Telegram as a buttress:

How far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists are expanding their infrastructures via Telegram

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Executive Summary

Previous research by ISD in the project 'Countering radicalisation in right-wing extremist online subcultures' shows1 that Telegram is the most popular alternative platform of the right-wing extremist online milieu in Germany. The app, which was initially designed as a messenger service, has become a hybrid between a messenger service and a social network through adopting new functions.

Building on previous studies, this analysis focuses on the use of Telegram by right-wing extremist online communities. For this purpose, a link analysis was conducted to show which platforms are linked by actors from this spectrum, and which linking strategies are used. Telegram also links to established social media platforms in addition to alternative platforms.

Content from these platforms, which are required to delete illegal content under the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), is shared even more frequently than content from smaller, non-regulated platforms. The type of content and the frequency with which it is shared in Telegram channels differs depending on the ideological orientations and objectives of the channels studied.

The groups studied include right-wing extremists, right-wing radicals, conspiracy theorists, Reichsbürger:innen/sovereignists, media outlets and AfD members. The analysis is based solely on data from publicly accessible Telegram channels. Use of the platform is therefore not to be equated with a retreat into a closed, encapsulated space. As can be observed on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, the importance of individual, extraordinarily active 'power users' is also seen on Telegram. As a case study, this report uses the example of Attila Hildmann to show how certain actors make strategic, intensive use of Telegram through a network of channels.

Key Findings

- **The far-right and conspiracy ideological actors that were studied shared a variety of alternative platforms via Telegram, however none of these platforms seem to be of central importance for the scene in Germany.** Instead, Telegram itself appears to be serving as a catch-all for individuals and organisations whose profiles have been deleted from larger platforms. Linking between platforms seems to be determined by a mix of strategic considerations, personal ties and preferences.

- **Audio-visual platforms, such as video and live-streaming websites, are particularly popular with right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists on Telegram.** The most popular websites in this category were set up outside the German-speaking region. However, the observed channels also shared platforms that were set up by German speakers.

- **Only eight per cent of all links pointing to the 8,252 target domains in the data set led to an alternative platform that was shared more than 15 times.** The most commonly shared domains belonged to established platforms, disinformation sites as well as established media outlets.

- **Extremist actors continue to make frequent use of platforms that are required to remove illegal content quickly under the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG).** Twice as many links (16 per cent) in the reviewed data set led to established sites rather than to smaller platforms that operate outside legal requirements. Among them, YouTube is more prominent than Twitter and Facebook.

It seems that despite regulatory efforts by the platform, there is still massive interest among extremists and conspiracy ideologues in using YouTube. Instead of the expected effect (observed in cases of »deplatformed« extremists) of refraining from using established platforms, a different dynamic is evident here. Extremists change their communication strategy on the established platforms in order to continue their activity there. However, in some cases the platforms do not fulfil their obligations under the NetzDG, or illegal content is not reported across the board.

- **The linking practices of the actors in the study differ along ideological fault lines and between movements, parties and media outlets.** Right-wing extremist channels post fewer links than radical right-wing channels but link to established platforms more frequently. The so-called '*Reichsbürger:innen*' mainly link to Telegram's own file-sharing platform. Video platforms are particularly important for conspiracy theorists and lockdown opponents. The posting behaviours of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) party and media platforms are shaped by their institutional frameworks.

- **Individual 'power users' play a central role when it comes to linking on the platform.** They proceed in a strategic manner and advertise their profiles on a multitude of different platforms.
This phenomenon, already documented in ISD's previous '*Escape Routes*' report, was also detected on Telegram. Some users, as shown by the example of Attila Hildmann, build complex networks between different channels and group chats in order to increase their reach.

Glossary

Affordances: Affordances are the specific technical capabilities offered by individual platforms to their users, also referred to as functionality.

Blockchain: Blockchain technology, which was developed specifically for alternative currencies, is characterised by its unique data structure. It is considered particularly secure against forgery due to its transparency and decentralised structure, in which data is stored in many different locations and regularly verified. Blockchain technology enables anonymous transactions and exchange, making this technology attractive to criminals and extremists.

Deplatforming: Deplatforming refers to the blocking of social media accounts and groups. It regularly results in these groups losing audience reach and revenue sources for their agendas. At the same time, deplatforming and the fear of accounts and websites being blocked or deleted has contributed to the emergence of alternative social media platforms.

Media Outlets: The accounts coded as media outlets in this report are those whose specific institutional and functional character is that of a media channel, leading us to assume that they largely refer to their own channels and websites. The accounts included here include established media, smaller blogs and disinformation actors who often prepare content in the form of news websites in order to appear more credible.

Alternative Platforms: So-called alternative platforms are used by groups and individuals who, because of their political views, no longer feel welcome on the major social media platforms due to restrictions imposed by law or by the platforms themselves.

NetzDG: The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) is a law that came into force on 1 October 2017 and was last amended in May 2021 with the aim of strengthening law enforcement on the internet. The aim of this act is to more effectively combat punishable hate speech and other punishable content on social networks. Its scope for the obligation to remove unlawful content includes platforms with at least two million registered users in Germany.

Platform: Platforms are internet sites or apps through which users can communicate with each other. Of particular relevance are the so-called social media or social networks and messenger services.

Right-wing extremism: According to the ISD's working definition, right-wing extremism refers to a form of nationalism that is characterised by its reference to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy.

Introduction

The digital messenger service Telegram has grown massively in recent years.[2] According to the company, over half a billion people worldwide use the service.[3] Telegram is a platform that advertises itself as having strong data security and very limited moderation. According to a survey conducted in May 2021, Telegram is used by 18 percent of the German population, which is the second highest figure for a messenger service after WhatsApp.[4] Unlike other competitors such as WhatsApp or Signal, Telegram also has mass communication features similar to those of social media. Telegram quickly became the most popular platform of Germany's new social movement: the anti-lockdown protests that oppose measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] Right-wing extremists likewise use the platform to spread their propaganda and promote their cause.

German right-wing extremists also use Telegram for the specific technical functions the platform features. Despite having established itself in large parts of the population, and large groups and channels being covered by the NetzDG, Telegram still fulfils the functions of an alternative platform for right-wing extremist online subcultures. This is because Telegram is not a social network in the traditional sense and was first designed as an encrypted messaging service. Only over time did the service transform into a hybrid platform. Moreover, Telegram is perceived as 'alternative' by extremists and conspiracy theorists. Therefore, they trust Telegram more than the supposed 'mainstream' platforms.

Since the beginning of 2021, and within the framework of the project 'Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures', funded by the Federal Ministry of Justice, ISD has been investigating the alternative platforms on which right-wing extremist actors organise in German-speaking countries.

The projects first publication[6] has already established Telegram as the most important alternative platform of the right-wing extremist online milieu in Germany. Telegram content was shared with a significantly higher frequency than any other alternative platform according to the data set that was studied for the »Escape Routes« report. The messenger platform, which is used like a social network, was shared 2,950 times in the period from 1 January 2021 to 13 May 2021, according to a link analysis. By comparison, the second most shared alternative social network, VK, was only linked 41 times[7] in the same period. This report therefore examines how Telegram is used by actors in far-right and conspiracy theory communities. After presenting an overview of the platform, a link analysis examines which platforms and websites are linked to by users and how their usage and linking behaviour differs according to their ideological beliefs and the type of channel. A case study on the strategic use of Telegram by the prominent right-wing extremist Attila Hildmann shows how entire networks of channels are used on Telegram to spread propaganda and agitate as widely as possible. The methods of the study are discussed in the annex.

Background information on Telegram

Founding History

Telegram was founded in 2013 by brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov, who were born in St. Petersburg. In 2006, the two created and ran the Russian network VKontakte (now VK.com). Already then, Pavel Durov was unwilling to censor content or cooperate with state authorities. After Vladimir Putin's opponents organised demonstrations against election fraud via VKontakte in 2011, the Russian security service FSB tried to force Pavel Durov, who was still head of VKontakte at the time, to delete online groups involved in the protests. After an encounter with the Russian authorities, Durov reportedly decided to set up a secure communication medium together with his brother.[8] Eventually, VKontakte was bought out by Mail.ru and United Capital Partners, both of which have links to the Kremlin. In April 2014, Pavel Durov finally left his position at VKontakte. During his time at VKontakte, he had already begun creating a new company called Digital Fortress in the US and moved some of his programmers to the US. In 2013 it was revealed that the Durovs had been developing Telegram during this time.[9]

According to his own statements, Pavel Durov supports Telegram »financially and ideologically«, while Nikolai Durov mainly works on the technical infrastructure.[10] As of 2021, the company says it is based in Dubai and that most of the programmers originally come from St. Petersburg.[11] It has more than 550 million monthly active users worldwide.[12] Telegram largely rejects the moderation of content for business reasons and probably also due to the political convictions of its founders. Thus, illegal activities such as drug trafficking or fake vaccination certificates are publicly visible on the platform.[13]

Use by extremist groups and individuals

With its promise of privacy and unregulated, secure communication, the platform has become particularly popular among the citizens of authoritarian states. Protesters in Belarus, Hong Kong and Iran used Telegram to organise and evade state surveillance. However, terrorists, extremists and criminals have also found refuge on the platform.

Telegram's rejection of content moderation makes the messenger service attractive to groups that have been banned from so-called established social media platforms. For example, media reports in 2015 revealed that members of the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) used the app for recruitment, propaganda and coordination of attacks. Among other things, the messenger service played an important role in spreading IS propaganda during the terrorist attacks in Paris of November 2015.[14] A report by Jugendschutz.net from 2016 examined 130 German-language Islamist Telegram channels and found that channels posting execution videos sometimes produced over 200 posts per day. For this report, Jugendschutz.net reported 51 channels with content harmful to minors, of which only six were deleted and they quickly reappeared under new names.[15]

Today, Telegram is known as a preferred means of communication for right-wing extremists. An increase in this activity on Telegram can be seen especially from 2019 onwards, when several right-wing terrorist attacks occurred across the world. Major tech companies came under increased pressure to delete far-right content. According to research by VICE magazine, of 150 English-language, far-right channels analysed, more than two-thirds were established in the first eight months of 2019.[16] A 2020 study by ISD examined 208 far-right Telegram channels and over one million messages in English. The report found that terrorist content was shared on 60.1 per cent of the channels.[17]

Telegram also plays an important role for right-wing extremists outside of the English-speaking world, for example in the post-Soviet states.[18] Telegram has also gained popularity among the far-right in German-speaking countries. In addition to research by ISD,[19] monitoring by Jugendschutz.net[20] over several years also highlights Telegram as the most important alternative platform for right-wing extremists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Various right-wing extremist actors including the founders of Pegida and Martin Sellner have maintained Telegram channels since 2019.[21] During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theorists, *Reichsbürger:innen* and QAnon supporters also increasingly organised themselves on the platform. According to a study published in May 2021, Telegram is now the main platform for conspiracy narratives in Germany.[22]

Telegram Terms of Service and Privacy Policy

According to Telegram's terms of service, the following content is prohibited on the platform: fraud, spam, incitement to violence as well as illegal pornography on public channels and bots.[23] Within the app itself it is possible to report channels and messages with such content. However, in contrast to the channels and messages (see Figure 2), there is no »report button« for the stickers that can be shared on the platform. A »report button« for the stickers only exists in the browser version and in the desktop app.

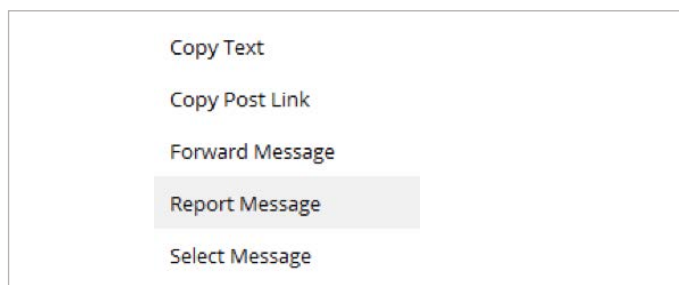**Figure 1** Screenshot of the Telegram app on 24.08.2021

Figure 2 Screenshot of the Telegram app on 24.08.2021

Telegram emphasises that the company categorically does not delete illegal material from private and group chats, as these chats are a »private matter«.

In the case of bots, illegal content on channels, or illegal sticker packs, users are supposed to contact an email address or the »ISISwatch« profile, which was set up to combat IS propaganda. Telegram justifies this procedure by saying that the company has to deal with »legitimate requests« in order to guarantee its service »where it is needed most«.[24]

Telegram also explicitly refers to the AppStore and Google PlayStore, as they have to fulfil their requirements so the app remains on offer. However, Telegram claims it would not remove content in the »context of local restrictions on free speech«. Telegram would delete publicly available terrorist propaganda, but would »in no way prevent users from peacefully expressing alternative opinions.«[25]

Telegram not only promises a (virtually) unregulated service. The platform also advertises a high level of data protection. According to the company's own statement, messages and files sent via Telegram cannot be viewed by internet service providers, network administrators or third parties.[26] Telegram states that chats which are not end-to-end encrypted are secured by server-to-client encryption. These are all cloud-based chats, such as open groups and channels.

