

THE POLITICS OF FEAR AND ATTENTION: THE PLATFORM LOGIC OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION

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Abstract

This article examines how fear and attention intersect as structuring forces in contemporary political communication. Grounded in symbolic interactionism, media logic, attention-based politics, and the concept of fear as infrastructure, this conceptualization theorizes fear as an affective mechanism embedded in platform environments. Selected examples from the communication style of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán serve as brief illustrations of how these dynamics appear in practice, rather than as systematic case studies. The analysis reveals that fear serves as a performative resource, shaping community boundaries, legitimizing leadership, and organizing political visibility. The convergence of fear and attention reshapes political identity, amplifies polarization, and challenges the normative foundations of democratic communication.

Keywords: *attention-based politics; political fear; media logic; symbolic interactionism; identity politics*

1. Introduction

Political communication today predominantly unfolds in an attention-driven, platform-based environment, where visibility has become not only the precondition but also the very substance of political power. In this dynamically transforming media ecology, the struggle for attention constitutes a symbolic repertoire that produces new logics of political legitimacy. Rather than rational deliberation, performative impact, emotional resonance, and algorithmically steered visibility set the parameters of political action (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Merkovity, 2017). Fear plays a crucial role in this process. It is not merely a campaign technique or rhetorical device but an affective-infrastructure mechanism embedded in the very functioning of the political public sphere (Yeung, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

This study aims to explore how attention-based politics and the practice of fear converge within a communicative environment structured by platform logics. Fear does not simply appear as a linguistic trope or symbolic flourish; it becomes a resource that structures interactions between political actors, conditions citizens' perceptions, and encodes political identities. In emotionally saturated media environments, fear is not an episodic or exceptional feature but a normalized emotional grammar of political communication amplified by algorithms, reproduced by media routines, and encoded in symbolic forms (Altheide, 2006; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

The following analysis is situated within the theoretical traditions of symbolic interactionism, media logic, attention-based politics, and the conceptualization of fear as infrastructure. Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959/1986) dramaturgical model and Herbert Blumer's (1969) theory of meaning-making, we emphasize that political fear is not a reflection of "objective" threats but a socially constructed performance that defines situations and identities. This framework is complemented by theories of media logic and mediatization (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014), which highlight how contemporary political communication is formatted for visibility and resonance, as well as by the perspectives of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and governance-by-design (Yeung, 2018), which demonstrate how affective states, such as anxiety and outrage, are embedded in platform infrastructures. In this light, fear emerges as a platform-optimized performance: dramatized, algorithmically amplified, and normatively constitutive of political legitimacy.

To clarify these dynamics, the article draws on the communicative strategies of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán as illustrative cases. These examples are not examined through systematic empirical methods but serve to exemplify the theoretical mechanisms discussed throughout the study. Trump's "gonzo" style exemplifies improvisational performances of threat in which fear is staged through spectacular, emotionally charged acts optimized for virality (Altheide, 2023). By contrast, Orbán employs institutionalized media control and long-term narratives of national vulnerability, creating a mediated environment in which fear serves as an enduring interpretive frame (Szabó Palócz, 2022). These conclusions highlight not only the performative forms of fear but also their strategic goals and alignment with specific audiences.

The article is structured around the following research questions:

1. Through which symbolic and technological logics does fear become a structuring element of political attention?
2. How does platform-based media reshape political identities with fear as an affective resource?

3. What role do audiences play in the co-construction and circulation of such political performances?

By addressing these questions, the study aims not only to provide a theoretical synthesis but also to demonstrate that the convergence of fear and attention is not an aberration in political communication, but rather a defining feature of contemporary political logic. Recognizing this convergence is indispensable for rethinking democratic political communication, particularly in a historical moment when public discourse is increasingly governed by emotional polarization, symbolic antagonism, and performative visibility (Moffitt, 2016; Krzyżanowski, 2020).

The illustrative examples referenced in this article draw on public speeches, campaign communication, and widely circulated media statements from the period 2015–2024. These materials are not subjected to formal content analysis, but instead serve to demonstrate how specific communicative acts align with the broader theoretical framework of attention-based politics and fear performativity. The study, therefore, remains primarily theoretical, using illustrative cases only to clarify conceptual mechanisms, rather than to produce empirical generalizations.

