

Signposts

A contextual background for the
project Countering Radicalisation
in Right-Wing Extremist Online
Subcultures.

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Glossary

Affordances: Affordances are the specific technical capabilities individual platforms offer their users.

Alternative platforms: The term 'alternative platforms' refers to platforms used by groups and individuals who no longer feel welcome on mainstream social media platforms due to their political views. Alternative platforms include those set up specifically for extremist purposes, those that tolerate a wide range of political positions (including hateful and extremist ones) because of their broad definition of freedom of expression, and those set up for completely different and non-political purposes (such as video game livestreaming).

Network Enforcement Act: Germany's Network Enforcement Act (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, i.e. NetzDG) that aims to strengthen legal enforcement on the internet and more effectively fight against and punish hate speech and other criminal content on social networks. It came into effect on 1 October 2017 and was last amended in May 2021. The Act chiefly applies to platforms with at least two million registered users in Germany.

Far-right: ISD's definition of 'far-right' is in line with that of expert Cas Mudde, who conceptualises it as an umbrella term that includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe "inequalities between people are natural and positive", but have differing attitudes towards democracy. Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.

Platform: In this report, the term 'platforms' refers to websites or apps through which users can interact with each other. Social media or social networks play a particularly relevant role in this context.

Deplatforming: Deplatforming refers to the removal of accounts and groups on social media. This practice is usually accompanied by a loss of audience reach for the respective accounts.

Demonetisation: In this report, demonetisation is understood as restricting content from being able to have any commercial value on a platform. For example, content that is 'demonetised' by a platform cannot be used to generate advertising revenue.

Right-wing extremism: A form of nationalism characterised by its references to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy.

Introduction

In the wake of far-right terror attacks in the 2010s, some right-wing extremists were banned from established social media platforms. As a result, far-right actors online started migrating to alternative platforms, bringing their supporters with them by promoting these alternative platforms on established social media. As largely unregulated spaces, alternative platforms also functioned as a place to form new like-minded communities.

Right-wing extremist subcultures on the internet are subsequently thriving, and have gained additional momentum following protests against the German government's COVID-19 policies in 2020. The resulting digital ecosystem of far-right activists poses a threat to public safety and to the democratic process. These ecosystems call for political actions, foster and organise hate campaigns, and produce and disseminate anti-democratic propaganda.

To date, there has been no systematic, long-term study of the German-language right-wing extremist online milieu on alternative platforms and their correlation with established social media. Therefore, the aim of this project is to investigate the far-right online milieu on alternative platforms.

The project uses the latest methods of digital empirical data analysis, as well as qualitative and ethnographic research methods. ISD has published two data-driven reports as part of this project: *Escape Routes* investigates the strategies used by right-wing extremists on major platforms to circumvent the NetzDG; and *Telegram as a Pillar of Support* examines the extreme right-wing use of the messenger service Telegram.

As part of a three-year project, this report looks at the larger context of research on the German far-right, and explains the methodological approach of our investigation in more detail.

The first section of this report provides a historical overview of the far-right's relationship with technology, both in general and more specifically in Germany. This is followed by a literature review of recent research that focuses on online right-wing extremist networks.

The second part of the report is devoted to the conceptual groundwork of the research project. Here, we define and describe the term right-wing extremism that is used for the project. The methodology and the findings from four interviews with experts on right-wing extremism are also explained in more detail in this section. These interviews ensured that all current trends and noteworthy platforms were included in the project.

The conclusion offers a preview of the remaining phases of project based on the findings so far.

Part One:

Historical context and review of existing literature

In order to identify key actors and platforms, an analysis of existing research was conducted at the beginning of this project. The goal was to identify research gaps and position the project in the context of the existing research. This analysis also looked at crucial developments in the online activities of the far-right in Germany. This section of the report presents central historical developments to provide a broader context for current trends.

Online right-wing extremism in Germany

In Germany, the extreme right has used the internet for coordination and political agitation since the early 1990s. As the internet has evolved, right-wing extremists have adapted their strategies and tactics to match technological advances. By networking through forums and message boards, creating their own websites, using social media platforms, and more recently, developing their own technology i.e. 'alt-tech'¹, the extreme right has actively and successfully capitalised on the evolution of the internet.²

As the internet and its capabilities changed, so did the online strategies of the far-right. National and international far-right networks that previously operated offline began using the internet to evade the laws of individual countries and to avoid police investigation.³ Initially, the far-right mostly used closed message board style forums for sharing information and coordinating internally. For example, message boards that linked to the Thule network⁴ helped far-right groups maintain their online connections and contacts in one place and avoid dispersal.⁵ Since 1993, the Thule network had existed as a network of online mailboxes, and in 1996 it also became a website. The extreme right in Germany also used the internet for international networking through forums, such as Stormfront, which was founded in 1995 and is still active today. Stormfront was one of the first platforms where an international online community was established around far-right discourse.⁶ Gradually closed networks were transformed into websites or replaced by them. Already back then, right-wing extremist activists organised online propaganda and 'trolling'-campaigns.⁷