User data would be stored on servers in different states, meaning Telegram could only be forced to hand over data through court rulings from multiple jurisdictions. The company claims that it has never released a single byte of user data.[27]

However, Telegram has been criticised in the past by data protectionists for the company's lack of transparency and for limiting one-to-one encryption to private chats. Unlike, for example, the messenger service Signal, Telegram does not make the source code of the platform available. However, Telegram stores messages on its own servers instead of on the user's phones. The company thus has access to copies of all chats via its databases and would technically be able to release this data to state authorities.[28]

Moderation, Blocking and Application of the NetzDG

In the past, Telegram has only sporadically and reluctantly deleted content, and has mainly done so due to external pressure. For example, in 2015 after the Bataclan attacks in Paris, the platform removed 78 IS channels in 12 languages and announced a simpler system for reporting content. However, this did not affect private messaging between terrorists according to media reports.[29]

In November 2019, Europol announced that the agency had worked with Telegram and other online service providers to disrupt many of IS's activities by mass deleting the terrorist organisation's channels.

Following the storming of the US Congress on 6 January 2021 by supporters of former US President Donald Trump, Telegram also began blocking far-right channels. Shortly thereafter, a Telegram spokesperson confirmed that the company had blocked »dozens« of far-right and neo-Nazi channels, as reported in a TechCrunch article.[30]

This action is part of a new enforcement procedure that is supposedly »expanding«.[31] However, it is unclear how widely these new rules will be enforced. According to TechCrunch, some of the »blocked« channels were still accessible via Telegram's web client.

Pavel Durov wrote on his own channel that Telegram's moderators had removed hundreds of publicly viewable calls for violence.[32] After the riots, it became public knowledge that the alternative platform Parler was being used to spread conspiracy narratives and organise the storming of the Capitol. As a result, many companies stopped working with Parler, including Apple and Google, which had previously offered the app for download.[33]

The current wording of Telegram's Frequently Asked Questions [34] suggests that Telegram is concerned about restrictions being imposed by other tech companies. For example, the blocking of some of Attila Hildmann's channels via apps downloaded from the AppStore or Google PlayStore may have been a precautionary measure on Telegram's part.

In June 2021, it emerged that the main channel of far-right conspiracy theorist Attila Hildmann was no longer accessible via Telegram app versions downloaded from the AppStore or Google Play. However, his channel was still accessible via browser or app versions downloaded directly from Telegram's website. A Google spokesperson said that the company had not blocked Hildmann's channel. The background to this partial blocking was unclear, but Google and Apple may have put pressure on Telegram. It is also possible that the platform introduced the partial blocking itself to avoid violating the terms of use of the two app providers.[35]

Although Telegram probably has over two million users in Germany,[36] it did not initially fall under the Network Enforcement Act due to being primarily a messenger service. However, Telegram has developed into a hybrid between a messenger service and a social network. According to media reports, this development could possibly justify regulating Telegram under the Network Enforcement Act.[37]

In June 2021, the Federal Ministry of Justice announced that it would take legal action against Telegram. The reason given by the ministry was that there was no easily visible way to report illegal content on the platform. Furthermore, it was unclear to which address courts could turn if someone filed a complaint against the platform. The Federal Office of Justice sent two letters to Telegram's business address in Dubai. This is the first time the Federal Office of Justice has applied the NetzDG to a messenger service.[38]

Features and Affordances

While Telegram's extensive freedom from censorship and privacy protection makes the platform attractive to extremist groups, the handling and technical features (affordances) also contribute to the popularity of the platform. Unlike other messaging services, Telegram can easily be used for mass communication. Telegram was designed as a messaging service but, by expanding its components, the platform has developed into a hybrid between a messaging service and a social media platform.

Telegram offers its users three different communication channels. In addition to one-to-one chats, which are also possible on other messenger services, the platform allows users to create chat groups and channels. Posts can be easily forwarded between groups and channels, which facilitates networking.

Chat Groups
Both private and public chat groups with up to 200,000 members can be created on Telegram. This maximum number of participants in Telegram's group chats is significantly higher than in other messenger services such as Signal (1,000) or WhatsApp (256).[39] The potential reach of Telegram's group chats is comparable to the reach of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook rather than to that of a messenger service. The administrators of the groups can transfer the conversations from other platforms such as WhatsApp and share the entire communication history with new group members.

Channels
In Telegram channels, communication is structured as one-way communication: from the channel administrators to the members. Only the administrators can publish posts. The number of channel members is unlimited. The channel function offers influencers the possibility to reach their audience in a way similar to established social media platforms. Telegram channels can have multiple administrators, who — among other things — can set whether the messages sent are labelled with the name of the channel or the respective administrator. Since 2019, the admins can allow comments under the posts, which enables communication between the users.

File Sharing and Streaming Functions
In addition to text, audio, image and video messages, Telegram also allows the sharing of documents up to two gigabytes in size. Telegram has a streaming feature that allows up to 30 people to actively stream video or audio chats and up to 1,000 people to watch the streams.[40]

Voice chats are available in both groups and channels and have no participant limit.[41] In addition, users can leave video and voice messages in their channels.

Sticker Packs and Blogging Functions
Users can create, share and download personalised sticker packs. These stickers, images or short animations can be used in both chats and channels. Illegal content can be reported to Telegram via an email address,[42] but there are still many sticker packs glorifying extremism and violence on the platform. In 2016, Telegram introduced the publishing tool Telegra.ph. It allows users to publish longer texts with images. Contributions to Telegra.ph can be published anonymously. No registration is required to use Telegra.ph and bloggers can embed content from other websites.

People Nearby and Groups Nearby
As of 2019, Telegram allows its users to find groups and other users in their vicinity. With just a few clicks, users can get in touch with other users in their area. Telegram itself promotes the function in a similar way as dating apps like Tinder.[43] In reality, however, this function is often used for trafficking drugs or weapons.[44]

This multitude of features means that Telegram is not a simple messenger service. Through its functions, Telegram is also a file-sharing platform, streaming service, blogging tool, and dating and trading platform. All this makes Telegram an attractive tool for social movements but also for extremists and criminals.

Results of the Link Analysis

Evaluation by Platform Functionality

The research data was gathered via a link analysis. For this purpose, ISD collected all posts published between 1 January 2021 and 12 September 2021 in 238 selected channels belonging to right-wing extremists, right-wing radicals, conspiracy theorists, *Reichsbürger:innen /* Sovereignists, media outlets and AfD members. For the collection and analysis, ISD used the software *Method52*. Only publicly accessible channels were examined for the link analysis. The links were filtered out of a total of 659,110 messages. From 371,988 identified links, 8,252 different domains were extracted. Analysts then manually checked all domains that were shared more than 15 times in the observed channels. This research was used to create a list of domains that belong to social media platforms and other sites allowing user generated content.

A link analysis was employed to explore the far-right online environment on Telegram, as this method identifies which domains or links are particularly relevant to certain actors and which websites they intend to promote. Link analyses make it possible to discover new websites and explore their distribution within certain internet communities. They can be used in combination with ethnographic research to find out what kind of platforms are particularly popular.
The online platforms that were linked in the monitored channels can be distinguished by their modes of operation. Some of them were specifically created for the dissemination of extremist ideas, while others are simply being used by right-wing extremists, even though extremist content violates the terms of use of these platforms.

Platforms with more than two million registered users in Germany are obligated to report and provide data (Section 2 and Section 5a) and complaint and opposition procedures (Section 3 - Section 3b) as per the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG). They are listed separately in the analysis. These include well-known online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter.

The focus of this research project is on right-wing extremist activity outside of these established platforms. However, this analysis also shows the continued relevance of established platforms for extremists and conspiracy ideologues in the German-speaking world.

Classifying the Analysis
In order to classify the following analysis, it is important to note that channels from the different user categories have sent varying numbers of messages on Telegram. Some channels stand out for their significant posting activity. At the same time, the high number of messages and links in certain user categories comes from some particularly active channels. Furthermore, only a very small proportion of the shared links point to alternative platforms.

Out of 371,988 links, less than eight percent pointed to an alternative platform that was linked to more than 15 times. In contrast, more than 16 percent of all links led to established platforms. The majority of the remaining links were references to articles from disinformation sites, but also from established media portals.

Telegram is a central communication medium for the conspiracist scene, which is why news and new conspiracy theories are constantly spread via such channels. The participants we observed showed very different behaviours in the marketing of their profiles on other platforms.

Actors such as Ignaz Bearth, a member of the far-right extremist Partei National Orientierter Schweizer (PNOS [Party of National Oriented Swiss]), and a German conspiracy theorist, identified by ISD as belonging to the radical right-wing milieu, link almost exclusively to their channels on other platforms in their Telegram posts. Others, such as the convicted Holocaust denier Nikolai Nerling, maintain active channels on alternative platforms but hardly link to them.[45]
This means that a link analysis cannot provide a complete overview of the use of all alternative platforms. Nevertheless, it can be very helpful in identifying such spaces.

Unlike other communication platforms such as Twitter, Telegram is also a popular medium for sharing image, video, audio and text files. These files are not shared through external links but uploaded directly to Telegram. The following analysis is based on the below metrics: Total links, individual links (»unique links«), linking channels and views. 'Total links' describes all links to a domain that were included in this dataset. The number of individual links shows how many different links to a particular domain were shared. Among other things, this helps determine whether the number of mentions of a domain is related to individual links. The number of 'linking channels' shows how many different channels contained at least one link to the domain. 'Views' shows how often a post was viewed according to Telegram's data. ISD tested how views are generated on Telegram through a channel created for this purpose.
It turned out that the information regarding views was unclear; how the metric actually returned results was not transparent. The 'views' of a channel that originate from a specific Telegram account can be counted twice over several days. A brief pause on a post was also counted as a 'view'. According to the Telegram Guide, the views of a single user can be counted multiple times, including copies of forwarded posts.[46] Therefore, the view metric is inaccurate. Unless otherwise indicated, all data on the number of posts or links in this report refers to the study period from 1 January 2021 to 12 September 2021.

Video Platforms

Video platforms are websites whose main purpose is to upload and play videos. They may have livestreaming capabilities, but this is not their main feature. Links to video platforms accounted for just under 38 percent of all links to alternative platforms.

Domain	#Total Links	#Unique Links	#Linking Channels	#Views
odysee.com	2.816	965	112	84.608.358
tube.querdenken-711.de	1.900	210	51	28.813.936
bitchute.com	1.632	749	102	28.247.456
rumble.com	1.625	910	74	17.331.193
wtube.org	766	355	22	16.850.216
lbry.tv	582	189	58	7.757.373
vimeo.com	345	166	62	7.689.539
bittube.tv	337	238	25	2.226.602
youmaker.com	295	246	15	3.832.335
vdp.veezee.tube	186	80	9	5.539.172
frei3.de	157	67	22	1.426.525
veezee.tube	152	89	16	598.236
okitube.com	70	56	12	329.921
wirtube.de	61	21	15	2.177.273
gegenstimme.tv	55	39	13	206.681
dailymotion.com	44	25	23	1.377.864
dein.tube	42	24	13	103.910
wiki-tube.de	35	19	15	645.561
tube.klardenken.tv	26	8	19	329.865

International and German-language Platforms

It is notable that many of the most popular video platforms were set up outside of Germany. They are considered a refuge for extremists and conspiracy ideologues in other countries, too. For example, the blockchain-based video platform Odysee with 2,816 links was not only the most linked to, but also appeared in the most channels (112).

Odysee is the successor of the now defunct website LBRY.tv. It was launched in 2020 and is part of the LBRY network, which presents itself as an alternative to centralised and commercial platforms. The LBRY network has its own cryptocurrency that can be used to monetise videos on Odysee. The platform came under fire, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, for extremist content, disinformation and lack of moderation. In France, Odysee is considered a video platform of conspiracy ideologues.[47] Known faces from the US far-right environment also found refuge on the site after their content on the COVID-19 pandemic was blocked on larger platforms.[48] According to an internal email, a representative of Odysee said that the podcast of a US neo-Nazi did not violate Odysee's rules and that there was no reason to delete his account.[49] There are no exact user statistics on Odysee. According to its own data, the LBRY network has over 10 million users.[50]

In the analysed dataset, conspiracy ideolgy channels in particular linked to Odysee, with these channels being responsible for about 70 percent of all links. The three channels that linked to this video platform most often all belonged to the QAnon movement. Right-wing extremists shared only 6 percent of the links to Odysee, but the platform is well known in this milieu, so that one third of all observed right-wing extremist channels contained at least one link to Odysee.

The domains of Bitchute and Rumble were also among the most shared video platforms in this dataset. Both have a reputation as fallback sites for actors who have been blocked from established platforms.[51]

Bitchute is a British platform that presents itself as a defender of freedom of expression, but has also come under criticism for failing to moderate propaganda content from terrorist groups.[52]
Bitchute is registered with Epik, a hosting service that also offers its services to the alternative platforms Gab and Parler.[53]
The platform has been online since 2017 and currently has around 44 million visitors per month.[54]
While Bitchute now blocks some content within certain regions such as the UK or the European Economic Area (EEA), these restrictions can be bypassed using a Virtual Private Network (VPN).[55]

After Odysee and tube.querdenken-711.de, Bitchute was the third most shared video platform in the dataset. A large proportion of the links (1,033 of 1,632) came from conspiracy theory channels. In second place are '*Querdenken*' movement channels, which linked to Bitchute 255 times (this corresponds to just under 16 percent of all URLs). Right-wing extremists also used Bitchute frequently. 11 percent (175 links) of all links shared in right-wing extremist channels led to Bitchute, and more than one in four right-wing extremist channels (28 percent) contained at least one link to the platform. In particular, well-known right-wing extremists such as Lutz Bachmann, Attila Hildmann and Sven Liebich shared Bitchute frequently. Rumble was also the platform of choice for conspiracy theory and the '*Querdenken*' movement, with 1,056 (65 percent) and 352 (22 percent) links respectively. However , this platform was shared much more frequently by right-wing radicals with 132 links (8 percent) than by right-wing extremist channels, which contained only 16 (1 percent) Rumble links.