2. Theoretical framework

Research on political fear has a long tradition extending across the fields of political psychology, sociology, and political communication. Early studies conceptualized fear primarily as an individual emotional response shaped by perceptions of threat and danger, focusing on its effects on risk assessment, policy preferences, and authoritarian attitudes (Marcus et al., 2000; Huddy et al., 2007). In this tradition, fear is understood as an internal affective state that influences political judgment. While this literature has provided important insights, it tends to treat fear as a psychological variable, often detached from the symbolic and communicative processes that produce it.

A second strand of research, strongly influenced by discourse studies, has emphasized fear as a linguistic and rhetorical construct. Ruth Wodak's work (2015) shows how right-wing populist actors adopt fear-laden discourses to construct crises, enemies, and threatened identities. Studies of moral panics, securitization, and migration discourse similarly demonstrate how political actors rhetorically use fear to define situations and mobilize support (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2015). This line of research highlights how fear is strategically constructed yet often remains focused on textual output without fully accounting for how digital infrastructures transform the circulation and amplification of fear.

A third and rapidly developing field examines fear through the lens of mediatised politics and the affective turn. Scholars such as David Altheide (2006) argue that the *politics of fear* is sustained by media routines that dramatize conflicts and crises.

Meanwhile, other scholars have demonstrated how emotions, particularly fear and anxiety, are embedded in contemporary news values (Pantti, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). These works highlight that modern media systems do not merely transmit fear; they format it for visibility through dramatization, repetition, simplification, and personalization. Yet, much of this scholarship was developed in the context of broadcast media and has only recently begun to address platform-based environments.

More recent research has shifted toward platform dynamics and affective infrastructures, demonstrating that fear spreads not only through rhetoric but also through algorithmic amplification and emotional optimization (Belli & Zingales, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018). Research in this area reveals how recommendation systems prioritize content that induces anxiety, outrage, or threat, thereby embedding fear at the infrastructural level (Yeung, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Despite this development, the field still lacks a comprehensive synthesis that integrates symbolic interactionism, media logic, and platform governance to explain how fear operates simultaneously as a performance, a communicative form, and an algorithmically reinforced affective pattern.

This article contributes to these debates by conceptualizing political fear not as an emotional state, rhetorical device, or discursive trope alone but as a performative-infrastructural mechanism within attention-based political environments. To develop this conceptualization, the study integrates four interconnected theoretical traditions: symbolic interactionism, media logic and mediatization, attention-based politics, and the conceptualization of fear as an infrastructure in algorithmic governance. This combined framework addresses a notable gap in the existing literature by explaining how fear functions as a structuring logic of visibility and identity formation in platform-mediated public spheres. The illustrative examples of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán serve to demonstrate how these mechanisms appear in practice, thereby linking the theoretical synthesis to concrete communicative operations.

2.1 *What is fear?*

In this article, *fear* is used as a multidimensional but analytically specific concept. Rather than defining fear as a psychological state or an individual emotion, the study conceptualizes political fear as a performative, relational, and communicative mechanism through which political actors define situations, construct boundaries, and orient collective attention. This approach follows symbolic interactionist insights, which suggest that meanings are created and negotiated in interactions rather than residing within individuals (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, fear is not treated as an internal feeling but as an externally observable communicative act that signals who or what constitutes a threat, who can offer protection, and how political identities are positioned. This performative orientation resonates with Goffman's dramaturgical

perspective, in which actors define situations and roles through publicly staged performances (Goffman, 1959/1986), and with research demonstrating that fear becomes effective when formatted for visibility and affective resonance within media environments (Altheide, 2006; Altheide & Snow, 1979).

From a media-logic perspective, fear functions as a format of communication optimized for visibility, repetition, and affective activation in platform ecosystems shaped by algorithmic incentives (van Dijck et al., 2018; Yeung, 2018). In this sense, fear operates not merely as content but as an infrastructurally supported pattern of meaning circulation embedded in the affective dynamics of platform society (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

This framework allows fear to be analytically operationalized not as a measurable emotional response but as a set of communicative operations:

- (1) the naming of an enemy or threat (Wodak, 2015);
- (2) the framing of this threat as urgent, disruptive, or existential (Krzyżanowski, 2020);
- (3) the performance of a protective leadership role (Moffitt, 2016); and
- (4) the circulation and amplification of these meanings through platform infrastructures (van Dijck et al., 2018; Yeung, 2018).

These operations serve as the empirical touchpoints for the illustrative examples analyzed later in the article. Accordingly, the study seeks to understand how such communicative acts are formatted, amplified, and ritualized within platform logics, without attempting to infer individual emotional states or conducting systematic content analysis, in line with the conceptual and theoretical nature of the inquiry.