Since the 1990s, the number of right-wing extremist websites in Germany has grown rapidly and distinct groups have differentiated themselves.⁸ The online spectrum includes websites of political parties and right-wing extremist groups (e.g. community and fan websites). These sites range in quality, depending on the technical capabilities of their owners. For many local groups and associations, websites served as more of a status symbol rather than a professional, functional presence on the internet. However, some website operators recognised early on that the internet offered many opportunities for political coordination and propaganda. For example, right-wing extremists used their sites to make texts banned in Germany available for download alongside other propaganda material, such as far-right rock music. Right-wing extremists specifically used forums, online mail order, blogs and social media to recruit new supporters, finance their political activities and spread their ideology beyond their own ranks. Their strategic use of the internet has quickly adapted to technological changes and advancements.

Forums

Forums have had an extremely important role in the right-wing extremist online environment. They have been used to advertise and appraise political actions, develop strategies, and exchange ideas with like-minded people. From the outset, the ability to send private messages between individual users strengthened the social aspect of forums. Although early versions of forums did not offer the same possibilities as today's social media, they were spaces that fostered community building and allowed users to engage in political organising.

In addition to dedicated right-wing extremist sites such as the Thiazi forum, right-wing extremists exchanged ideas on other forums, such as imageboards, which include 4chan and 8chan (now 8kun). These forums, which were at first primarily used by anime fans to exchange images,⁹ developed a culture of provocation and 'taboo-breaking' behaviour, developing an 'amoral' style attractive to reactionaries and right-wing extremists.

German-language imageboards, such as Krautchan (active between 2007-2018) and Kohlchan (active since 2018), have also been available for right-wing extremists. The ability to post anonymously on forums, as well as the relatively weak moderation practised on these sites, provided the ideal conditions for harmful activity to flourish. Such activity includes attempting to 'outdo' other users by posting the most shocking images or other content arousing disgust or horror, as well as ideas for trolling and the representation of right-wing extremist or generally misanthropic political positions.

In addition to anonymous users on imageboards who made extreme statements out of a desire to break taboos (so-called 'anons'), there were also those who sought to defend their statements from criticism through the use of irony and humour. Among them were right-wing extremists who strategically used imageboards to recruit new supporters.¹⁰ The use of irony, tongue-in-cheek language and supposed 'humorous' language has been used as a strategy by right-wing extremist agitators. This ostensible ridiculing of one's own statements has been used to conceal the effects of this agitation.¹¹ On 4chan, this strategy has been systematically used as a means of shifting the discourse. It is now an entrenched part of far-right rhetoric on various platforms. This style reflects a more general trend: by presenting one's worldview with 'ironic detachment' gives the impression that the author is not entirely serious about their convictions.

The use of irony regarding their ideology has had a concrete function for extreme right-wing activists online. It has made it more difficult to prosecute users for the content of their statements online, and partly has prevented algorithms from flagging relevant posts. In turn, the use of irony has aided online recruitment efforts by extremist movements by making it easier to participate in extreme ideologies, as the success of right-wing extremist community building on 4chan has shown. Right-wing extremists still use the platform 4chan and 'ironic' styles of online activism today.

Monetisation

Since the early 2000s, online mail order businesses that are owned and operated by right-wing extremists steadily become more important. The internet offers a broader market for sellers of right-wing extremist music, literature and fashion brands, as well as making such cult items easier to buy. While previously right-wing extremists could only purchase products like far-right rock CDs at concerts or through mail-order catalogues, the emergence of online shops has made them more accessible. While some shops did offer the MP3 download of songs early on, the new distribution structures of online businesses have enabled independent cult brands to establish themselves. Online distribution is still a profitable source of income for mail-order companies that are respected and well established within the right-wing extremist milieu. Sales within this community not only serve the economic interests of individual supporters, but the profits are also used to finance political activities, concerts and other events.

Blogs

In addition to explicitly right-wing extremist online spaces, other websites have emerged that could not immediately be ideologically categorised. For example, the anti-Muslim website PI-News (formerly called Politically Incorrect) that began in 2004 now operates via a server in the US. There is no Impressum (imprint), which makes legal access even more difficult.

Some German states via their State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution have put PI-News under observation since 2011¹². In 2021, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution included this blog in its list of 'observed objects'.¹³ The Bavarian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution recognises PI-News' Islamophobia as a new form of extremism.¹⁴ PI-News has been an important site for the online mobilisation of various far-right movements since its

inception. Beyond its opposition to Islam, the blog's broader ideological stance is evident in its very name. Its opposition to positions pejoratively described as 'politically correct' is central to the far-right's culture war.¹⁵ The blog's authors use the name to advertise their self-perceived image as courageous 'taboo-breakers' who stand up to a supposed 'left-wing opinion-dictatorship'.