The numerous links among right-wing radicals were particularly due to a conspiracy theorist classified as right-wing, as this individual alone shared 114 links (7 percent).

Rumble was founded in Canada in 2013 and initially focused on easily marketable content such as family-friendly videos featuring children or animals. During 2020, Rumble received an influx of users who were supporters of Donald Trump who spread misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic and had been banned from other platforms for doing so.[56] By the end of the first quarter of 2021, Rumble had 31.9 million monthly users, according to its CEO.[57]

Among right-wing extremists, links to Rumble seemed to be rather sporadic. One possible explanation is that much of the content deals with Donald Trump and his policies. While the former US president is considered a figure of salvation among QAnon supporters, many German right-wing extremists, especially neo-Nazis, reject Trump.

While platforms from the German-speaking world are shared less frequently, they are still relevant to the far-right scene. These include Frei3, which is officially registered in Hungary and was set up by an AfD supporter.[58] On Frei3, videos can be embedded and played via other sources such as YouTube, Odysee, 3Speak and Bitchute. Right-wing extremist channels contained the most links to Frei3, with 130 out of 157 links (83 percent). About a third came from the channel of the organisation Ein Prozent, which is classified by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution as a suspected right-wing extremist group.[59] Another 11 percent came from the presenter of a famous podcast in the milieu. The Identitarian Movement and Pegida also shared Links to Frei3. The second most frequent linkers were right-wing radicals, who referenced the platform 19 times. Another German-language platform found in the dataset studied is OKiTUBE. This video portal belongs to an Austrian internet radio station. OKiTUBE claims to promote the »future space of free media« and calls on readers to inform themselves about 5G, 'Corona coercion' and the 'Great Reset'.[60] The popularity of this platform was due to the activity of a minority of actors; 83 percent of the links came from only two channels. Furthermore, 68 out of 70 links came from the conspiracy theory spectrum.

PeerTube

Many popular German-language video platforms in the analysed dataset were PeerTube channels.

PeerTube is an open-source video platform built on peer-to-peer technology. It is currently supported by the non-profit organisation Framasoft in France. Users can create individual so-called 'instances'. Instances can be accessed as independent websites via their own domains and can be designed according to the needs of the creators. While these instances exist independently, users can build 'federations' by following other instances and displaying videos stored on other instances on their own pages. Because of its decentralised structure, concerns were already raised in 2018 that this network could be misused for extremist or violent content. To prevent this, PeerTube relies on moderation by other users. A spokesperson for Framasoft explained in July 2018, when asked by the newspaper Le Monde, that certain instances can be excluded from other communities.[61] According to its own information, PeerTube has 60,000 users who host over 400,000 videos with a total of over 15 million clicks.[62]

In the analysed Telegram channels, the PeerTube channels 'tube.querdenken-711. De', 'veezee.tube' and 'gegenstimme.tv' were referred to most frequently. 'tube.querdenken-711.de' is an official platform of the *Querdenken* movement. It is mostly referenced in channels opposed to COVID-19 lockdowns.

1,775 out of 1,900 (93 percent) of the links came from anti-lockdown channels. The main channel of the *Querdenken* movement alone accounted for 38 percent of all links. It is striking that 78 percent of the links were to their homepage. The domain is promoted as the group's own platform and is listed in the 'signature' of almost all of their posts, alongside their Twitter profile and website. Sixty-one of the links came from the channel of the right-wing extremist Ignaz Bearth, who interviewed *Querdenken* activist Michael Ballweg on his channels.

The organisation behind veezee.tube is Free Media Network, which is registered in Switzerland and operates the livestreaming platform veezee.tv (see below). According to its own information, Free Media Network offers »smaller channel operators and ›newcomers‹« free channels on veezee.tube and veezee.tv. Paying customers get servers for exclusive use via veezee.tube, which are maintained and administered by Free Media Network.[63] According to its own data, veezee.tube had over 2 million video views.[64]

Gegenstimme.tv describes itself as »a censorship-free video platform run by a group of activists«. The impressum (imprint) lists a company called Plan B Solutions Ltd., which is registered in the Seychelles.[70] On its website, Plan B Solutions mentions as among its clients Gegenstimme.tv and a far-right podcast that was removed by Spotify for violating its terms of service.[71] The site has 2,055 registered users and hosts 5,014 videos.

Veezee.tube was shared mainly in conspiracy ideology channels, accounting for 91 percent of the links. 74 percent of the links came from the channel of a spokesperson involved with the conspiracy theory movement. Furthermore, researchers identified several platforms in the dataset that operated via the veezee.tube network. Examples include vdp.veezee.tube, a conspiracy ideology podcast, which was linked to 186 times, and engelsburgtv.veezee.tube, whose owners from the Akademie Engelsburg[65] combine ideological elements from the *Reichsbürger:innen,* QAnon and Anastasia movements, which was shared four times. According to Free Media Network, this association behind vezee.tube also operates the portal wirtube.com, owned by Heiko Schrang,[66] who has been identified in media reports as belonging to the right-wing esoteric scene.[67] The portal was linked to 61 times in the dataset. Most PeerTube instances appear to be tied to specific individuals or organisations that are mainly responsible for the content of these video platforms. These include tube.kenfm.de, the instance of an ex-radio presenter known by his stage name 'Ken Jebsen'[69] and whose channel is monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution; exo.tube from the UFO conspiracy portal Exomagazin; and an instance run by an anti-Wikipedia actor. The number of links to most PeerTube instances was so low that it fell outside the scope of thisanalysis in most cases. However, not all PeerTube instances were linked to specific individuals. Gegenstimme.tv was found to be a PeerTube instance. Of the 55 links in the dataset, 47 originated from right-wing extremist channels, including those of Martin Sellner and Frank Kraemer.

Almost half of all links came from a single channel, in particular links to videos made by its right-wing extremist operator.

YouTube Rivals
In addition to alternative video platforms with intentionally minimal moderation, there are video platforms that do not have clear political goals but are exploited by extremists.
As these platforms have a smaller market share than YouTube, they may lack resources to moderate content on a similar scale. These platforms are also less exposed to public pressure.
In the analysed dataset, this particularly affects the US video portal Vimeo and the French platform Dailymotion. Both are relatively well established, founded in 2004 and 2005 respectively. They are less popular than YouTube, but still have hundreds of millions of active users.[72]

In the case of Vimeo, most links came from conspiracy ideology (59 percent) and *Querdenken* channels (32 percent). Links from right-wing extremist channels accounted for about 6 percent. Vimeo is frequently linked to by a relatively broad user base. About a third (21 out of 62) of the channels that linked to Vimeo shared the domain more than four times.
Among the most avid disseminators are numerous *Querdenken* and QAnon profiles.
Dailymotion was also shared mainly by conspiracy ideologues and lockdown opponents, who were responsible for 27 and 10 of the 44 links respectively. However, there is also right-wing extremist content on Dailymotion, including a far-right rock music video that was linked to four times within the dataset.

Connections between Users and Platforms

Some video platforms' distribution is strongly dependent on individual channels that disproportionately link to the corresponding domain. In some cases, there was a personal relationship between the platform and the operators of the Telegram channels. For example, the video platform Youmaker was cited 295 times, but 88 percent of the links came from the channel of the German edition of the Epoch Times. Youmaker itself appeared to have links to the Epoch Media Group.[73]
The site WTube, which was hijacked by the hacker collective Anonymous in September 2021, also primarily appeared on Attila Hildmann's main channel, which shared 90 percent of the total 765 links. According to documents published by the hackers, Hildmann set up the domain wtube.org through his own company.[74]

A personal or business relationship was not obvious for other video platforms, which were mainly shared by individual channels.

One example of this is Dein.Tube. About two thirds of the 41 links came from Sven Liebich's channel. Liebich has a profile on the website, but there are numerous videos by other right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists.
The site notice of Dein.Tube references a company called Alternative Network Foundation, which is registered in the US and according to current research has no direct links to Liebich. The domain of Bittube is mainly shared by a sovereignist channel, which was responsible for 92 percent of the 331 links. While a personal or financial motive behind the disproportionate linking of a specific domain cannot be ruled out, the observed actors seemed to simply have different preferences when it came to platforms.

Trends over Time[75]

The analysis showed that platforms were shared with varying frequency. Well-known alternative video platforms such as Odysee or Bitchute were shared consistently during the observation period without significant fluctuations.
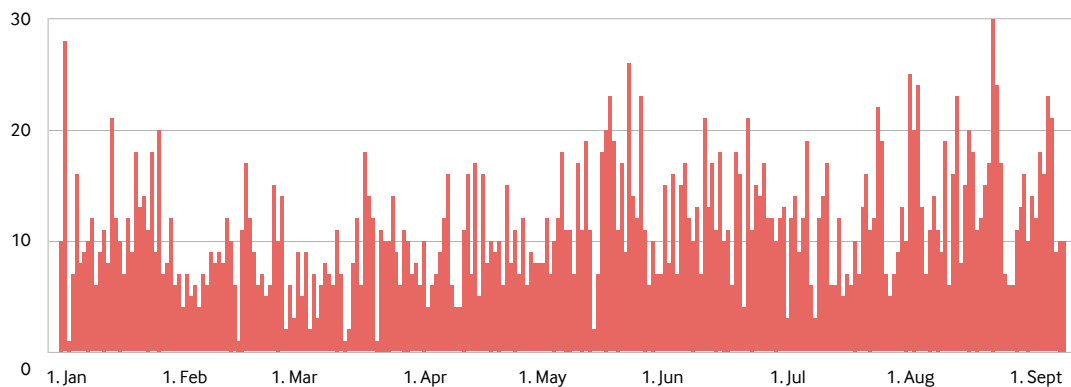
Figure 3
Links per day to odysee.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021
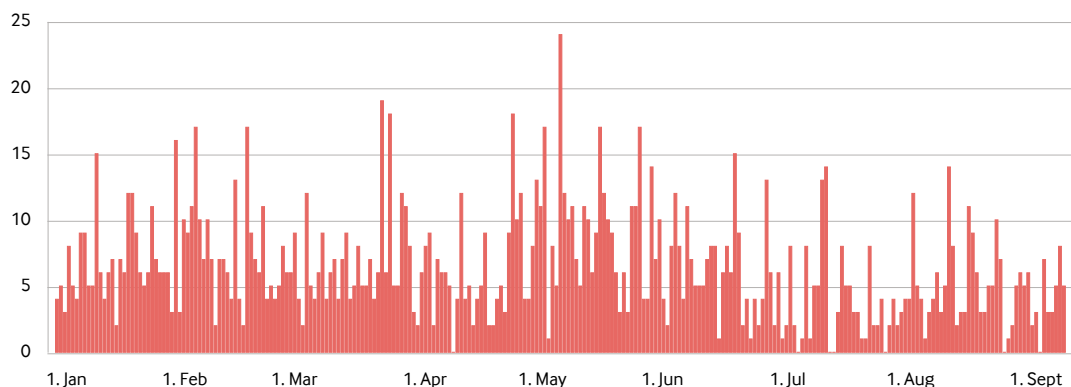
Figure 4
Links per day to bitchute.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021

However, clear chronological trends are visible for other websites. For example, links to the domain tube. querdenken-711.de rose sharply from May 2021. The growing popularity of this platform is probably influenced by the deletion of the main *Querdenken* channel and a further backup channel. Michael Ballweg however denied the existence of a second channel and announced the creation of his own platform.[76]
Since links to the movement's PeerTube instance were already shared at the beginning of the year, the project seemed to have been set up before the YouTube channel was blocked. This could indicate that users were trying to proactively prepare for their ban on established platforms by setting up their own infrastructures.
For other domains, a decrease is observed over the survey period. This may be due to technical reasons, as

in the case of LBRY.tv which was replaced by Odysee. LBRY.tv links led to the corresponding videos on Odysee. Mentions of the old domain decreased sharply from summer 2021.