2.2 Symbolic interactionism and performativity

Following Herbert Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism interprets human action as a meaning-dependent process, in which meanings are not objective givens but are created, negotiated, and reinterpreted through social interactions. This perspective is especially suitable for political communication research, as it highlights that political symbols, threats, or identities are not pre-existing entities but the outcome of situated interpretations. From this perspective, fear is neither “true” nor “false” but a socially constructed affective relation that acquires meaning in political interactions. In this article, this socially constructed relation is understood not as an inner emotional state but as a communicative and symbolic operation that becomes visible in political performance.

Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical model (1959/1986) emphasizes the performative aspects of this meaning-making process. According to Goffman, social actors shape and sustain identities through “front stage” and “backstage” interactions. In a media-saturated environment, political actors construct performances to persuade

audiences, define enemies, and maintain a sense of threat. Fear, therefore, is not a mirror of reality but a dramaturgical device for defining situations and identities. In this sense, fear becomes a performative resource that organizes symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,” sustaining political identity through dramatized acts of communication (Moffitt, 2016).

2.3 Media logic and the mediatized public sphere

The logic of media has long shaped political communication, but the emergence of digital platforms has elevated its significance. As Altheide and Snow (1979) argue, the media do not merely transmit information; they also structure the forms, values, and repertoires of political communication. Fear is often adapted to media formats that dramatize, simplify, and repeat, thus coding fear not only as content but also as form.

The concept of mediatization deepens this interpretation by showing how the political system is increasingly adapting to the rules of the media system (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Self-mediatization (Blumler, 2016) implies that political actors design their strategies in advance to conform to the logics of visibility, affect, and polarization. In this context, fear-based communication is not accidental but structurally aligned with the demands of a mediatized public sphere. Media logic rewards spectacular, emotionally charged, and easily repeatable narratives; thus, fear is embedded into the symbolic codes of the news cycle, talk shows, campaign visuals, and viral clips (Altheide & Snow, 2019).

2.4 Attention-based politics

A more recent paradigm in political communication is attention-based politics, which shifts focus from transmitting information to capturing and sustaining attention. According to Norbert Merkovity (2017, 2019), digital platforms have created an attention economy in which political actors become “attention entrepreneurs,” operating within the logics of algorithmic visibility. In this framework, the key to political power lies not in the quality of content but in the degree and mode of visibility.

This dynamic is especially pronounced in social media, where emotionally saturated, visually striking, and repetitive content gains greater reach. Attention entrepreneurs do not primarily inform but symbolically define the situation. They answer – often subjectively – questions such as: “*Who is the enemy?*” “*What constitutes the crisis?*” “*Who is the true leader?*” Attention thereby functions as a form of symbolic capital (Graber, 2004; Merkovity, 2017). In this sense, fear operates as an attention strategy, amplified by algorithmic affordances that privilege content designed to provoke outrage, anxiety, or urgency (Pariser, 2011; Hu & Li, 2018).

2.5 Fear as infrastructure: algorithmic governance and the affective economy

To understand the political role of fear, one must move beyond content analysis and investigate its structural embeddedness. Karen Yeung's (2018) concept of governance-by-design and Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism both demonstrate that digital platforms are not neutral channels but normative environments that shape behavior and emotions through coded incentives. Fear, as an affective state, is already present in the infrastructure itself. Algorithms determine which content is foregrounded, which emotional codes are emphasized, and which reactions are reinforced through feedback mechanisms.

José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) describe digital platforms as "affective infrastructures," hybrid systems that combine technological design with emotional modulation to organize meaning. Fear-inducing messages are not only distributed, but also emotionally conditioned, shaping who citizens believe they should fear, distrust, or remain loyal to. As such, fear is not simply communicated but becomes embedded in the infrastructure as a patterned emotional register that guides political interpretation and legitimates authority.