This self-representation, as well as its wide-ranging subject matter and political stance, has meant PI-News has reached beyond the far-right to right-wing, conservative and even liberal audiences. While in the early days of the internet, right-wing extremists moved in mostly closed online spaces that were clearly recognisable as extreme, the anti-Islam movement that has emerged since 11 September 2001 has created a milieu in which right-wing extremists can operate and have an impact on the political mainstream.¹⁶ Through this approach, the far-right has succeeded in exploiting and deepening political divisions within the mainstream.

PI-News is important both as a place for mobilisation and an information channel, especially for the anti-Muslim factions of the radical and extreme right. However, because of its blog format, PI-News serves as a prime example of how the emergence of blogs has had consequences on the online political spectrum. Blogs have allowed loosely connected groups to connect with each other through comments, links and quotations. The comparatively weak ideological coherence of newly formed blog environments has also meant that visitors to blogging sites discover more easily established blogs like PI-News.

The transition to Web 2.0, whereby users not only consume content but also create it themselves, has presented new opportunities for the dissemination of extreme right content and the extreme right's use of the web.

Social media

Social media platforms are revolutionary for the extreme right because they are designed to allow easy connection and sharing. This makes them an extremely useful tools for political mobilisation. Depending on the structure of the platform, they offer scope for broader dissemination of individual ideological concepts

or for promoting issues for mobilisation.¹⁷ Far-right media portals have used social media to promote their ideological messaging by ensuring their stories have prominent placement on far-right media platforms and then amplifying them on mainstream spaces.¹⁸ The aim is to outrage readers and reinforce their worldview. One example is content about the 'crimes' committed by migrants (often sarcastically referred to as 'isolated incidents').

In addition to political parties and social movements, individual right-wing extremist influencers have also become prominent on social media. Far-right influencers combine a political message with a personal brand. This combination of political and commercial interests is one reason for the urgent call for the deplatforming of right-wing extremist activists and groups. Deplatforming, i.e. the blocking of accounts and groups, regularly leads not only to a loss of audience reach, but also the loss of important sources of income.¹⁹ In recent years, the largest social media operators have increasingly taken to blocking right-wing extremist accounts for spreading hate speech or disinformation.

In addition to social pressure and the platforms' own rules, legal regulations, such as the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) in Germany, also contribute to platforms increasingly deleting illegal content. This also partly promotes the blocking of extremist accounts. There is evidence that deplatforming is leading to a sharp decline in the audience reach of blocked accounts.²⁰

Deplatforming and the fear of having one's account or website removed or blocked has led to the emergence of distinctly far-right social media platforms that copy the affordances, i.e. the technical functions, of mainstream platforms. Alt-tech related platforms used by this movement can be divided into three categories: those created specifically for extremist purposes; platforms that as a result of their broad understanding of freedom of expression tolerate a wide range of political positions, include hate speech and extremism; and those that were created for different, apolitical purposes that cannot effectively control extremist content ('captured platforms'). Prominent examples of alt-tech platforms are the Twitter clones Gab and Parler, the already deactivated Reddit clone Voat, and

video platforms like BitChute and Odysee that strongly resemble YouTube.

In addition to setting up their own digital infrastructure, right-wing extremist internet activists specifically use platforms that either do not have the capacity to effectively moderate or exclude extremist content, or that tolerate extremist activities even though the platform itself does not adhere to extremist ideologies. Content can be tolerated due to the economic considerations or libertarian attitudes of the platform operators. However, in terms of technology, the alt-tech sector has mainly aimed to create their own infrastructure. The platforms that have emerged in this way now go beyond simple platform clones and offer their own features.²¹ The extreme right in Germany also uses these alt-tech platforms. For example, there is a comparatively large number of German-speaking users on Gab, even though the platform does not have the same status in Germany as in the US. In 2020, the online ecosystem of the extreme right in Germany changed again, as in most Western countries. New online networks were formed in parallel to new ideological trends. For example, in Germany, during the protests against the German government's policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, numerous groups established themselves on the messenger service Telegram, which quickly recorded a large increase in users.²²

Current research on right-wing extremist online networks

There has been an increasing focus in recent years on the identification of alliances and networks between right-wing extremist actors on the internet. Burris, Smith and Strahm established an analysis of the social networking function of hyperlinks in the early 2000s; now a common approach for researching online right-wing networks.²³ They focused on partner sites and web pages that can be found, such as the recommendations in 'blog rolls' i.e. the lists of links on weblogs. Since then, a number of studies have examined the Italian,²⁴ German,²⁵ broader European, transnational and US-American far-right.²⁶ The overlapping of different online communities such as the 'manosphere' and the alt-right are also increasingly the subject of academic analysis.²⁷ The manosphere is a conglomerate of websites, forums and blogs that share a misogynistic worldview and a digital culture (memes, narratives, networks). Although

it consists of distinct groups, each with a different focus, these groups usually count themselves as part of the manosphere and unite under this collective term. In addition to being the subject of academic research in journals and anthologies,²⁸ the online activities of right-wing extremists in Germany have persistently been the subject of studies in recent years.