The decline in WTube links was less easily identifiable. Although the platform was still functional during the selected timeframe, Hildmann's links to his own platform decreased significantly from July 2021. Leaked emails reveal that WTube's hosting service, Hetzner, had already written to Hildmann in February 2021 about copyrighted and unconstitutional material, and that the website ultimately moved to new servers.[77]
It is unclear whether the problems with content on WTube were directly related to the decline in linking to WTube on Telegram.
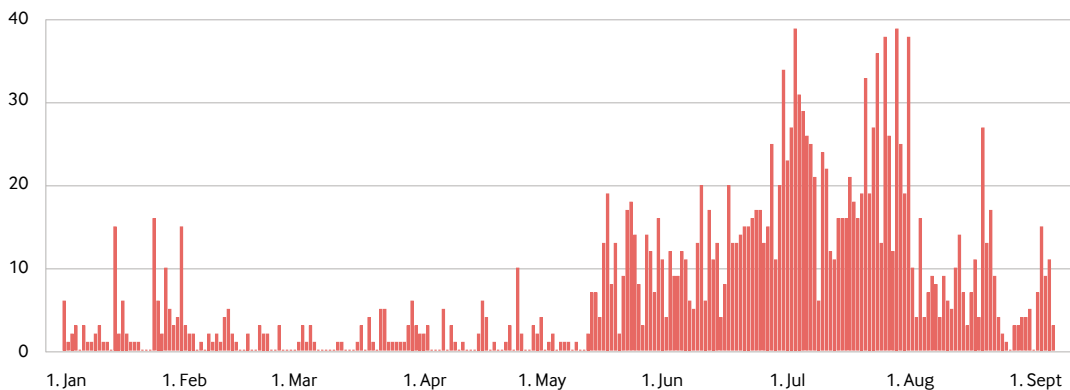
Figure 5
Links per day to tube querdenken-711.de in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021
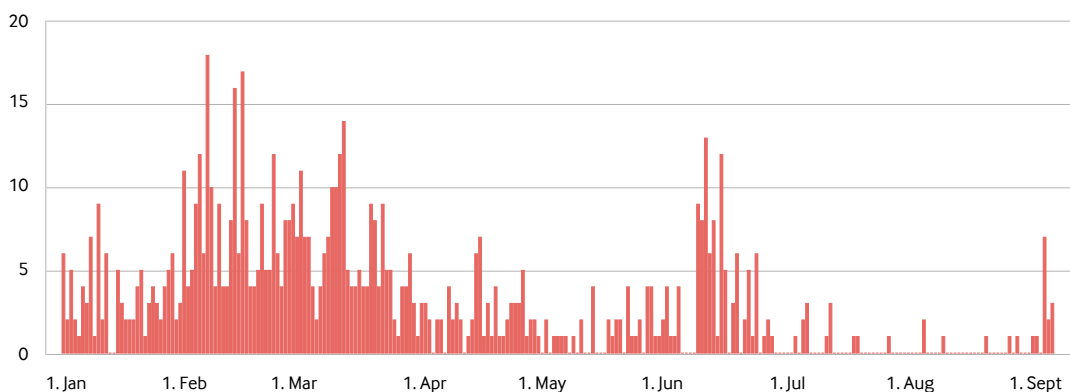
Figure 6
Links per day to wtube.org in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021

Livestreaming Platforms
Online livestreaming is an increasingly popular and growing entertainment and information format, fuelled in particular by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Between March and April 2020 alone, the number of hours spent livestreaming grew by 45 percent.[78] German-speaking right-wing extremists and conspiracy ideologues in the sample we researched also seemed to have embraced this medium.

There are several explanations for this:
Firstly, they could align themselves with a social trend and exploit the growing importance of the medium. In contrast to pre-filmed videos, they were able to interact directly with their viewers and give them a sense of immediacy, such as by livestreaming at anti-lockdown demonstrations. Particularly for those actors who were aware of the controversial nature of their content, livestreaming offers the possibility to avoid blocking and prosecution. If a recording of the livestream was not saved, it is difficult to trace back certain statements. However, the use of livestreams by the right-wing extremist online milieu is not a development that was solely due to the pandemic. Martin Sellner, for example, was already using it before the COVID-19 pandemic. It was not only right-wing extremists who, like Sellner, were primarily intent on political intervention that used livestream platforms. Other segments of the far-right online community also resorted to such platforms.

In the past, right-wing terrorists have livestreamed their attacks, including that of the Halle terrorist, whose deadly attack on a synagogue and a kebab shop was watched by 2,200 people on Twitch.[79]

Four livestreaming sites were found in the dataset. However, it should be noted that numerous (video) platforms also offer a livestreaming function. The following list contains only the links to platforms that were specifically designed for livestreaming.

Gaming and E-Sports Platforms
Three of the four livestreaming services were set up specifically to broadcast video games.
ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series[80] examined right-wing extremist users of DLive and Twitch in the English-speaking world.
The study, published in 2021, found that right-wing extremists have an ambivalent relationship with DLive and have moved to other platforms such as Trovo and Odysee, due to increasing moderation.
While far-right content was easily found on Twitch, it was not an endemic problem on the site.[81]
In this dataset, DLive and Twitch were shared across many channels and user categories. For example, DLive appeared in 31 *Querdenken* channels, 30 conspiracy ideology channels and 18 far right channels, among others.
Twitch was shared in 18 *Querdenken* and 18 conspiracy ideologist channels.

The phenomenon of a few channels producing the majority of links is particularly pronounced for livestreaming platforms. Livestreams are used especially by well-known influencers in the right-wing extremist movement. In addition, some of them stream on several platforms at the same time.

Ignaz Bearth is an example of this. On his channel, he shared the most links to Twitch (30 percent) and DLive (45 percent) and the second most links to Trovo (25 percent). Bearth generally announced his livestreams via Telegram during the observed period, linking to numerous platforms including VK Live and YouTube.

Domain	#Total Links	#Unique Links	#Linking Channels	#Views
dlive.tv	3.001	255	87	44.882.320
veezee.tv	943	20	32	12.490.196
trovo.live	428	33	29	8.088.034
twitch.tv	350	50	50	3.901.773

A previously mentioned radical right-wing conspiracy ideologue also operated a multi-platform strategy. He shared the most links to Trovo (58 percent) and the second most to DLive (10 percent).
Like Bearth, he announced his livestreams on Telegram with links to multiple platforms, including Odysee and Rumble.
Martin Sellner also used several platforms to livestream during the research period, although he was less active than Bearth or said the mentioned radical right-wing conspiracy ideologue. For example, there were only 10 links to Trovo and 17 to DLive on his channel. On 4 October 2021, Sellner announced that he had been banned from Trovo and would henceforth stream exclusively on Odysee.[82]

The right-wing extremists in the dataset also appeared to be evaluating which platforms were most popular with their viewers. For example, Sven Liebich asked in a poll on Telegram whether his audience preferred VK, Facebook or Twitch for livestreams.[83]

Veezee.tv is a special case among the livestreaming platforms, because unlike Trovo, DLive and Twitch, the site was not set up for gamers. Instead, it claims to provide a censorship-free platform for »independent journalists« and activists. It is backed by the Free Media Network association, which has already been mentioned in connection with veezee.tube. Veezee.tv currently maintains 24 channels by various individuals from the far-right or conspiracy theory spectrum. Ignaz Bearth and the previously mentioned far-right radical conspiracy theorist are also represented here. Both have also promoted the website via their Telegram channels. Bearth shared 68 percent of all links while the conspiracy theorist's channel shared 21 percent. Free Media Network states that over 3,000 livestream hours were transmitted on veezee.tv.[84]
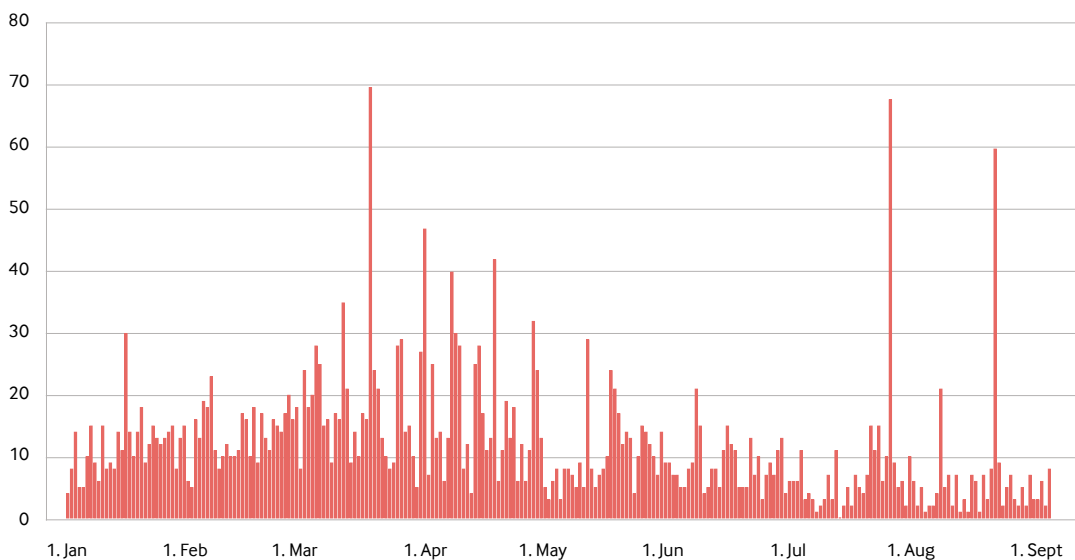
Figure 7
Links per day to dlive.tv in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021

Volume over Time

While there were variations in the number of links over time, these often seemed to be influenced by the self-promotion of individual actors or posts listing links to different livestreams. For example, Ignaz Bearth's channel shared 33 of the total 70 links to DLive on 20 March 2021, and 30 out of 40 DLive links on 10 April 2021. Bearth posted on days of demonstrations about the latest developments and linked to the numerous platforms on which he livestreamed under these posts . 'Masterposts' listing livestreams of different users are often circulated ahead of demonstrations. On 1 August 2021, Bodo Schiffmann and a channel belonging to the QAnon movement distributed lists of up to 10 livestreams on DLive about the anti-lockdown demonstration which was taking place in Berlin at the time. Similarly, on 28 August 2021, the self-proclaimed *'Querdenken'* lawyer Ralf Ludwig and Attila Hildmann distributed livestream lists of the Berlin demonstration.

Social Networks and Chat Platforms

In this study, social networks are categorised as platforms that focus on 'microblogging' and written exchanges between registered users. While in a broader understanding of the term, video and streaming platforms also fall under social networks, the category was defined more narrowly in order to include platforms designed for written interactions and to distinguish them from the audiovisual platforms in the dataset. For example, social networks include websites modelled on Twitter that are generally built in response to deplatforming, such as Gettr, Gab and Parler. VK.com, which is widely used in Russia and has functions similar to Facebook, is also listed because of its popularity with German-speaking right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists.

Telegra.ph is Telegram's blogging tool and has been included as part of this group of networks. Discord is a multifunctional platform developed especially for gamers. It allows video and voice chats as well as direct messaging. Members of the same server can engage with each other in channels or write direct messages to each other. It was included because it is primarily used for oral and written chats.

Russian Platforms

The social networks with the most links were built by the Durov brothers, although VK has since been taken over by Russian companies with close ties to the government. One possible explanation for the popularity of these platforms is the libertarian mindset of their founders. Additionally, many German-speaking right-wing extremists seem to have an affinity for Russia. For example, members of German neo-Nazi parties received military training through the 'Russian Imperial Movement'.[85]

Representatives of the Russian government maintain relationships with right-wing populist parties, such as the AfD and FPÖ, or with media like the COMPACT magazine.[86] Russia plays an important role for QAnon supporters as it is seen as an ally for an imagined 'liberation' of Germany. However, whether this motivates the platforms' alleged libertarian stance or sympathies for the Russian government depends on the respective protagonist. The frequent linking of Telegra.ph was influenced by one sovereigntist channel in particular, as it distributed 95 percent of all links to the domain.

The channel copied excerpts of articles from other sites to Telegra.ph several times a day and was thus able to produce a high volume of links. The blogging tool,

Domain	#Total Links	#Unique Links	#Linking Channels	#Views
telegra.ph	12.727	12.031	64	59.970.142
vk.com	307	96	33	3.286.136
gettr.com	239	60	53	2.770.852
gab.com	230	108	32	3.771.868
parler.com	144	69	24	3.626.937
discord.com	19	10	8	221.323

however, was also used in many other channels. For example, 65 of the 238 channels (27 percent) contained at least one link to an article distributed via Telegra.ph. More than half of these 65 channels contained five or more links to this domain.

It is striking that Telegra.ph was mainly shared in conspiracy theory channels (38) and anti-lockdown channels (12). Only five extremist and four radical channels contained such links.

Many of the frequently linked articles contained conspiracy theories and disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the 2020 US presidential election.

It is likely that Telegra.ph would have a similarly relaxed moderation policy to its parent platform Telegram, making it attractive to conspiracy ideologues.
VK.com, on the other hand, which is no longer owned by the Durovs, was linked to most often by right-wing extremists, who produced 159 of the 307 links.

Most of the links came from two channels. The first belonged to Ignaz Bearth, who linked almost exclusively to his main VK profile, through which he also livestreamed.

The second channel belonged to Sven Liebich, who showed a different online behaviour: of the 53 links he shared, 31 pointed to different pages that mainly contained videos from anti-lockdown demonstrations. He also linked to the VK profile of his blog 11 times.

Twitter Clones

Microblogging sites that resemble Twitter in appearance and functionality often originate from the conservative right-wing in the US. This community is particularly critical of the moderation rules of established platforms, seeking new online spaces for the dissemination of its ideology. Twitter's popularity in the US could be the reason that alternative platforms that use a 'Twitter' format are primarily from there. About 22 percent of the US population use Twitter, while just 8 percent of the German population use the platform.[87] Twitter clones include Gab, Gettr and Parler.

