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**\*Call for Papers – Special Issue n. 1/2025 (April 2025)\***

**\*Title\***

Fringe democracy and platformization of the public sphere

**\*Guest editors\***

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**\*Description\***

The contemporary landscape of digital communication is characterized by a complex interplay of public, semi-public, and private spaces (Boccia Artieri et al., 2021). These digital spaces differ in terms of visibility, regulation, and participation, but they are interconnected through reciprocal migration dynamics between "fringe" and mainstream digital media. Fringe platforms (de Winkel, 2023) are alternative platform services which explicitly contest the ideological premises and the practices of mainstream platforms. These platforms can offer diverse types of service (e.g., social media, streaming service, Appstore), express diverse ideologies (e.g., far-right, anarchist, anti-authoritarian positions), and put forward criticisms of various kinds (e.g., contesting Big Tech's personal data policies and accumulated power, advocating for diverse types of moderation, requesting to give voice to disadvantaged communities) (de Winkel, 2023; Herasimenka, 2022). These alternative digital spaces – at once technical, cultural, and social – are connected to disinformation ecosystems, to the spread of hate speech, and to the normalization of populist and extremist thought (Schulze et al., 2022; Walther & McCoy, 2021). Furthermore, despite their potential ideological variety, some scholars highlight the existence of a relationship of co-dependency and interdependence between the rise of alternative digital spaces and the growth of discursive forms associated with the far-right (e.g., Marwick et al., 2022; Schulze et al., 2022; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024; Urman & Katz, 2022).

For many years, fringe positions have leveraged the distribution power of mainstream social media platforms as "neutral channels," becoming part of the broader public debate, altering the very nature of political discussion, and destroying the conditions of the public sphere (Esau et al., 2023). With the term "fringe democracy," we refer to systems, practices, and political movements that exist on the periphery of traditional democratic norms and values, a "democracy from the margins" that tends to become increasingly visible in the online public sphere today. It can involve entities or political groups operating within a democratic framework but advocating for extreme or unconventional ideologies and methods of governance/participation. Fringe democracies often challenge or diverge from established democratic principles such as pluralism, inclusivity, respect for minority rights, and adherence to the rule of law. The main characteristics of fringe democracy are:

- Extremist ideologies: movements or parties that may hold radical views significantly diverging from traditional political thought, such as ultranationalism, (anti-)authoritarianism, anarchism, or radical populism.
- Marginalization from traditional politics: marginal democratic groups are typically sidelined from mainstream political discourse and may have limited influence within the broader political system. They often attract a smaller, more radicalized segment of the population.
- Questionable democratic practices: although they may participate in democratic processes such as elections, their commitment to democratic principles like fair play, tolerance, and dialogue may be weak. They might employ tactics that undermine democratic institutions or the electoral process.

- Controversial policies and rhetoric: these groups often advocate controversial or provocative policies that can polarize society. Their rhetoric may target specific groups, promoting division and sometimes inciting hatred or violence.
- Potential for destabilization: by challenging the norms and values of traditional democracy, fringe democratic movements can contribute to political instability.

The concept of fringe democracy is increasingly linked to the transformation driven by the platformization of the media system (van Dijck et al., 2018), which indicates a process by which digital platforms' logics transform the communicative dynamics of politics and the public sphere.

In particular, the relationship between the platformization of the public sphere and fringe democracy extends along several paths to be explored:

- Amplification of marginal voices and mobilization: Digital platforms provide fringe groups with powerful tools to disseminate their ideologies and messages. Social media, in particular, allows these groups to reach a global audience, bypassing traditional "gatekeepers" such as mainstream media and political institutions. Online platforms also enable marginal groups to organize and mobilize more efficiently. This has led to rapid growth and greater visibility for fringe movements, which can influence political agendas and public discourse.
- Growth of polarization and overexposure to marginal thinking: In digital environments, users are primarily exposed to information and viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs (dynamics of filter bubbles and echo chambers), which could accentuate polarization. This can intensify radical opinions and make fringe ideologies appear more widespread and accepted than they actually are in society at large.
- Disinformation and propaganda: The platformization process has facilitated the spread of disinformation and propaganda. Fringe groups often exploit these mechanisms to disseminate false or misleading information, manipulate public opinion, increase the toxicity of the discursive dimension, and discredit traditional democratic institutions and processes.
- Global reach and creation of fringe networks: Online platforms connect like-minded individuals across borders, allowing for the creation of transnational fringe networks. This global reach increases their influence and ability to share strategies, resources, and support.
- Alternative media ecosystems: Online platforms have enabled the creation of alternative media ecosystems where fringe groups can produce and distribute their content. These ecosystems often operate independently of the oversight and standards of traditional media, which can lead to the proliferation of extreme and unverified content.
- Monetization and funding: Many digital platforms offer monetization options, such as ad revenue, crowdfunding, and donations, which fringe groups can exploit to fund their activities. This financial support can sustain and grow their activities beyond what would be possible with traditional means.