These studies examine the strategies and technical aspects of right-wing extremist online activism,²⁹ or explore them through an investigative approach.³⁰ In doing so, the research also considers the technical conditions required for the success of online right-wing extremist agitation³¹ and discusses various strategies for combatting online neo-fascist agitation, as well as the challenges.³²

Academic analysis of right-wing extremist movements online and their relationship to platforms has primarily focused on Twitter,³³ Facebook³⁴ and Reddit.³⁵ Large and well-known platforms provide right-wing extremist movements with access to a large audience for their agenda, while smaller and closed platforms are used for discussion in end-to-end encrypted chats and serve as a means of internal organisation.

The analysis of right-wing networks on social media platforms, such as Twitter, has shown that the networks often cluster around a small number of very active and influential users. These popular and prolific users are not necessarily the most radical and extreme ones on the respective platforms. They tend to be located in a grey area between conservative, radical and extreme positions.

These positions are presented as walking a fine line between freedom of expression guaranteed by law and legal regulations and the platforms' Terms of Use. For example, a US Twitter network of well-known 'white supremacists' deliberately seeks to appeal to conservative users.³⁶

Studies of European networks and of topics that are supposed to galvanise the users of these networks have shown that only few transnational themes find their way into the Twitter discourse of the European far-right.³⁷ Apart from anti-immigration discourses and protectionist economic positions, country-specific issues dominate the respective networks. Foundations and research institutions are also

increasingly concerned with the far-right online environment in Germany. For example, the study *Alternative Wirklichkeiten (Alternative Realities)* by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, examines various platforms in this context and describes the media strategies of the right-wing alternative online community.³⁸ ISD has long been concerned with right-wing extremist online activities and has conducted numerous studies on this topic. In 2020, ISD published *The Online Ecosystem of Far-Right Actors*,³⁹ analysing far-right groups, and their platforms and narratives. In the same year, ISD published the report *Crisis and Loss of Control*⁴⁰, which examined extremist narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic. ISD has also explored the use of individual platforms by right-wing extremists, for example in the analysis *A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram*.⁴¹ In studies such as *'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism*⁴² and *Trans-Atlantic Journeys of Far-Right Narratives Through Online-Media Ecosystems*,⁴³ ISD analysed and traced the spread of far-right ideologies and narratives on the internet. The analysis *Hate at the Push of a Button: Right-wing extremist troll-fronts and the ecosystem of coordinated hate campaigns online*⁴⁴ examined right-wing extremist campaigns on the internet.

A systematic, longer-term study of the German-speaking right-wing extremist online community on alt-tech platforms,⁴⁵ as well as their relationship to established social media platforms, has been lacking until now. This research gap will be filled by the project *Radikalisierung in rechtsextremen Onlinesubkulturen entgegentreten (Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures)*.

The history of the right-wing extremist use of online platforms, as well as research on this topic, has shown that right-wing extremists have always been quick to harness new technologies. Therefore, it is important to research and uncover their strategies, narratives and connections within these new online environments from their onset.

Part Two:

Preliminary conceptual work for the research project

Most of the analysis in the project *Radikalisierung in rechtsextremen Onlinesubkulturen entgegentreten* (Countering radicalisation in right-wing extremist online subcultures) has been carried out through big data analysis and ethnographic research. However, in order to make this research possible, conceptual groundwork is necessary to guide the data analysis. Specifically, developing a definition of 'right-wing extremism' for the project, as well as interviews with experts to help narrow the research focus for the project.

Development of a definition for the term right-wing extremism

Currently there is no uniformly accepted definition of the term 'right-wing extremism'. Different definitions of the term are used by countries and governments, academic research and civil society organisations, and individual researchers. The divergent understandings of right-wing extremism have implications for this project. In order to successfully research and comprehensively analyse the object of study, it is necessary to clearly define what right-wing extremism means in the context of the project. A definition of right-wing extremism must be broad enough to encompass new right-wing extremist movements, and at the same time precise enough to grasp the phenomenon and withstand scrutiny.

In order to achieve this, the project began by using a working definition of right-wing extremism, which was tested against the data collected over the course of the research and adapted as necessary. This definition was developed on the basis of a compilation of various definitions by members of the research team. A selection of these definitions is presented below.