3. Fear as an Attention Strategy in Platform Logic

As the structure of the digital public sphere has transformed, the political function of fear has also undergone changes. Fear, understood here as a communicative mechanism rather than an internal emotional state, is no longer merely an episodic emotional trigger but has become a central element of attention management. The thematization and visualization of fear not only increase the likelihood of agenda-setting but also align with the operational logics of platform algorithms, which privilege emotionally activating, polarizing, and simplified content (Szabó Palócz, 2023; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In the competition for attention, messages that can provoke strong affective reactions – particularly those built on fear – stand out (Altheide, 2006; Yeung, 2018). Fear as a political linguistic element becomes most effective when it appears in short, visually striking, and repeatable forms, that is, when it becomes platform-compatible performance. Political actors learn to "play" fear in ways that are algorithmically legible and distributable (Altheide & Merkovity, 2022). Fear does not merely frame political reality; it codes affective orientations that are constantly measured and reinforced by platform feedback mechanisms such as likes, shares, and comments. Algorithmic logics are therefore not neutral channels but enforce emotional preferences (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, attention is not an objective condition but a symbolic act produced in interaction that attributes meaning to political events (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959/1986). In this sense, fear is one of the affective tools that structure orientations of attention and contribute to the

definition of political situations. Political actors do not simply communicate threats but performatively define them – the naming of the “enemy” simultaneously affirms the boundaries of the “we” group. Thus, attention becomes not a prerequisite for political efficacy but itself a performative instrument of power that structures the public sphere. This is especially evident in fear-based communication, where framed threats – such as migration, the “Brussels diktat,” or the “radical left” – simultaneously mobilize attention and construct political identities (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Moffitt, 2016).

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, create affective distortions that favor the spread of fear-oriented content. Algorithmically privileged messages are often polarizing because they ensure maximum engagement (Pariser, 2011; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Such logics do not merely reshape information structures but create affective ecosystems in which fear appears as a naturalized emotional response in political discourse (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). This dynamic is evident in content that is concise, visually striking, and morally unsettling, where fear is not a reflection of external events but a content form tailored to platform logics (Altheide, 2006; Zuboff, 2019).

3.1 *Managing fear for attention: Trump and Orbán as models*

The following examples illustrate the performative logics discussed above. They are not intended as comprehensive case studies but as theoretically informed demonstrations of how fear is enacted and circulated in different political styles.

Donald Trump’s communication represents the “gonzo” and improvisational model of applying fear in an attention-optimized way (Altheide, 2023). His Twitter strategy, campaign rallies, and rhetoric – such as “Build the Wall,” “China Virus,” and “American Carnage” – constructed a sense of threat that dramatized the political situation and conferred exclusive legitimacy on his leadership role. Trump’s constant dramatization illustrates the media logic of spectacle: brief, emotionally charged, and highly visual content optimized for virality. In this case, fear functioned as a symbolic device for saturating news cycles and algorithmic feeds, transforming attention into symbolic capital. In line with the conceptualization outlined earlier, these examples do not attempt to capture emotional reactions but rather demonstrate how fear is enacted through communicative operations, such as naming threats, dramatizing crises, and performing protective leadership.

By contrast, Viktor Orbán’s discourse represents an institutionalized and mediated model of fear (see Szabó Palócz, 2022). Following the 2015 migration crisis, the Hungarian government developed state-coordinated narratives – such as the “Soros Plan,” “Stop Brussels,” and the defense of “Christian Europe” – that systematically thematized threats and constructed political loyalty around emotional attachment to a protective discourse (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2015). Unlike Trump’s improvisational style, Orbán’s strategy is marked by message discipline,

centralized media control, and the routinization of fear as a dominant interpretive frame.

In both cases, fear functions not just as an agenda-setting device but as a distributor of political identity. By designating the object of fear, political actors define who belongs to the community and who poses a threat to it. Thus, fear is not only an emotional state but also a structure of attention strategy that, through platform logics and algorithmic amplification, is converted into political power.

3.1.1 *Illustrative examples of fear-performances*

To concretize how the communicative operations of political fear function within attention-driven, platform-based environments, this subsection presents a set of illustrative examples drawn from the public communication of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. These instances do not constitute systematic case studies but serve to demonstrate how threat-naming, crisis-framing, protective leadership performance, and algorithmic amplification materialize in practice. By linking specific remarks to the conceptual mechanisms outlined above, these examples clarify how fear becomes a formatted, circulated, and ritualized resource of political visibility.

Donald Trump:

(1) *“They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”* – Campaign announcement, June 16, 2015. This statement exemplifies fear as a boundary-making operation: migrants are cast as a homogenous threat, dramatizing the situation and positioning the speaker as the sole credible protector (C-SPAN, 2015).