Gab is the oldest of these platforms and was set up in 2016 by Andrew Torba and Ekrem Büyükkaya.
Torba explained that he wanted to build a censorship-free medium and claimed that established platforms were controlled by progressive leaders and Silicon Valley collaborators.[88]
Gab became notorious as a retreat for right-wing extremists.
In 2018, a right-wing terrorist announced his attack on a Pittsburgh synagogue via Gab.
As a result, financial service providers such as PayPal and Stripe, as well as domain registrar GoDaddy, withdrew their support for Gab.[89]
Gab was ultimately able to go online again, hosted by the domain registrar Epik.
Parler also found refuge with Epik after Amazon Web Services ended its business ties with the platform.[90]
By mid-January 2021, Gab had around 3.4 million registered users.[91]

Parler was founded in 2018 by Joe Matze Jr. and Jared Thompson with a similar rationale as Gab: namely, to create an alternative to the supposedly left-liberal dominated corporations in Silicon Valley.
This social network became a platform of choice for US right-wing conservatives and QAnon acolytes.
After the presidential election in November 2020, the platform gained up to 2 million new users per day.
The number of daily active users quadrupled.[92]
Rumours spread on the site that Joe Biden had „stolen" the election and that Donald Trump was still the rightful president.
Such conspiracy theories also motivated the violent riots in Washington on 6 January 2021.
As a result, Amazon revoked Parler's permission to use its servers and the platform was temporarily no longer accessible.[93]
However, it is now back online. The current number of registered users is difficult to find.
In November 2020, Parler had about 3.6 million downloads.[94]

Gettr emerged in response to the blocking of Donald Trump on platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and the temporary demise of Parler. The network was founded by Trump's former communications advisor Jason Miller and went online in July 2021.[95] Like Gab and Parler, Gettr presents itself as a haven for free speech. However, like the other two Twitter clones, this platform is also dominated by far-right, conspiracy ideology and racist content. In addition, content such as Islamist terror propaganda[96] and child abuse[97] can be found on the site. According to a report by Stanford University, Gettr reached a total of 1.5 million users in August 2021. Although Miller has suggested a higher number.[98]

Based on the dataset examined, Gettr was the most frequently cited of the Twitter clones, with 239 links. The first citations appeared on 1 July 2021. This same month also had the most links to Gettr. The domain appeared in 17 conspiracy theory channels, 16 right-wing extremist channels and 10 anti-lockdown channels, among others. Overall, 48 percent of the links came from conspiracy theory channels, while just under 36 percent came from far-right channels. The most shared links were the Gettr profiles of well-known actors in the political scene, such as Ignaz Bearth, Lutz Bachmann, Siegfried Daebritz and Frank Kraemer, as well as journalist Boris Reitschuster, whose channel was not examined and who is popular among *'Querdenken'* members. However, among all these actors, only Ignaz Bearth seemed to actively market his Gettr channel. He linked to it 45 times, while Lutz Bachmann only referred to his own channel four times. The most shared link, with 106 mentions in the dataset, led to an anonymous profile whose content was particularly directed against German mainstream political parties and politicians.

Gettr's domain does not appear in the dataset until after the platform was launched in July 2021. Gab and Parler were linked to most frequently in January. This trend is far more pronounced for Parler. Almost all the links to this domain were from one week in the first half of January, with a peak on 10 January 2021 (four days after the Capitol Riots) when the domain appears in the dataset 44 times. However, from 12 January 2021 onwards, the platform hardly received any attention, even though it was accessible again after being temporarily shut down. The channels that most frequently linked to Parler belonged primarily to the QAnon movement or to people who had at least expressed partially positive views towards this conspiracy theory. On the other hand, in the extreme right space there was only one link from Ignaz Bearth to his own profile.
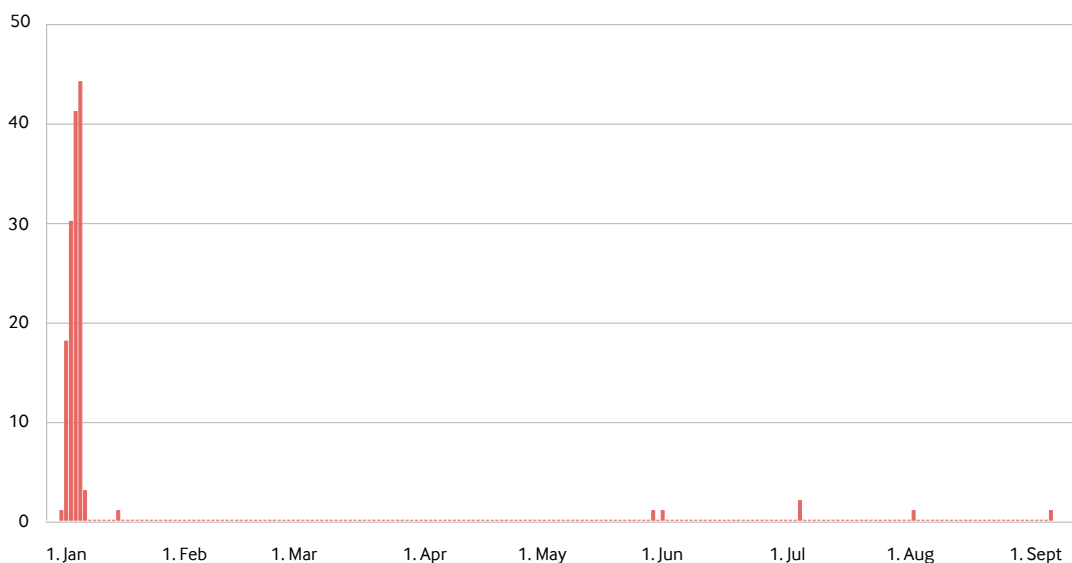
Figure 8
Links per day to parler.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021
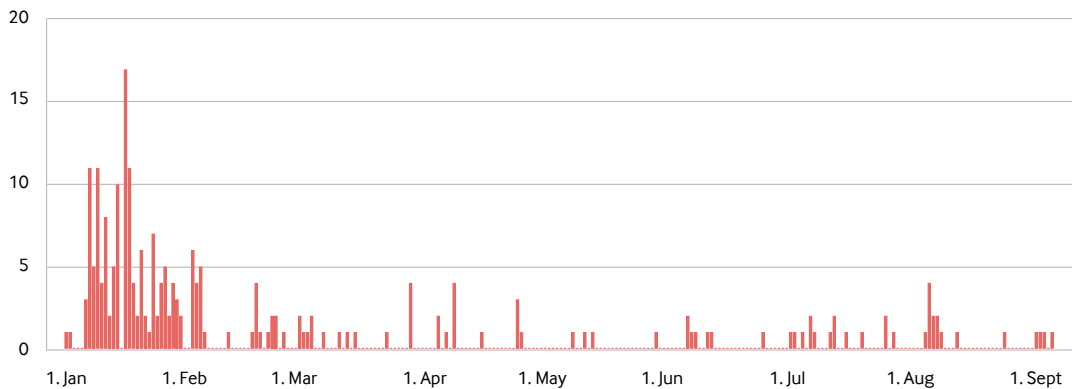
While Gab was also linked to with particular frequency in January 2021, the platform was also still regularly linked to throughout the rest of the observed period, unlike Parler. Again, the most active channels included many QAnon supporters but also right-wing extremists, such as Ignaz Bearth with 28 links and a radical right-wing channel with 17 links. Media outlets such as Epoch Times Deutsch and Freie Medien also repeatedly referred to Gab. However, conspiracy ideologists accounted for 67 percent of the links.

Overall, it can be observed that the aforementioned Twitter clones were losing relevance among the far-right and conspiracy ideology scene in the German-speaking world. While Gettr was often shared because of its novelty in July, the number of links decreased quickly. Parler almost disappeared from the dataset after a few mentions in January 2021. Gab was also cited less often from January 2021 onwards. A possible explanation for this could be that Telegram itself had become the most important social network among the alternative platforms of this scene in the German-speaking world.[99] As US-based platforms were being increasingly regulated by local legislation and having their contracts terminated by business partners, German-speaking right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists may have seen the Dubai-registered Telegram as a safer network in the long run.

Discord
The links to Discord were mainly invitation links to servers. These links allow influencers to direct their followers to more private spaces that offer further opportunities for interaction. Eight out of 19 links came from the channel of a right-wing extremist internet radio station, which exclusively invited users to its own Discord server. The other far-right channel that linked to Discord only shared posts about this same internet radio station. Aside from this, there was also a QAnon supporter linking to his Discord server.

Established Platforms

The main focus of this report are alternative and comparatively small platforms; however, it must be noted that many established platforms were being shared on Telegram channels with extremist and disinformation content. Among them were also platforms that are required by the NetzDG to delete illegal content in Germany. The internet archive, archive.org, was included in this category, although it pursues a non-profit purpose and is primarily used to host files and not as a social media platform. The platform was misused by extremists as a file-sharing platform. However, links to one of these platforms did not mean that the user agreed with the content they linked to, in some cases users simply

shared news stories or links that served to coordinate campaigns targeting users on the linked platforms with negative comments. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that much of the content on the established platforms fit into the narratives of the actors researched.

The most frequently linked Twitter accounts in the dataset belonged mainly to various local groups of the anti-lockdown movement *Querdenken*. In addition, there were links to the now deleted accounts of former US President Donald Trump and to that of the candidate for the 2021 election of the *Bundestag* and former president of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Hans-Georg Maaßen, who is also popular with the far-right.[100] The majority of the 26 links to Maaßen's account were inserted by channels sharing posts from his Telegram channel, which in turn linked to his own Twitter account. In addition, the Twitter account of 'TRT' was shared a total of 32 times in the dataset. In particular, one person from the conspiracy ideology sector shared tweets and distributed content without comment on their own channel. Also, the most shared Facebook links were primarily from pages within the anti-lockdown movement. These included campaign pages and accounts that give approving coverage of anti-lockdown protests. The only exception among the Facebook links was a page that posted pictures along with short statements that could then be shared via Facebook. The page appeared to be a non-political with

content that appeared to be for motivation or edification, regardless of the political orientation of the user. On YouTube, three of the ten most shared links belonged to various channels of Ignaz Bearth. However, none of these channels had any video content on them anymore. Two others among the most shared links led to the channels of anti-lockdown groups.

Conspiracy theory channels were also frequently linked to. One of them had no content of its own but had created playlists with videos from other channels. Here visitors could find videos critical of the »system« and videos on the use of firearms. Also among the ten most shared links was a programme from a channel close to the far-right National Democratic Party (NPD) on left-wing terrorism and a film clip from the feature film Law Abiding Citizen, whose comments section often referred to QAnon ideologies.

The frequent linking to established platforms in the dataset shows that these platforms are still relevant for right-wing extremist actors in online spaces despite the NetzDG. This also supports the findings of the ISD report »Escape Routes« about the strategic use of established social media by right-wing extremists,[101] whereby they partially moderate their statements on established social networks, using 'dog whistles' and employing both established and alternative platforms to disseminate content tailored to the respective platforms.

Domain	#Total Links	#Unique Links	#Linking Channels	#Views
youtube.com	47.367	26.623	195	576.652.105
twitter.com	10.821	6.147	141	233.912.491
facebook.com	2.419	1.140	135	30.042.463
archive.org	269	165	56	3.913.208
tiktok.com	212	98	48	3.377.488

Video Platforms

YouTube is by far the most important established platform in the dataset and was linked to far more frequently than any of the alternative platforms during the study period. More than three quarters of all links to established platforms were to the video platform. This also points to a broader observable trend of the popularity of smaller video platforms and livestreaming sites. This is especially true as YouTube offers both on-demand and livestreaming capabilities. Around half of all YouTube links came from the conspiracy ideology community, but it was far-right extremist channels that were the second most likely to share this domain, with 13 percent of links. This is remarkable, because in the wake of the NetzDG regulation and the platform's own moderation it would be expected that the interest of right-wing extremists in YouTube would have decreased. Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists posted 4,211 links to YouTube (9 percent of the total number of links posted). In conspiracy ideology channels, the most shared links led to a variety of content, including music videos, spiritual and esoteric content, and conspiracy ideology lectures and discussions lasting from a few minutes to over an hour. Right-wing extremist channels often referred to extremist actors and channels that were still active on the site. These included Ignaz Bearth, who has since removed much of his content, a channel run by NPD federal leader Frank Franz, and a channel run by neo-Nazi Patrick Schröder.[102] A YouTube channel hosting an Identarian movement podcast is no longer accessible. In addition, right-wing extremist musicians and publishers used YouTube to promote new releases in the community.

In contrast, the video platform TikTok was very rarely linked to. An ISD study from August 2021 found that English-language extremist videos were easy to find on this platform and were removed inconsistently.[103] In the dataset, 128 of the 212 links (about 60 percent) to the TikTok platform came from conspiracy theory channels and 39 (18 percent) from anti-lockdown channels. Just 8 percent came from right-wing radical channels and only 4 percent from extremist channels. The TikTok profile of Michael Scharfmüller, the managing director of the magazine Info-DIREKT and former member of the now disbanded Bund Freier Jugend, was the only profile linked to by right-wing extremist channels.[104] Telegram users appeared to have little overlap with right-wing extremist TikTok users.

Social Networks

Many of the actors in the study linked to Twitter and Facebook domains in order to bring people to their channels and grow their audiences. Many of the most shared Twitter links led to the profiles of accounts from the anti-lockdown movement. The ten most shared Facebook links were also mainly to pages of opponents of COVID-19 measures, rather than individual posts. Individual status posts were shared as sources, news or simply as 'Netzfund' (i.e. something found online).