A specific definition of right-wing extremism, which ISD has often used, was based on the research of Cas Mudde. This definition, includes:

*"groups and individuals that exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy."*⁴⁶

The definition has been revised in recent years and expanded in a report published in 2020 as follows:

*"Right-wing extremism, which the extreme right understands to be typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism. We use the generic umbrella term far-right to cover both radical and extreme right-wing groups, actions and ideologies. The conceptual difference between right-wing radicalism and extremism is that the former is not explicitly anti-democratic (e.g. far-right libertarian, anti-Islam groups), while the latter is characterised also by an explicit anti-democratic stance (e.g. openly fascist, neo-Nazi groups). Both share the core ideology of exclusivist nationalism, which openly advocates against the principle of egalitarianism".*⁴⁷

Looking at German research on right-wing extremism, the criterion of 'anti-democracy' is often decisive when it comes to classifying an organisation as extremist, as Mudde noted.⁴⁸ Furthermore, an incompatibility with the free democratic order enshrined in German Basic Law is emphasised in the definition of right-wing extremism by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which was also analysed for the working definition:

"Nationalist, antisemitic, racist and xenophobic ideological elements appear in various forms within the right-wing extremist domain. Right-wing extremists assume that belonging to an ethnic group or nation determines the actual value of a person. This understanding of values counteracts the principle of a free democratic basic order and is thus in fundamental contradiction to the Basic Law." (translation by ISD)⁴⁹

While this definition also describes large parts of right-wing extremism, it is faced with the challenge that new manifestations of right-wing extremism might escape the breadth of this definition. These new manifestations include conspiracy-based ideological groups for which ethnic or national affiliations are not necessarily explicit, but refer strongly to coded or even openly expressed

antisemitic conspiracy myths, while also actively spreading them. At the same time, right-wing extremists who argue from a cultural point of view are not well covered by this definition, because they would use the argument that they do not reject an ethnicity as such, but rather certain culturally-grounded ways of life.

The Italian social philosopher, Norberto Bobbio, has a different approach to defining right-wing extremism. He focusses on two distinct key characteristics. For Bobbio, an ideological legitimisation of inequality is at the core of political right-wing attitudes:

*"To give a straightforward and immediately understandable example, equality, which is a traditional element in the ideology of the left, is considered levelling down by someone on the right. Inequality, which for someone on the left is a statement of fact without ideological connotations, becomes hierarchical order for someone on the right."*⁵⁰

However, apart from his distinction between left and right, Bobbio also introduces a distinction between moderate and extremist positions:

*"As soon as one considers the problem, it becomes immediately clear that the distinction between extremist and moderate has very little to do with the nature of the ideas professed, but rather concerns their radicalisation, and therefore different strategies for their implementation in practice. This explains why revolutionaries (on the left) and counter-revolutionaries (on the right) can tap into the same writers, because they share them not as thinkers of the left or the right, but as extremists of either the left or the right, who are thus distinguished from moderates of the left or the right."*⁵¹

Definitions of extremism, right-wing extremism, right-wing radicalism and right-wing populism were discussed at four workshops, with the aim of developing a definition of right-wing extremism. Participants in the workshops included members from ISD Germany, as well as staff from ISD's London office.

The first workshop served as a general discussion of various definitions and the delimitation of the described phenomena. In further discussions, we examined the extent to which individual characteristics of extremism, such as anti-democratic attitudes or dehumanising tendencies, could be included in the desired definition. An attempt was made to move away from a definition based on notional characteristics and towards a primarily conceptual definition. At the third workshop, a draft definition based on ISD's general definition of extremism was presented. This general definition of extremism is:

*"Extremism is the advocacy of a worldview that propagates the superiority and dominance of one's own group over all foreign groups and the dehumanisation of others and is therefore incompatible with universal respect for human rights. Extremist groups demand a systematic change of society according to their worldview and actively work towards this - either through violence or more subtle or political activities. Extremism can be propagated by both state and non-state actors."*⁵²

Following this definition, the following definition has been proposed:

"Right-wing extremism refers to the advocacy of a worldview of inequality based on a claimed difference between racial, ethnic or cultural groups. As a consequence, right-wing extremists claim supremacy and dominance among their in-group. This dominance can be asserted as either global or regional. It can be expressed as domination over or demarcation from out-groups that are described as inferior or essentially different from the in-group."

On the basis of this draft definition, the following definition has been proposed:

"Right-wing extremism is a form of nationalism characterised by its reference to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy."