(2) *“Our country is full. You can’t come in.”* – Speech at Republican Jewish Coalition, April 6, 2019. By depicting national space as saturated and overwhelmed, Trump performs existential crisis-framing, transforming immigration into an immediate threat that requires defensive action (Cochrane, 2019).

(3) *“American carnage stops right here and stops right now.”* – Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017. The term “American carnage” constructs a totalizing crisis frame that legitimizes the speaker’s role as a crisis-stopper, reinforcing protective leadership as a performative identity (Trump, 2017).

(4) *“The China Virus. The Invisible Enemy.”* – Remarks at Whirlpool plant in Ohio, August 7, 2020. The dual labelling merges an externalized, ethnicized threat with an abstract, omnipresent danger, creating a highly portable fear narrative optimized for algorithmic repetition across platforms (C-SPAN, 2020).

Viktor Orbán (pro-government media and Orbán’s government):

(1) *“Let’s Stop Brussels!”* (“Állítsuk meg Brüsszelt!”) – Government-sponsored advertisement, 2017. “Brussels” functions as a monolithic external threat, reinforcing a defensive national identity and legitimizing the government’s role as guardian against foreign intrusion (Vastagbőr, 2017).

(2) *“George Soros attacks again.”* (“Soros György újra támad.”) – M1 News, June 18, 2021. This instance illustrates enemy personalization and visual condensation: the news segment produces a quasi-iconic fear symbol suited for viral circulation and repeated performative invocation (M1 Híradó, 2021).

(3) *“What Brussels says is betrayal.”* (“Amit Brüsszel mond, az árulás.”) – Facebook video, September 22, 2021. The “fence” on the Southern border of Hungary simultaneously serves as material infrastructure and symbolic boundary, enacting protective leadership performance and anchoring fear in a tangible object (Orbán, 2021).

(4) *“We will protect Hungary.”* (“Mi megvédjük Magyarországot.”) – Government promise, 2015–2024/2025. Through sustained repetition across multiple crises, this formula becomes a ritualized reassurance performance, stabilizing fear as a long-term interpretive frame and reinforcing emotional loyalty (Magyar Nemzet, 2024).

Collectively, these examples illustrate how stylistically distinct political actors enact structurally convergent fear performances within platform-mediated environments. Trump’s improvisational spectacle and Orbán’s institutionalized narrative discipline both operationalize fear through threat designation, crisis dramatization, and protective leadership performance, while platform infrastructures ensure the ongoing amplification and circulation of these narratives. These dynamics reinforce the broader argument of the article that fear functions not simply as rhetorical content but also as a performative and infrastructural logic shaping political visibility, identity formation, and legitimacy in contemporary attention-based politics.

4. The Politics of Attention

The logic of attention in the digital public sphere has transformed not only the circulation of information but also the very conditions of political authority, identity formation, and civic engagement. Political communication no longer spins primarily around the transmission of arguments or policy proposals; instead, it is organized as a competitive struggle for visibility in a media ecosystem structured by platform algorithms. These infrastructures distribute attention according to criteria such as emotional resonance, visual intensity, and repetitive circulation (Merkovity, 2019).

In this sense, attention is not a neutral cognitive response but a socially organized and technologically mediated resource that structures political legitimacy.

Visibility has thus become the decisive prerequisite for political relevance. Those absent from trending lists, news feeds, or algorithmically curated highlights risk political marginalization, regardless of their institutional mandate or policy expertise (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). As Benjamin Moffitt (2016) demonstrates in his analysis of populist style, contemporary political actors operate within an environment where *visibility is equivalent to existence*. The equivalence of visibility with existence reorders the coordinates of political competition. Attention functions as symbolic capital, conferring power on those who dominate the screens and streams of digital publics.

The dramaturgical perspective, as offered by Goffman (1959/1986), is particularly useful for analyzing how attention is organized. Political leaders do not simply present information but define situations by constructing interpretive frames that shape how audiences perceive threats, responsibilities, and boundaries. Fear-centered narratives about migration, crime, or cultural decline do more than describe conditions; they frame them in ways that determine who is perceived as a danger, who counts as a member of the political community, and who is excluded as an outsider (Blumer, 1969; Wodak, 2015). Through these definitions, attention is mobilized as a performative resource that anchors political meaning into emotionally charged categories.

The structuring of attention carries profound consequences for the organization of democratic discourse. Algorithms guiding digital platforms are calibrated to reward messages that maximize engagement, often reinforcing existing attitudes rather than challenging them. The result is the consolidation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where individuals encounter information that confirms their prior beliefs while being shielded from dissonant perspectives (Pariser, 2011; Garrett et al., 2014). In such environments, political communication shifts from persuasion toward affirmation, weakening social cohesion and narrowing the deliberative space necessary for pluralist debate (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010).