While conspiracy theorists shared the most links to these domains on both Twitter and Facebook with 60 percent and 44 percent respectively, the platforms rarely appeared comparatively among right-wing extremists. Six percent of the links in right-wing extremist groups were to Twitter. The five most shared links were to profiles rather than individual posts, including those of Attila Hildmann, the 'Gefangenenhilfe' association that supports far-right prisoners,[105] and the NPD party magazine.[106]

For Facebook, links from right-wing extremist channels accounted for around 10 percent and often led to ideologically related pages, especially from the milieu of the NPD.

Volume over Time

There were variations at times in the number of links to established platforms. The sharp increase in links to Twitter in the wake of the violent riots in the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 and the subsequent suspension of Donald Trump's Twitter account was particularly striking. There were 402 links to Twitter on this day, more than on any other day. The six channels that referred most frequently to Twitter on 6 January 2021 all belonged to QAnon supporters. One possible explanation is that Twitter was Donald Trump's preferred communication platform and that his German-speaking supporters drew many of their beliefs from Twitter. There were hardly any links to Twitter from extremist channels on that day.

In the case of Facebook, there was no comparable increase, but the most links appeared around the floods in Germany in mid-July 2021.

Many of these links led to videos of affected residents, highlighting their frustration with the government. YouTube was regularly linked to with increased activity around 20 March 2021, when clashes broke out between anti-lockdown demonstrators and police at a demonstration in Kassel, and 21 March 2021, when rallies were held by anti-lockdown activists in Berlin because of an amendment to the Protection Against Infection Act.

Many of the linked YouTube videos have since been removed. The deletion of *Querdenken* movement pages by Facebook[107] took place shortly after the end of the study period of this report and is therefore not reflected in the number of links.
Links to the Facebook pages of the *Querdenken* movement that have since been deleted can also be found in the dataset.
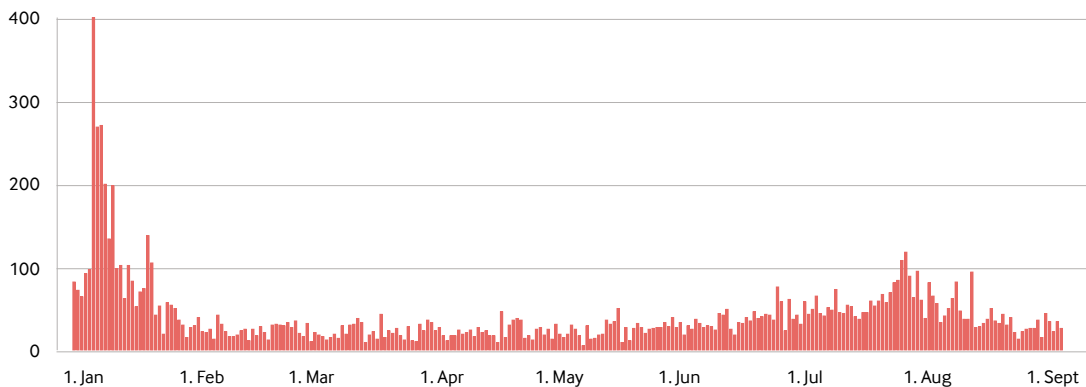
Figure 10
Links per day to twitter.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021
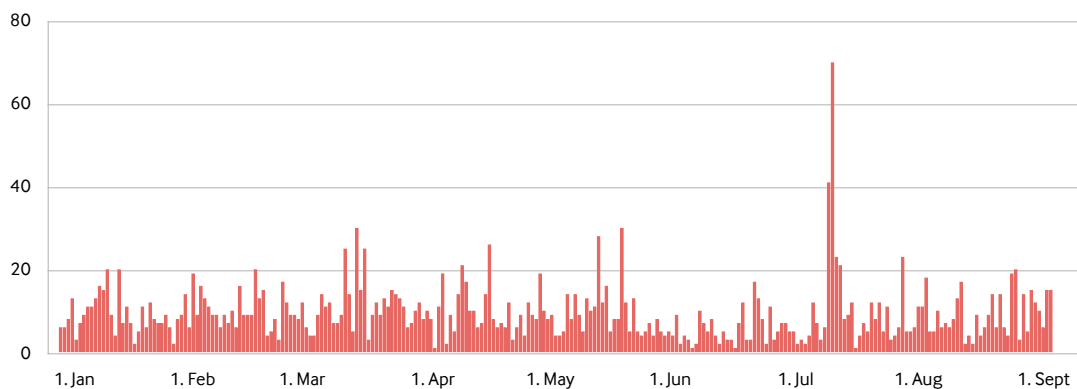
Figure 11
Links per day to facebook.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021
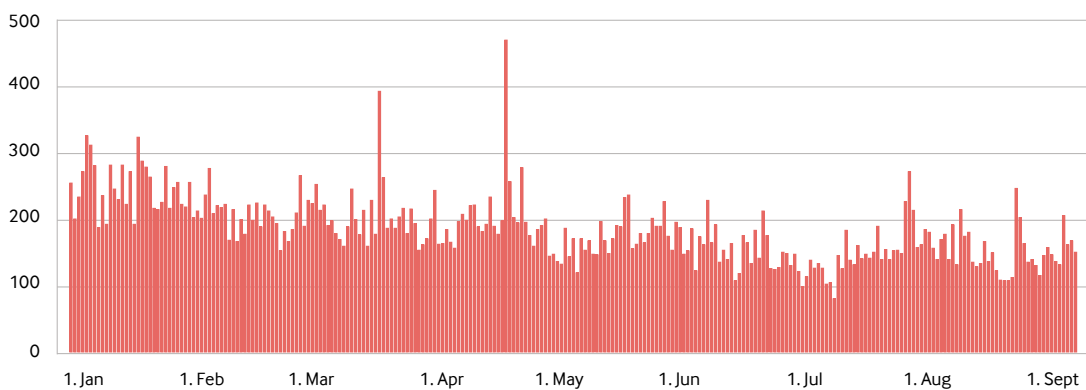
Figure 12
Links per day to youtube.com in the analysed Telegram channels in 2021

Misuse of the Internet Archive

The digital library, Internet Archive, was included in the analysis of established platforms. Although the site serves a non-profit purpose, right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists were misusing it. In its own terms of use, this archive acknowledges that it contains content that some users may find offensive. However, the Internet Archive must be used in accordance with local laws.[108] A book on the alleged 'Great Reset',[109] which is no longer accessible, was linked to eight times in the dataset. It could have been removed due to copyright infringement or because it violated the terms of service. Other links pointed to a range of esoteric, antisemitic and conspiracy theory documents, including texts on the 'Vril Society', texts concerning an alleged 'climate lie' and historical distortions of the Second World War. Of particular note was a report on the activities of the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) during the war, stored on Archive.org. This text was used by conspiracy ideologues to implicitly deny the Holocaust. The ICRC itself published a statement that it had never collected statistics on the number of deaths in concentration camps.[110] The report on the Internet Archive was uploaded by the ICRC itself and is of historical interest, however it was reinterpreted without its concrete historical context and misused by conspiracy ideologues and antisemites to trivialise the Holocaust. Some conspiracy theorists and extremists see Internet Archive as an unregulated backup platform for sharing content, even if the operators restrict content according to regional jurisdictions. Much of the content are documents that are also of interest to researchers, especially on the topic of right-wing extremism. Moreover, this is a non-profit database and not a commercial platform whose algorithms try to keep visitors on the site as long as possible. This means that the danger of an echo chamber effect is very smallin the case of the Internet Archive.

Evaluation by Ideological Orientation

Right-wing Extremists

Right-wing extremist channels used Telegram to coordinate and spread messages. In doing so, they also linked to established platforms. Among these, YouTube was the most popular. A total of 6,169 links to the video platform were shared by right-wing extremist channels. Similar to other social media platforms, right-wing extremist 'power users' were also found on Telegram, who specifically used their channels to disseminate their own content and who stood out from other users due to the large number of posts. The link analysis showed that these right-wing extremist users did not have any favourites among the alternative platforms. On right-wing extremist channels, it was mainly video and streaming domains that were shared, and rarely social media platforms, which further emphasised the importance of Telegram itself as a social network for the right-wing extremist online environment.

Links to all domains of alternative platforms in right-wing extremist channels

Domain	Links
dlive.tv	1.524
wtube.org	717
veezee.tv	669
bitchute.com	175
twitch.tv	174
odysee.com	168
vk.com	159
frei3.de	130
trovo.live	124
gettr.com	85
tube.querdenken-711.de	62
gegenstimme.tv	47
telegra.ph	32
vimeo.com	30
archive.org	30
gab.com	29
dein.tube	27
veezee.tube	17
rumble.com	16
discord.com	10
lbry.tv	8
dailymotion.com	6
bittube.tv	2
youmaker.com	1
parler.com	1
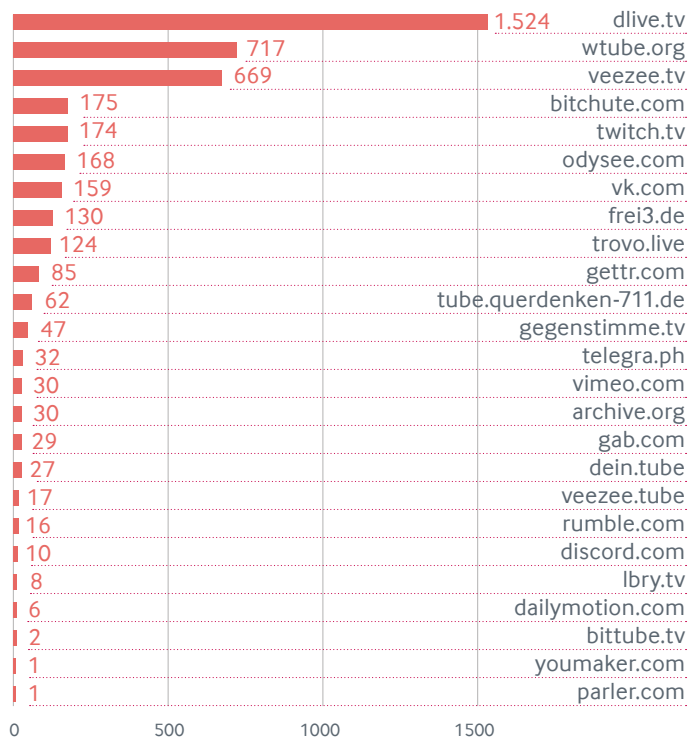
Number of right-wing extremist channels in which a domain of an alternative platform was shared

Domain	Channels
odysee.com	29
bitchute.com	23
dlive.tv	18
gettr.com	16
frei3.de	13
archive.org	11
twitch.tv	9
vimeo.com	9
veezee.tv	8
rumble.com	8
wtube.org	7
gegenstimme.tv	7
trovo.live	6
vk.com	5
telegra.ph	5
dein.tube	4
veezee.tube	4
lbry.tv	4
dailymotion.com	4
gab.com	3
tube.querdenken-711.de	2
discord.com	2
bittube.tv	2
youmaker.com	1
parler.com	1
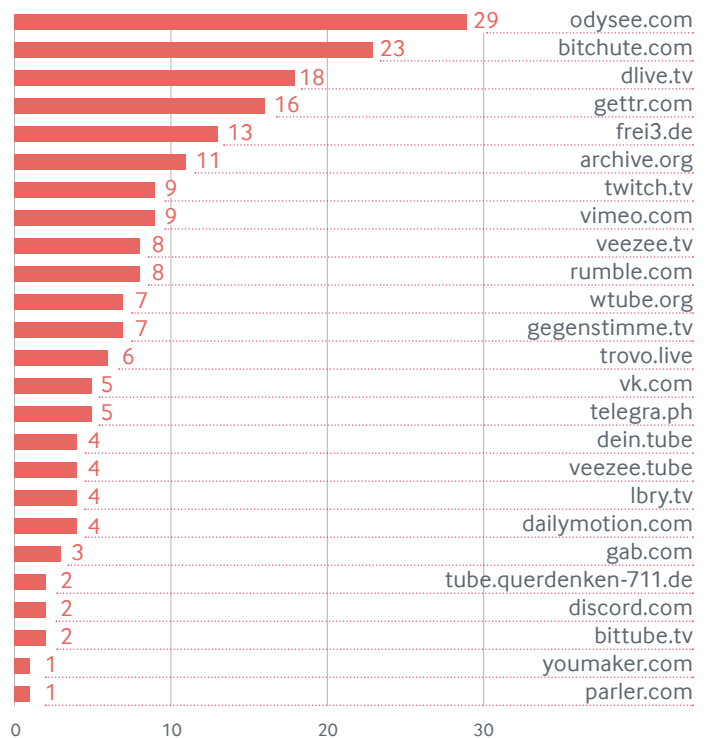
Right-wing Radicals

Right-wing radical channels linked to other platforms to a much greater extent than right-wing extremists. For the radical right-wing users of Telegram, the dissemination of their own content was the primary concern. Radical right-wing channels in the dataset also linked to major platforms, but to an even lesser extent than extremist channels. The most important platform for the radical right-wing spectrum here was YouTube (3,751 links). There were no significant links to mostly text-based social networks. This also underpins the outstanding importance of Telegram for users from the radical right-wing spectrum.