Interviews with Experts

Various sources of information have been used to select the platforms to be researched in this project. These include previous studies by ISD, such as the study *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right*, as well as further specialist literature.⁵³ In addition, new platforms will be identified throughout the project through ongoing data analysis. However, in order to ensure that the selection is as up-to-date as it is independent, interviews were also conducted with four experts on right-wing extremism during this project. They were asked about the alternative platforms used by right-wing extremists in Germany, and current trends they had observed in the online milieu. The findings of these experts supported the selection of the platforms studied in this project. They also helped identify and classify technical, subcultural and ideological trends in the collected data.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted in April and May 2021 with four experts on right-wing extremism in Germany and its activities in the online milieu. A guideline-based, semi-structured format was chosen, allowing for answers to be comparable, while giving the interviewees enough freedom to give their own answers. These guided interviews were designed to help identify both current trends and research gaps and to ensure that all key platforms were considered in this study. The underlying interview questionnaire was discussed by the research team and trialled in a test interview with a member of the research team. The questionnaire was found to lead to focused, topical answers and was thus adopted for the background interviews.

All of the selected interviewees actively research right-wing extremism in their everyday professional lives. Before the interviews, the participants were provided with specially prepared consent forms that explained the purpose and process of the data collection and processing.

This ensured that the interviews were conducted in compliance with the DSGVO, the German law shaping the European GDPR. Article 6 a) of the DSGVO requires the consent of persons whose personal data is being collected. The interviews were digitally recorded and key points were subsequently transcribed. To guarantee efficient research, the interviews were not transcribed in their entirety, as they were designed as expert interviews and were not the subject of a content or discourse analysis, for which a comprehensive transcription would have been necessary.

Results

Platforms

- Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube will retain their importance as entry platforms, according to the experts. While game streaming platforms will also become more important.
- Platforms for audiovisual content, such as BitChute and Odysee, and the messenger service Telegram are particularly relevant alternative platforms in German-speaking countries.

The experts agreed that mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube would retain their importance, especially as entry platforms. On these platforms, a wide and diverse audience can be reached with the help of more subtle content that is safe from being blocked. According to the experts, the anonymous platforms 4chan and 8kun (formerly 8chan), already known to ISD from previous studies, would also retain their niche function, but would not gain any additional importance due to the anonymity on the platforms.

While the alternative platforms Gab and Parler have already established themselves in the US, both platforms are less relevant in German-speaking countries. The experts considered audiovisual platforms, such as BitChute and Odysee, and the messenger service Telegram to be particularly relevant alternative platforms in German-speaking countries.

Telegram plays a special role because this messenger service offers a – to some degree, imaginary – protection of privacy. Given the possibility of distribution via channels, Telegram offers a very high reach and is scarcely regulated in terms of content.

Consequently, Telegram serves as a secure communication base from which other platforms can be linked. It is used to organise campaigns thanks to the combination of public channels and private chats.

The experts also considered gaming platforms, such as Discord and Twitch.tv, as particularly relevant, as well as mainstream visual platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, because younger target groups, who are more difficult to reach on other platforms, are especially likely to use these channels.

The game '*Heimatdefender*' and the app '*Patriot Peer*' were mentioned in the interviews as examples of the use of specially developed games and apps. These were used by the Identitarian Movement to reach a young audiences.

Traditional far-right websites and forums continue to be relevant, according to some of the researchers interviewed. These experts said that sites, such as Stormfront or Daily Stormer, have served as a refuge for those activists whose accounts have been blocked by established social media platforms. The Stormfront forum is still easy to find and offers right-wing extremists a stable site with a steady influx of users via German forums. The Daily Stormer is also comparatively easy to access via the dark web. The widespread perception of The Daily Stormer as an isolated niche site has more to do with false, mythologising ideas of the dark web than with its actual accessibility. The site can indeed be accessed relatively easily, as was underlined in an earlier interview. Another interview added that these classic websites and forums lack the necessary dynamics to create a broad impact. There are higher barriers to entry, there are no random visitors and communication takes place only among like-minded people.

Users' behaviour

- According to the experts, mainstream platforms are used to reach a broader audience, while niche platforms are used to distribute more radical content.
- It was noted that audiovisual platforms have not yet been researched to a sufficient extent to be able to make comprehensive statements.
- Research on alt-tech mainly focuses on platforms for end-users, but it is also important to look at upstream platforms.

According to the interviewees, the use of different platforms by right-wing extremist groups differs. Mainstream platforms serve to access a broader audience, while niche platforms are used to disseminate more radical content.

Large, open platforms offer right-wing extremists a larger reach even outside their own target group. The platform's own algorithms and suggestions of groups and accounts that are less extreme increase this reach. Facebook is becoming less important for right-wing extremist groups, as young audiences are moving to other platforms and activists are being dissuaded by stronger regulation and moderation of content.

It was also noted that on the platform TikTok, which is heavily used by younger users, short, fleeting messages tend to be shared. The experts found that smaller platforms and services with end-to-end encryption and private groups were used for planning, organising privately and for closer exchanges within the right-wing extremist community. The members of these private groups knew relatively well who they were talking to and who the other group members were. Users in such groups also know which rhetoric and stylistic devices are favoured. This is especially true for classic forums, such as Stormfront, that offer fixed usernames and an established structure and thus enable continued exchange and recognition among users.