Yet polarization in this context is not merely cognitive. It is increasingly affective, rooted in the emotional alignment of communities around shared feelings of threat and grievance. Political groups evolve into affectively homogeneous collectives whose sense of belonging is reinforced by the circulation of common fear narratives (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Political allegiance becomes less about rational preference formation and more about emotional loyalty to a symbolic order that defines insiders and outsiders, protectors, and enemies.

Attention politics also reshapes leadership roles. Within frames of fear, leaders reproduce their position as guardians, voices of the nation, or crisis solvers. These identities are performed through public appearances, ritualized speeches, symbolic repetitions – such as fences/walls, flags, and religious icons – and the constant designation of adversaries (Altheide & Merkovity, 2022). Such communicative acts

achieve efficacy only when they generate attention and enter circulation through algorithms that prioritize emotional salience. However, citizens are not mere spectators. Through likes, shares, comments, and other forms of digital interaction, they co-construct the symbolic meaning of politics. Participation becomes performative as audience reactions feed back into the visibility of leaders and narratives, further amplifying their symbolic power.

The thematization and distribution of attention are therefore not simply a matter of communicative technique; they are a form of political domination. Actors who are able to define the terms of fear, direct collective focus, and delineate the boundaries of identity simultaneously shape the perceived reality of politics. This type of power is not necessarily institutional or legalistic in nature. It is performative, embedded in algorithmic infrastructures and affective economies that reward repetition, polarization, and spectacle (Yeung, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). The struggle for visibility thus reorients democracy away from deliberative engagement toward symbolic competition, where political legitimacy is secured less by the coherence of arguments than by the intensity of mediated performances.

In this environment, the politics of attention redefines the very conditions of belonging and participation. Being part of the political community increasingly means sharing its fear narratives, contributing to the amplification of its symbols and performing loyalty through digital interactions. What emerges is not simply a transformation of communication styles but a reconfiguration of democratic life itself – one in which symbolic antagonism, affective fragmentation, and algorithmic amplification converge to make attention, rather than deliberation, the currency of political order.

5. The Performative Reproduction of Political Identity Through Fear

In the environment of platform-based political communication, identity is not a pre-given, stable entity but a continuously reproduced symbolic construct. Its reproduction occurs through performative acts, in which fear plays a central dramaturgical role. Fear is not merely emotional content but a symbolic mechanism that determines who belongs to the imagined community of “us” and who is marked as threatening “other” (see Szabó, 2024). In political discourse, enemy images – whether they refer to migrants, Brussels bureaucrats, or liberal elites – not only shape the agenda but also actively constitute the boundaries of political communities (Bene & Juhász, 2025; Brubaker, 2017). This mechanism is particularly evident in Viktor Orbán’s communication, where campaigns against the so-called “Soros Plan” have effectively elevated fear (Wodak, 2015; Szabó Palócz, 2022). A similar logic can be observed in Donald Trump’s discourse, where the battle against the “deep state” positioned his leadership as the ultimate form of protection (Altheide, 2023).

Fear not only thematizes but also mobilizes. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, meanings are not fixed but emerge through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). In this sense, the performative act of fear produces interpretations that orient and legitimate action. Identifying the object of fear sets the parameters of collective behavior, while the actor who assumes the role of protector presents himself as the authentic representative of the community. Digital platforms function not only as channels but as stage managers of these processes (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). “Front stage” events, such as campaign rallies, national consultations, or livestreamed performances, are inserted in algorithmically structured spaces, where the success of a message depends on its visual, linguistic, and emotional coding.

Political identity, when mediated through fear, becomes less a matter of rational belief and more a mode of affective attachment. Populist leaders often portray themselves as the only figures willing to “name the threat,” “defend the people,” or “reveal the truth” (Moffitt, 2016). Audiences do not merely interpret such messages; they identify with them. The relationship is not only cognitive but also identificatory; citizens align themselves with the leader by positioning themselves against the enemy. The effectiveness of this identification method depends heavily on the distribution of attention. Algorithmically highlighted fear narratives provoke stronger emotional responses, reinforcing the sense of cohesion within the community (Garrett et al., 2014). Belonging thus acquires a new meaning. The community of “us” is defined by collective fear, shared reactions, and the co-construction of symbols of threat.