Links to all domains of alternative platforms in radical right-wing channels

Domain	Links
dlive.tv	393
trovo.live	248
odysee.com	225
veezee.tv	196
rumble.com	132
bitchute.com	74
archive.org	31
gab.com	25
telegra.ph	23
frei3.de	19
twitch.tv	17
gettr.com	14
parler.com	12
vk.com	9
gegenstimme.tv	6
lbry.tv	5
tube.querdenken-711.de	1
discord.com	1
bittube.tv	1
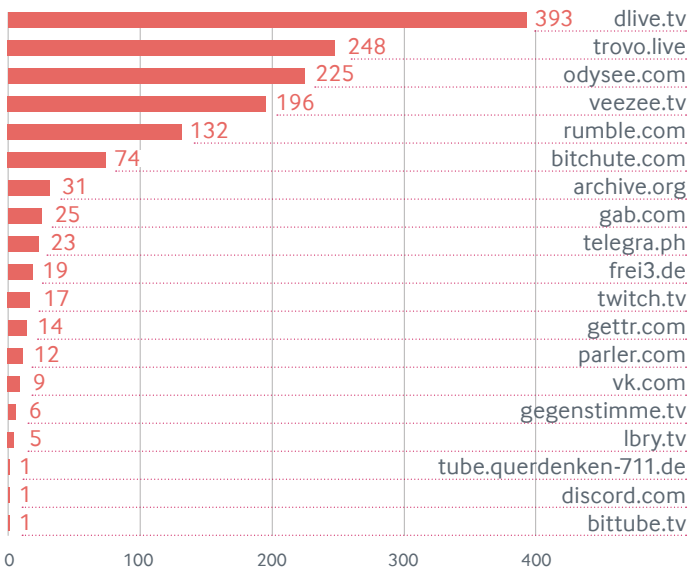
Number of right-wing radical channels in which a domain of an alternative platform was shared

Domain	Channels
odysee.com	8
bitchute.com	7
dlive.tv	5
gab.com	5
rumble.com	4
telegra.ph	4
parler.com	4
gegenstimme.tv	4
archive.org	3
twitch.tv	3
gettr.com	3
lbry.tv	3
trovo.live	2
frei3.de	2
vk.com	2
veezee.tv	1
tube.querdenken-711.de	1
discord.com	1
bittube.tv	1
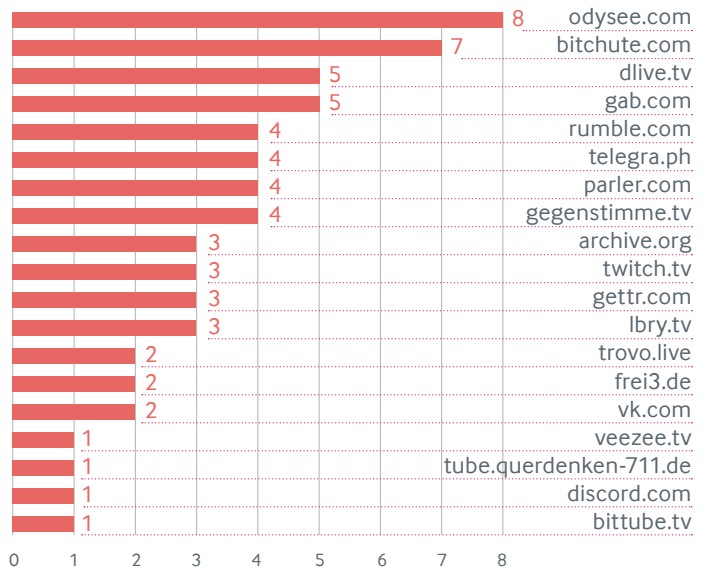
Reichsbürger:innen ('Citizens of the Reich') and Sovereignists

Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists used Telegram mainly for internal communication and sharing files within the channels. They referred to external platforms to a comparatively lesser extent and used Telegram as a closed online space. In the case of the three channels studied that belonged to the category of *Reichsbürger:innen* and Sovereignists, Telegram's blogging tool Telegra.ph was used disproportionately often. As with users of the other categories studied, YouTube was also the most popular established platform for *Reichsbürger:innen* and Sovereignists in the dataset. The video hosting platform was linked to a total of 4,211 times during the study period.

Links to all domains of alternative platforms in Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists channels

11.535	telegra.ph
307	bittube.tv
117	odysee.com
74	bitchute.com
25	rumble.com
15	archive.org
11	wtube.org
11	vimeo.com
11	dlive.tv
10	lbry.tv
5	gab.com
2	veezee.tv
2	tube.querdenken-711.de
1	youmaker.com
1	twitch.tv
1	parler.com
1	okitube.com
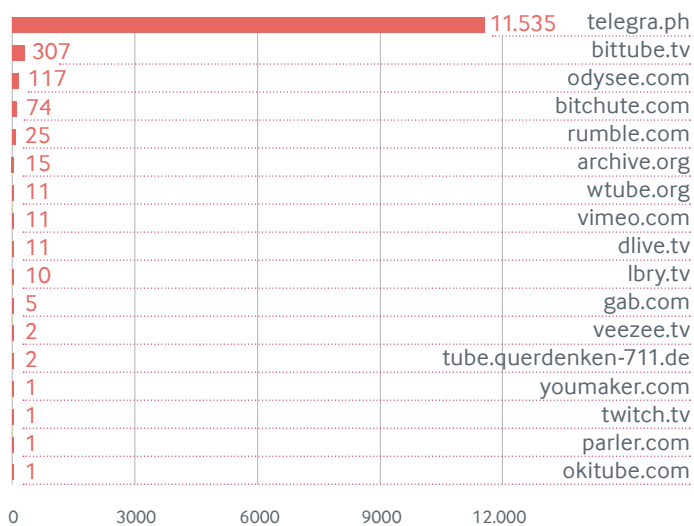
Number of Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists channels in which a domain of an alternative platform was shared

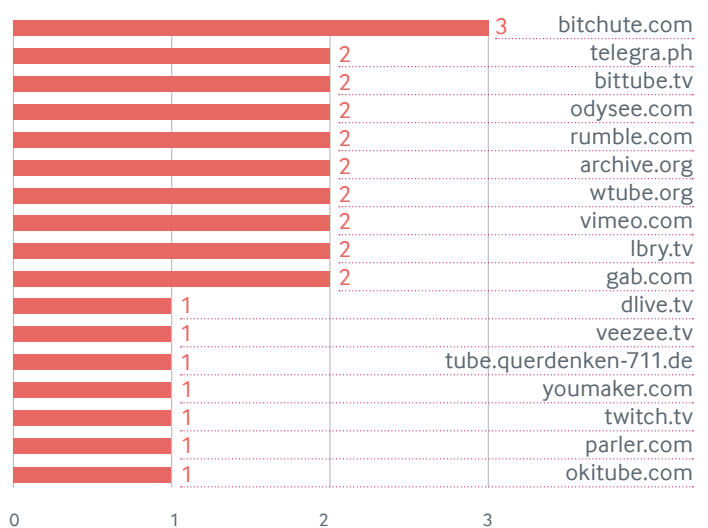|	
3	bitchute.com
2	telegra.ph
2	bittube.tv
2	odysee.com
2	rumble.com
2	archive.org
2	wtube.org
2	vimeo.com
2	lbry.tv
2	gab.com
1	dlive.tv
1	veezee.tv
1	tube.querdenken-711.de
1	youmaker.com
1	twitch.tv
1	parler.com
1	okitube.com

Conspiracy Ideologues

Channels from the conspiracy ideology spectrum used Telegram to spread messages, but also to link to other alternative platforms. Compared to other user categories in the study, the conspiracy ideologues were much more active on Telegram. Their channels sent the most messages during the study period. They referred most frequently to smaller platforms. Audiovisual platforms played a major role for the conspiracy ideology movement. However, major platforms were linked to on a large scale in these channels. In the dataset, conspiracy ideologues were the category that linked to these platforms most often. The most linked platform by conspiracy ideologues was YouTube (25,468 links).

All links to domains of alternative platforms in conspiracy ideology channels

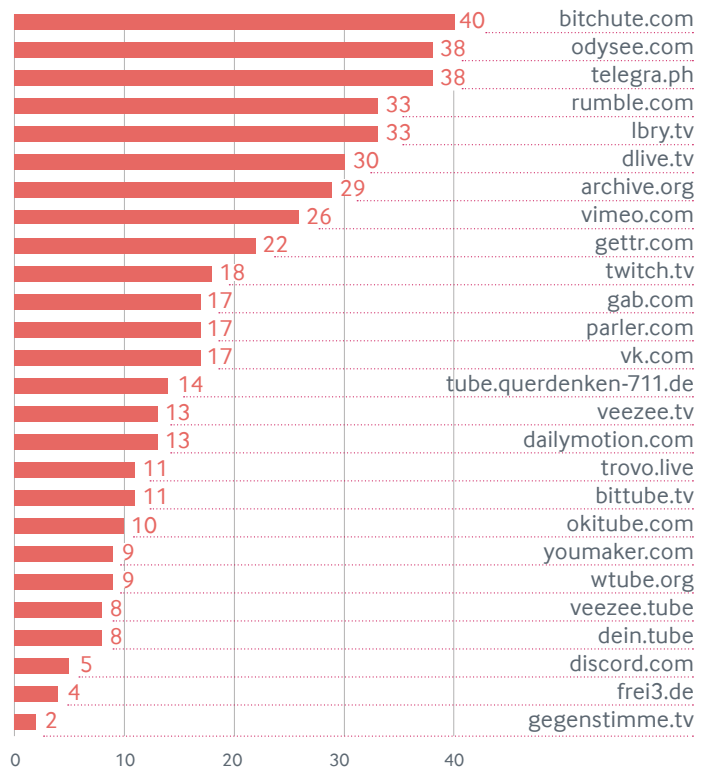| Domain	Links
odysee.com	1.989
telegra.ph	1.081
rumble.com	1.056
bitchute.com	1.034
dlive.tv	650
lbry.tv	344
vimeo.com	203
archive.org	172
gab.com	154
veezee.tube	128
gettr.com	115
parler.com	112
twitch.tv	96
vk.com	90
okitube.com	68
tube.querdenken-711.de	51
veezee.tv	50
trovo.live	31
youmaker.com	30
dailymotion.com	27
wtube.org	22
bittube.tv	14
dein.tube	12
discord.com	7
frei3.de	4
gegenstimme.tv	2

Number of conspiracy ideology channels in which domains of an alternative platform were shared

Domain	Channels
bitchute.com	40
odysee.com	38
telegra.ph	38
rumble.com	33
lbry.tv	33
dlive.tv	30
archive.org	29
vimeo.com	26
gettr.com	22
twitch.tv	18
gab.com	17
parler.com	17
vk.com	17
tube.querdenken-711.de	14
veezee.tv	13
dailymotion.com	13
trovo.live	11
bittube.tv	11
okitube.com	10
youmaker.com	9
wtube.org	9
veezee.tube	8
dein.tube	8
discord.com	5
frei3.de	4
gegenstimme.tv	2

Anti-Lockdown Movement

Anti-lockdown channels mainly used Telegram to share links to other platforms. Channels whose primary focus was the rejection of public health measures were coded as 'anti-lockdown'. Channels from this movement especially shared the PeerTube instance 'querdenken-711.de', which belonged to the *Querdenken* movement. Other livestreaming and video platforms such as DLive, Rumble and Odysee were also linked to more frequently by the anti-lockdown category. The focus of the anti-lockdown groups on video and livestreaming platforms could be influenced by the fact that these actors often record and livestream at their protests. There were numerous video recordings of *Querdenken* demonstrations, at least on »tube.querdenken-711.de«, in addition to interviews and documentaries. Meanwhile, the major platforms of anti-lockdown channels were shared far more frequently than alternative platforms. YouTube dominated here as well, being linked to 4,889 times.