During the expert interviews, platform-related research gaps were also noted. In general, the experts interviewed noted that visual and audiovisual platforms have not yet been researched to a sufficient extent to be able to make comprehensive statements about them. Here, a broader research gap became apparent. This also means that individual online phenomena, such as female right-wing extremist influencers who talk about everyday topics like bread, cooking and sport in the context of 'white supremacy', have hardly been researched. One exception is the work of one researcher of right-wing extremism. Certain radicalisation phenomena, such as right-wing extremist podcasts and micro-influencers, as well as the differences between content on mainstream platforms and alternative platforms have not yet been sufficiently researched. Also, not enough is known yet about the connections between deplatforming and radicalisation. Additionally, broader, multi-year studies investigating the radicalisation of online protagonists through their published content are rare.

According to the experts, visual platforms are becoming increasingly important. These platforms are more difficult to analyse than text-based content and also require a deeper cultural insight into the milieu. Additionally, it was noted several times that subtleties, such as tonality and imagery, were lost when transcribing audio or video-based content. The consensus among the experts is that TikTok and Instagram, along with BitChute and Odysee, need to be researched much more comprehensively. Gaming platforms, such as Twitch, should also be looked at more extensively in the future. According to the interviewees, these platforms are not yet the focus of research, partly because they are still only partially used by the right-wing movement.

In regard to platforms that have originated within the alt-tech scene, the interviewees pointed out that these software solutions were operated with varying degrees of success.

Many alt-tech platforms, such as Voat, have disappeared, while Gab and BitChute have gained acceptance, at least in some areas, probably due to their similarity to existing mainstream platforms.

The alt-tech scene is also very active in developing new platforms, such as Odysee, a video platform that seems to be replacing BitChute, according to some of the experts.

In addition to alt-tech, end-to-end encrypted messenger services will also become more important or at least maintain their newfound importance, according to the interviewees. Legal regulation of these platforms is difficult and there is a lack of initiative on the part of the operating companies. In some interviews, it was also pointed out that research on alt-tech should not only consider platforms for end users, but also upstream platforms, such as Epik, which are important for the infrastructure of other platforms.

Content moderation and deplatforming

- According to the experts, moderation on different platforms is enforced to varying extents and thus has different effects.
- The moderation efforts of the mainstream platforms have been quite effective.

The interviewees noted that moderation across the various platforms had different effects depending on the platform and that it was enforced to varying degrees. For example, newly introduced standards of conduct (Community Standards) were initially poorly received on the alt-tech platform BitChute and led to an exodus of users. However, a lot of right-wing extremist content can still be found there using relevant search terms. On open platforms, the content presented is often less extreme, such as the Gab homepage which is open to the public.

However, in the platforms private groups, registered users can easily come across more extreme content.

The moderation efforts of the mainstream platforms have been quite effective, as was pointed out in the interviews. Prominent right-wing extremists have been blocked there (see Deplatforming) or their content has been demonetised. One consequence of these moderation efforts was a loss of audience reach and financial damage to those affected. Another consequence, according to the interviewees, is that alt-tech platforms have become more popular.

New Community Standards on mainstream platforms only have a minor influence, according to the experts interviewed. Hate on the internet is difficult to combat, especially on an international level.

An exception here would be the action taken by Twitter against the accounts of the terrorist group 'Islamic State' (IS). According to the experts, this example shows that effective moderation by the platforms is possible.

Deplatforming brings about a number of effects in the radical and extreme right, as the interviewees explained. For example, deplatforming has led to more people turning to Telegram. Similar to Gab, the barrier to entry is low. The more widespread the practice of deplatforming, the more important such alternative platforms are becoming. According to the experts interviewed, qualitative research is necessary in order to examine in more depth the effects of deplatforming and the motivations of users.

Deplatforming is used as a rhetorical tool in the right-wing extremist community to portray themselves as victims of censorship and persecution. Deplatforming is cited as a reason for registering on alt-tech platforms. According to the interviewees, users who register on such platforms often see mainstream platforms and their founders or CEOs (such as Jack Dorsey and Mark Zuckerberg) as villains.

According to the experts, whether and to what extent deplatforming is useful is a question for consideration. On the one hand, extremist content cannot be taken lightly by platforms. On the other hand, deplatforming could promote radicalisation mechanisms. However, according to the interviewees, deplatforming does not automatically lead to the radicalisation of users. As discussed in the interviews, radicalisation through deplatforming can happen when users are already willing to further radicalise themselves and deplatforming provides them with additional motivation. People who are regularly blocked on mainstream platforms are already radicalised to a large extent and sometimes deliberately push themselves right to the brink of being blocked or deleted with the content they disseminate.