The political use of fear, therefore, is not simply a rhetorical technique but an act of identity politics. It redraws the boundaries, values, and cohesion of the community (see Juhász, 2012). Within the symbolic interactionist framework, politics appears less as decision-making and more as social drama, where roles, situations, and symbols are continuously reinterpreted. The dramatization of fear through visual elements (billboards, campaign videos), linguistic condensation (“invasion,” “danger,” “betrayal”), and repetitive emotional appeals becomes a ritualized form of communication. Through these rituals, political communities not only reaffirm their unity but also reconstruct their interpretive horizons.

Importantly, this process has a self-reinforcing effect in platform environments. Algorithms privilege fear-based narratives that attract high engagement, thereby ensuring their repetition and circulation. By interacting – liking, sharing, or commenting – citizens participate in the reproduction of fear narratives and in the symbolic reconstruction of political identity. The performativity of fear is thus not confined to elite actors. Instead, it is distributed across audiences who co-create identity through digital participation. These dynamics carry significant democratic implications. The performative reproduction of political identity through fear intensifies polarization, hardens symbolic boundaries, and erodes the conditions of deliberative exchange. As fear-based narratives dominate the symbolic repertoire of

political communities, identity increasingly rests on affective antagonism rather than on shared civic norms. Consequently, democratic belonging is redefined not through common deliberation but through collective alignment against perceived enemies. In this configuration, the community maintains itself by seeking ever-new threats that justify its existence and reaffirm its cohesion.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that fear and attention are not simply communicative techniques but structural and symbolic resources that shape the organization of contemporary political publics. In an algorithmically mediated environment, political actors do not merely transfer information or engage in rhetorical competition but instead compete for emotionally conditioned attention. Within this struggle, fear emerges as both a performative tool and a mechanism of legitimacy, rooted in the routines, infrastructures, and affective codes of digital media.

The theoretical framework, drawing on symbolic interactionism and media logic, demonstrated that political fear functions not only as content but also as a structural element. Following Goffman's dramaturgical model, performances of fear on the political stage reproduce the relational dynamics of "us" and "them," while audiences participate in meaning-making rather than passively observing (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959/1986). Algorithmic infrastructures distort and feedback these meanings, converting fear into a form of attentional capital (Zuboff, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The cases around Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán illustrated how different political styles rely on structurally convergent logics of fear. Trump's improvisational "gonzo" performances dramatized threat as a constant spectacle, while Orbán institutionalized fear within long-term, state-supported narratives. Despite stylistic differences, both leaders relied on fear not as rhetoric alone, but as an identity-producing mechanism that delineated community boundaries, reinforced leader roles, and anchored symbolic legitimacy (Altheide, 2023; Szabó Palócz, 2022).

By addressing the guiding research questions, the study arrives at several key conclusions. First, fear becomes a structuring element of political attention through symbolic and technological logics: dramatized performance, media formats, and algorithmic amplification. Second, platform-based media reshape political identities by inserting fear as an affective resource that defines community membership through antagonism. Third, audiences are not only recipients but active participants. Through sharing, commenting, and digital engagement, audiences co-create political meaning and amplify fear narratives.

The convergence of fear and attention is therefore not an aberration of political communication but a fundamental logic of contemporary politics. This recognition reveals broader democratic implications. The interplay between fear and attention is

not confined to strategy but signals a deeper transformation of the public sphere. Affective performances increasingly displace deliberative discourse. Political action becomes organized around symbolic oppositions rather than rational argumentation. The results are affective polarization, exclusionary identity politics, and the erosion of democratic norms.

The study concludes that fear and attention together constitute a symbolic and medial order in which algorithms, emotional codes, and political performances mutually reinforce one another. This raises urgent normative questions: How can political communication be reoriented toward reflexive identification rather than emotional manipulation? How can the public be organized around deliberation rather than dramatization?

Future research should investigate how platform-mediated fear influences political socialization, intergenerational attitudes, and the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks in addressing affective fragmentation. Particular attention should be given to cultivating emotional competencies – such as affective awareness and critical sensitivity – that strengthen democratic resilience. Ultimately, the politics of fear and attention signals not only a shift in campaign practice but the emergence of a new condition for political community-building. The future of democratic communication depends on whether attention can be structured in ways that prioritize shared meaning-making over fear, and reflexive participation over algorithmically amplified polarization.

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