In summary, the process of platformization has significantly transformed the landscape of fringe democracy by enhancing the reach, organization, and impact of fringe groups. Understanding these dynamics is essential for investigating some of the central themes in political communication studies, such as the quality of the public sphere, the influence of media on the political agenda and mobilization practices, the relationship between the media ecosystem and political polarization, and the processes of mis/disinformation. However, the study of marginal groups and radical counter-platforms that are difficult for researchers to access also poses several methodological challenges (Jost et al., 2023; Peeters & Willaert, 2022; Rogers, 2020).

We invite submissions that address topics including, but not limited to, the following:

- the role of fringe platforms in the platformized public sphere and in the contemporary media ecosystem
- strategies of amplification of marginal voices and the influence of this greater visibility on political agendas
- practices of online global mobilization and funding of marginal radical groups
- spaces of communication consistent with fringe ideologies and political polarization
- fringe platforms, disinformation, manipulation, incivility, and propaganda
- narratives, imaginaries, public discussion on fringe platforms

- case studies and comparative platforms studies: the specific and generalizable characteristics (actors, values, technologies, ideological frameworks, model of governance and participation) of radical counter-platforms
- the methodological challenges of studying fringe platforms and the views of the public sphere by movements on the margins of democracy
- extending the theoretical foundation of fringe social media platforms' social effects: similarities and differences with the “older” alternative and radical media

#### **\*Information for authors\***

Potential contributors should submit an extended abstract in English (1,200 words, excluding references), a 100-word bio, and the corresponding author's contact information. Long abstracts must be sent by July 30, 2024 to [rivista@compol.it](mailto:rivista@compol.it). Please indicate that the proposal is for the “special issue 2025” in the email subject. Notifications will be communicated by 3 September 2024. After the abstracts have been selected, authors will be invited to submit a full paper. Please note that acceptance of an abstract does not guarantee publication, given that all papers will go through the journal's peer review process.

#### **\*Abstract structure\***

The extended abstract should present a coherent narrative on fringe democracy and platformization of the public sphere, while highlighting how the authors respond to the special issue call. The abstract should clearly describe the key questions, the theoretical and methodological approach, the evidence presented, and the wider implications of the study. Authors are encouraged to provide as much detail as possible about the spatial and temporal context of their study, the research design and methods employed, the data collected, and the main results of the analyses. For theoretical works, the abstract should provide a clear and in-depth description of the conceptual framework.

#### **\*Key dates\***

- Deadline for extended abstract submissions: July 30, 2024
- Decision by issue editors sent by: September 3, 2024
- Full paper submissions: November 3, 2024
- First round of reviews completed by: December 15, 2024
- Resubmissions of papers: January 15, 2025
- Second round of reviews completed by: January 30, 2025
- Submission of final manuscripts: February 15, 2025

See the full CFP here: <https://www.rivisteweb.it/issn/1594-6061>

#### **For further information about the submission process, please contact the editorial team:**

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#### **\*About the venue\***

\*Editor in Chief\*: Augusto Valeriani (University of Bologna)

Comunicazione Politica (ComPol) – founded in 2000 and published by Il Mulino since 2009 – is sponsored by the Italian Association of Political Communication. It is well established among the academic and scientific community as the leading Italian journal that studies, analyzes and discusses the relationships between media and politics. The journal welcomes all research methods, comparative perspectives and analytical articles that deal with emerging political communication topics in Italy and worldwide. ComPol aims at promoting the interdisciplinary development of political communication scholarship by publishing contributions from political

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<https://www.rivisteweb.it/issn/1594-6061/presentazione>

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