also consider whose safety is most at risk in these contexts. For example, research illustrates how women are less likely than men to post politically on social media through fear of negative reactions (Southern, 2024), while women of colour are subject to racialised and gendered online abuse (Francisco & Felmlee, 2021), LGBTQ communities are more likely to face digital harassment than heterosexual cisgender individuals (Powell, Scott & Henry, 2018) and disabled content creators face numerous forms of ableist hate in the online environment (Heung et al., 2024; Pritchard, 2024). In a sector that demands ever greater visibility, we cannot ignore how this push for outward-facing work further advantages those already structurally advantaged and certain forms of scholarship (Marwick, 2020; Pruden, 2024). A number of knock-on effects arise too for individuals, because the reach of our work and how it is taken up and built on by others is influential in career progression. As Atchison (2018, p.283) states, 'citations are heavily dependent on professional networks, and since citations are a measure of research impact, citation counts are often a key factor in promotion/tenure decisions'. For those less likely to suffer negatively from increased exposure, the career benefits are marked, potentially widening progression gaps.

It is crucial therefore that we emphasise that 'ethical practices and commitments are not limited to the presumed completion of research according to a linear and teleological understanding of the research process' (Kim, Biddolph & Shepherd, 2024). We must continue to engage with these questions long after formal analysis is completed, as for

some, simply leaving research at the door is not an option. We are not proposing individualistic responses to these questions, as to do so would be to fall within neoliberal impulses, but rather follow Alexie Labelle's (2020, p.419) call for 'scholars to reassess ethics as a shared responsibility between researchers and academia as an institution'. As researchers, we can collectively establish counter-hegemonic practices but also demand more from the institution in ensuring that ethics goes beyond box-ticking assumptions.

Conclusion: integrating talking 'about' as within ethical practice

In this article, we have applied the concept of talking 'about' the far right to highlight the necessity of broadening our ethical reflections on dissemination to incorporate the full spectrum of possible harms. As academics, knowledge production is a core goal. However, when researching an inherently violent topic, it also has the potential to do harm itself. As active agents in these processes, this article encourages researchers to thoughtfully and critically reflect on how to be responsible and safe when contributing to what we know on the far right. Beyond that, this paper seeks to sensitise readers to the invisibilised processes that have the potential to do harm, including the role of impact on undermining the safety of researchers and dynamics such as 'publish or perish'. Although other articles have considered the impact of risk on dissemination, it needs to be put in conversation with the other elements of talking 'about' the far right in order to draw out the myriad pressures that influence what we know about the far right and how it is framed.

Situating these reflections within the broader academic context and its very neoliberal ethos helps us to understand the role of stakeholders in shaping the academic environment. More concretely, the emphasis on individualism, entrepreneurialism, and

neoliberal economic logics creates pressure on the researcher to engage with policy makers, produce publications, and impact. Whilst these pressures can appear justified and understandable, they can have unintended consequences that undermine researchers' abilities to critically reflect and minimise harm. In particular, the increasing pressure to acquire funding makes it difficult to step outside these confines and apply ethical principles in our practices. Secondly, the increasing pressure for public visibility and engagement undermines researchers' ability to keep themselves safe, especially in the absence of other (more effective) tools. The neoliberal environment can invisibilise these dynamics and make it challenging to centre ethics. However, the harm inherent in our topic, the potential to do harm through our work, and the resurgent far right only make it all the more urgent that we continue to collectively develop better practices and seek to minimise the harm to minoritised communities.

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