The frequently expressed assumption that deplatforming leads to the emergence of so-called filter bubbles was contradicted by the experts interviewed. The interviews showed that even on mainstream platforms there is no exchange that is likely to break the echo chambers there. At the same time, the deletion and blocking of accounts, as well as their demonetisation, leads to a loss of reach and sources of income for right-wing extremist players and can therefore be an effective means of combating this group.

The potential problem of content moderation was mentioned in some interviews as a distortion effect. Content could be toned down by moderation in such a way that it becomes more attractive to a broader audience. However, by deleting extreme posts, only the more innocuous ones would remain on the accounts concerned (e.g. cat videos or cooking videos). A further restriction of these topics would then be problematic with regard to freedom of expression.

Stakeholders and trends

- According to experts, a key current development is the intermingling of conspiracy ideologues, vaccination opponents and right-wing extremists.

The interviewees made special mention of those protagonists who are particularly prominent in the conspiracy ideology spectrum associated with COVID-19.

These include groups from the spectrum of 'Querdenker' ('lateral thinkers'), individual conspiracy ideologues, and groups such as the Identitarian Movement. Neo-Nazi groups, such as Kameradschaften, and sovereigntist milieus like that of the Reichsbürger movement, remain relevant. The so-called manosphere actors also appeared in the right-wing extremist online milieu, as experts noted in the interviews. Given the importance of public security, analysing right-wing extremist cells in the police forces and the military and their online channels is of particular relevance.

The experts found that the more extreme the participants were, the easier it was to categorise them into specific movements. It was more difficult to classify the actors who run pages or groups while pursuing a financial interest with their activism. They react to fluctuations and changes in their target audience, or rather customer base, in order to keep them happy. In general, right-wing movements often grouped themselves as 'negative coalitions', i.e. instead of agreement on positive goals, among them there is mainly a shared rejection of social ideas and concepts.

Developments

The mixing of conspiracy theorists, especially the anti-vaccination movement and right-wing extremists, was another crucial and acute development identified throughout the interviews.

In addition, an Americanisation of radical right-wing and extreme right-wing discourses has been observed. For example, the imported debates regarding 'Cancel Culture' or the alleged effects of 'Critical Race Theory'.

In addition, misogynist groups and right-wing extremist movements are increasingly mixing in Germany, thus following a trend in the US. For example, misogynist themes played a role in the attacks in Halle and Hanau.

The experts also discussed the efforts of right-wing extremist protagonists to recruit young people by penetrating the online gaming scene.

Conclusion

To date, the history of right-wing extremism and technology, as well as the research on it, have shown that far-right actors have always been quick to harness new technologies for their anti-democratic activities.

It is therefore particularly important to research and uncover the strategies, narratives and connections from their first use within this milieu.

The review of the literature also revealed that a systematic, longer-term study of the German-speaking, right-wing extremist online environment on alt-tech platforms, as well as their relationship to established social media, is still lacking.

The research from the project Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures aims to fill this gap over the next three years through quantitative and qualitative studies.

ISD developed the working definition of right-wing extremism for this project in several workshops on the basis of already existing definitions. The definition is as follows:

“Right-wing extremism is a form of nationalism characterised by its reference to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy”

This research uses the working definition of the extreme right-wing as described above.

During the interviews, it became clear that the messenger service Telegram, as well as audiovisual mainstream platforms, alternative platforms and alt-tech platforms play a special role in the right-wing community.

Here, some research gaps also became apparent. For example, the research challenges and difficulties presented by audiovisual content. All experts interviewed noted a trend towards the blending of right-wing ideologies with other movements like New Age esotericism or conspiracy ideologies.

Outlook

Drawing on the findings of the data analysis and qualitative research, ISD will focus its future reports on unregulated platforms, for example, the platforms that are recommended on Telegram.

This will also include tracking how posting and linking behaviour on unregulated platforms compares to that of the established platforms.

Audiovisual platforms will also be analysed more comprehensively in the future research as both the expert interviews and the previous link analysis confirmed the growing importance of these platforms.

The relevance of the platforms we have identified so far will also be discussed in greater depth in the subsequent reports.

Our analysis will consider factors like the degree of extremism and the number of users, as well as newsletters and websites.

Future analysis will also focus on current events and their impact on conversations in the right-wing extremist online milieu.

In addition, the relationship between deplatforming and persecution narratives will be considered, and the corresponding user migration will be analysed more intensively.

By analysing various platforms, the project aims to explore the functionality, usage, standards and size of right-wing extremist online subcultures on selected platforms.

In addition, a content analysis based on specific actors will shed light on the most common right-wing narratives across different platforms, as well as consider the changes to their content within the research period.

Furthermore, a message-based content analysis will track important narratives, campaigns and conspiracy theories of the milieu and trace their genesis, dissemination and development on different platforms.

The connections of the right-wing extremist online milieu on and between platforms will be shown through a network analysis and a link analysis.

An ethnographic study and the investigation of the financial flows that support the platforms and actors will complete the analysis.

Endnotes

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