Links to all domains of alternative platforms in anti-lockdown channels

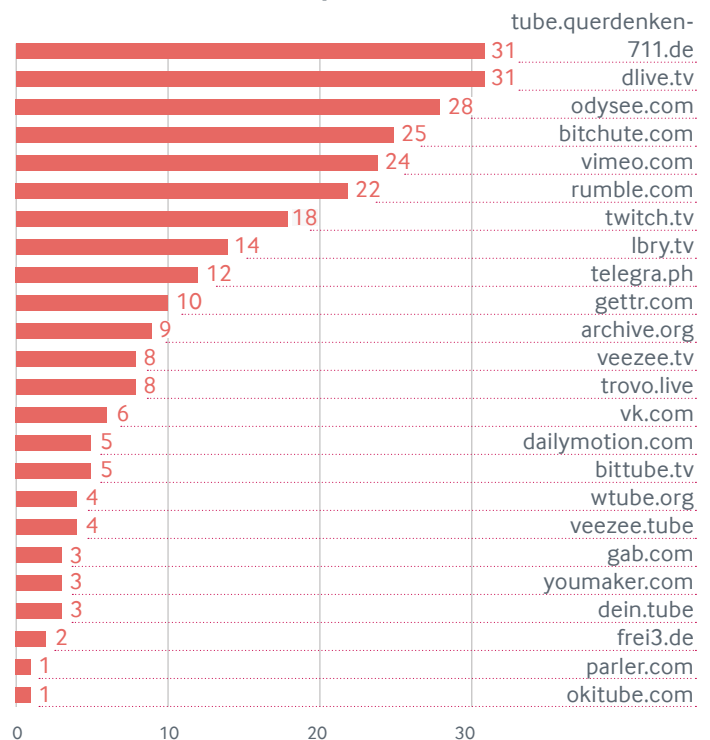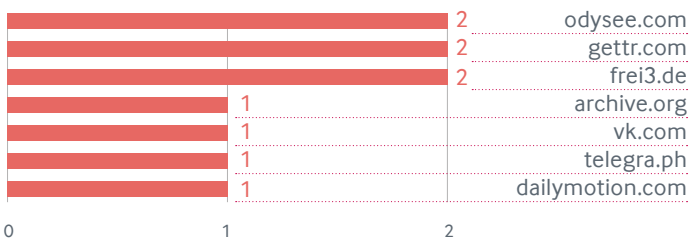| Domain	Links
tube.querdenken-711.de	1.775
dlive.tv	406
rumble.com	352
odysee.com	269
bitchute.com	255
vimeo.com	111
lbry.tv	72
twitch.tv	61
telegra.ph	46
vk.com	24
gettr.com	23
veezee.tv	22
trovo.live	20
archive.org	19
parler.com	18
wtube.org	16
dailymotion.com	10
veezee.tube	7
bittube.tv	7
gab.com	6
youmaker.com	4
dein.tube	3
frei3.de	2
okitube.com	1
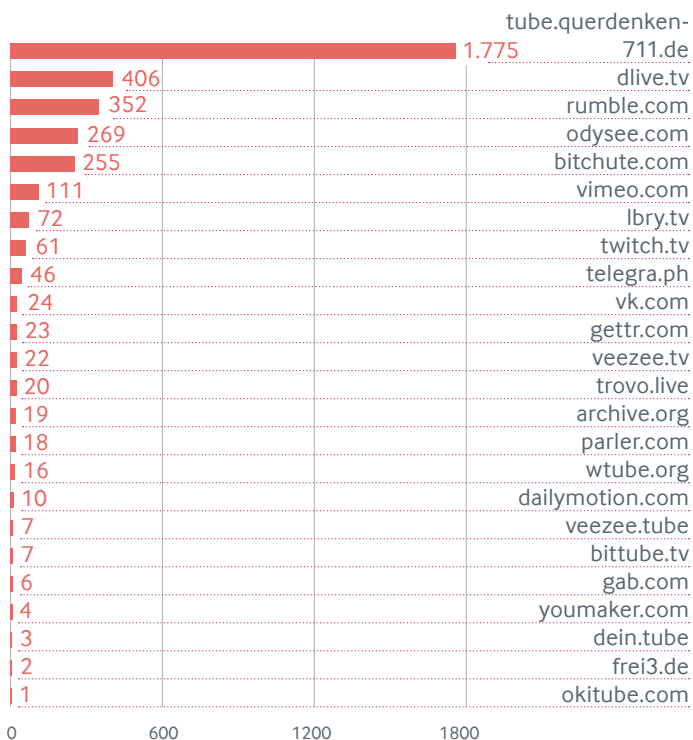
Number of anti-lockdown channels in which domains of an alternative platform were shared

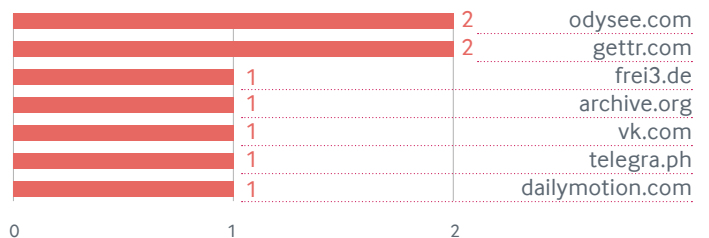| Domain	Channels
tube.querdenken-711.de	31
dlive.tv	31
odysee.com	28
bitchute.com	25
vimeo.com	24
rumble.com	22
twitch.tv	18
lbry.tv	14
telegra.ph	12
gettr.com	10
archive.org	9
veezee.tv	8
trovo.live	8
vk.com	6
dailymotion.com	5
bittube.tv	5
wtube.org	4
veezee.tube	4
gab.com	3
youmaker.com	3
dein.tube	3
frei3.de	2
parler.com	1
okitube.com	1

AfD (Alternative for Germany)

The AfD used Telegram to share content from other websites and used the platform as one of many means to reach its supporters. A large proportion of the posts from AfD channels in the dataset contained a link. Comparatively few links to alternative platforms were shared by the five observed AfD channels. This also has to do with the AfD's status as a political party: it has numerous channels available on the major platforms. No broader trends can be identified in the data collected, but it is noteworthy that two links were made to the platform Frei3, which was designed as a retreat for right-wing extremists. AfD channels linked more frequently to the major platforms, such as YouTube (169 links), than to alternative platforms.

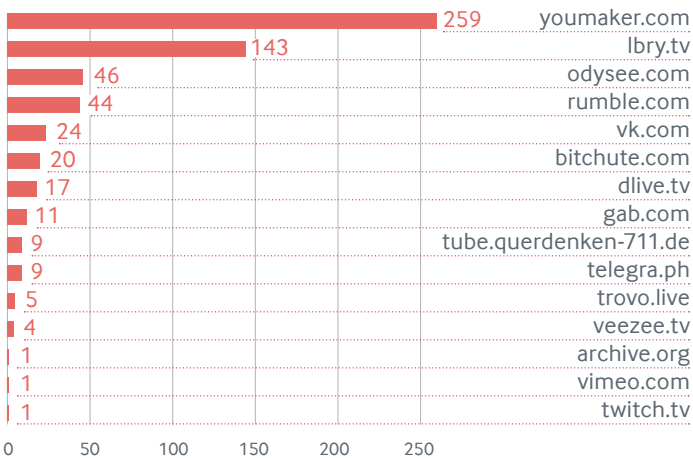**All links to domains of alternative platforms in AfD channels**

Domain	Count
odysee.com	2
gettr.com	2
frei3.de	2
archive.org	1
vk.com	1
telegra.ph	1
dailymotion.com	1

Number of AfD channels in which a domain of an alternative platform was shared

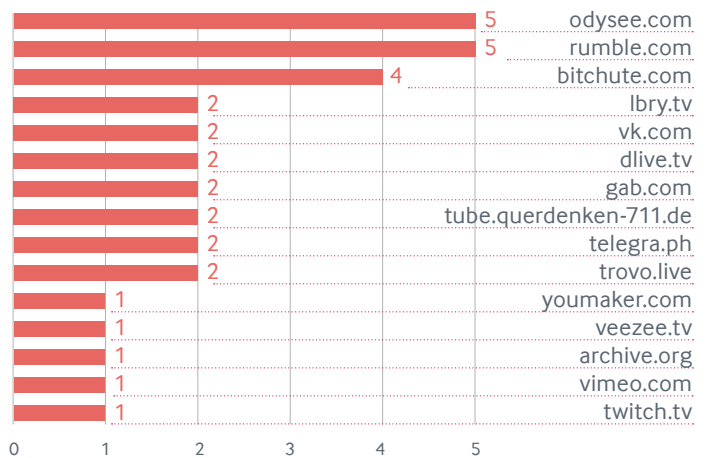| Domain	Count
odysee.com	2
gettr.com	2
frei3.de	1
archive.org	1
vk.com	1
telegra.ph	1
dailymotion.com	1

Media Outlets

Media outlets mainly used Telegram to link to other websites. A large proportion of the messages shared by channels in this category in the dataset contained links. These links were mainly to their own websites and their channels on various social media. Alternative platforms hardly played a role for media outlets. One possible explanation for this is that media outlets operate their own websites where they can distribute content. Moreover, they are more likely than other users to not have their channels removed on established platforms as long as they manage to present themselves as 'serious' media. Consequently, links to major platforms were also more frequent, primarily to YouTube (2,700 links).
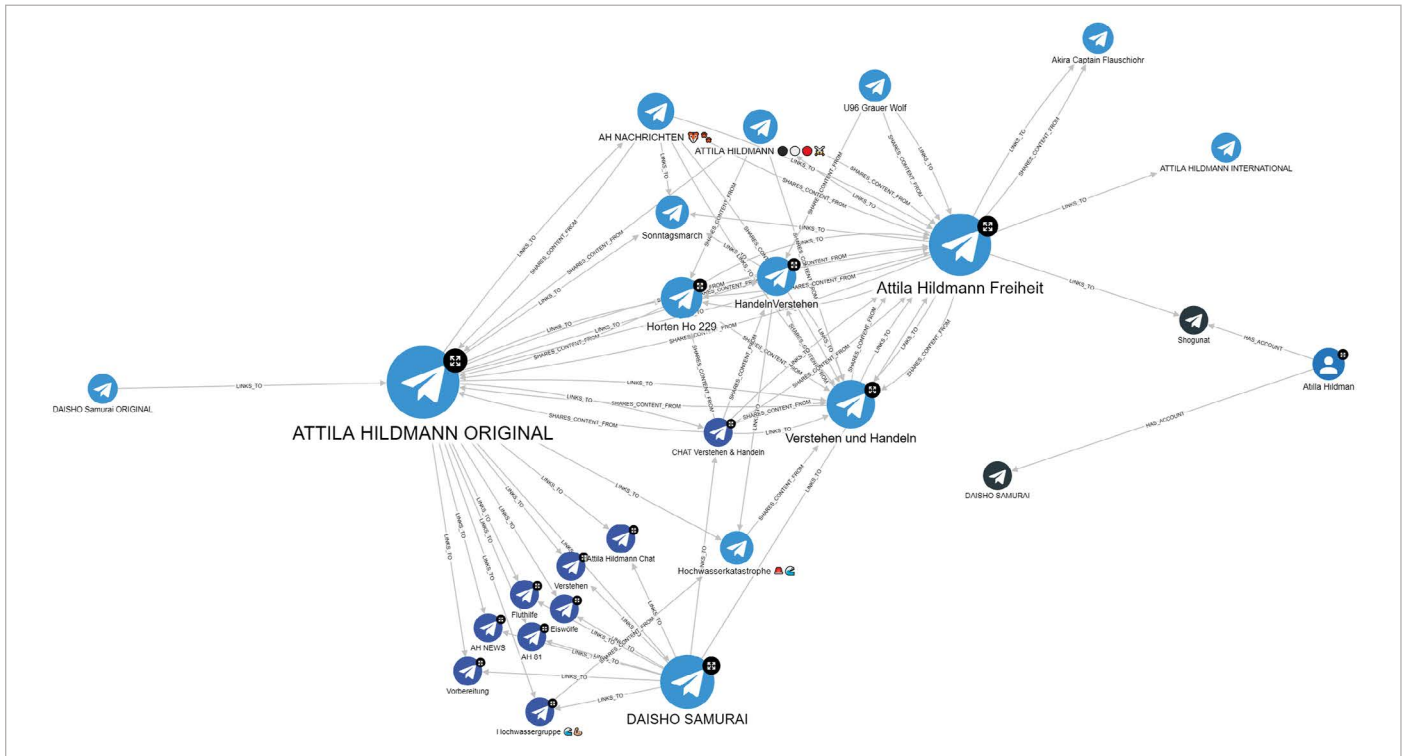
All links to domains of alternative platforms in channels of media outlets

Domain	Links
youmaker.com	259
lbry.tv	143
odysee.com	46
rumble.com	44
vk.com	24
bitchute.com	20
dlive.tv	17
gab.com	11
tube.querdenken-711.de	9
telegra.ph	9
trovo.live	5
veezee.tv	4
archive.org	1
vimeo.com	1
twitch.tv	1

Number of channels of media outlets in which a domain of an alternative platform was shared

Domain	Channels
odysee.com	5
rumble.com	5
bitchute.com	4
lbry.tv	2
vk.com	2
dlive.tv	2
gab.com	2
tube.querdenken-711.de	2
telegra.ph	2
trovo.live	2
youmaker.com	1
veezee.tv	1
archive.org	1
vimeo.com	1
twitch.tv	1

The Telegram Infrastructure of Attila Hildmann

Figure 13
Visual Representation of identified channels and groups owned by Attila Hildmann, actively linked to by Hildmann's channels, or actively sharing Hildmann's content. This graph shows the active network from 1 September 2021 to 15 October 2021 and does not include channels that were under the control of the hacker group Anonymous on 15 October 2021. This graph was prepared using Hume Neo4J.

The following case study examines Attila Hildmann's Telegram network. This is an example of how right-wing extremists infiltrate conspiracy ideological and anti-democratic movements on Telegram. In addition to explicitly right-wing extremist and antisemitic channels Hildmann was also behind channels against public health measures, channels discussing the floods of the summer of 2021, and anti-vaccination channels. His connection to them was not openly revealed. **This case study shows how right-wing extremists influence ideologically heterogeneous movements. It illustrates the dangerous development that people who initially came into contact with conspiracy narratives about the pandemic were eventually targeted with extremist content.** Subscribers to such channels could become ideologically radicalised or at least excuse such extremist content if, in individual cases, they have similar political goals to those of right-wing extremists, namely the suspension of public health measures.

Attila Hildmann, who is the subject of several criminal investigations, is one of the most well-known right-wing extremists in Germany. He has spread conspiracy theories and far-right content mainly via social media, which caused several platforms to either limit his activity or block him.

His largest Telegram channel is no longer accessible via Telegram apps downloaded from the Google Playstore or Apple Store. This has had an impact on the channel's number of followers, which has dropped from over 120,000 in February 2021 to just under 57,000 in October 2021 (see Figure 14).[111] To avoid these limitations, Attila Hildmann has created new accounts on different platforms, which are moderated either by him or his fans. These accounts have developed into a complex network, especially on Telegram. According to the hacker group Anonymous, Hildmann has been working on this with an assistant.[112]

Development of the number of subscribers to Hildmann's main channel
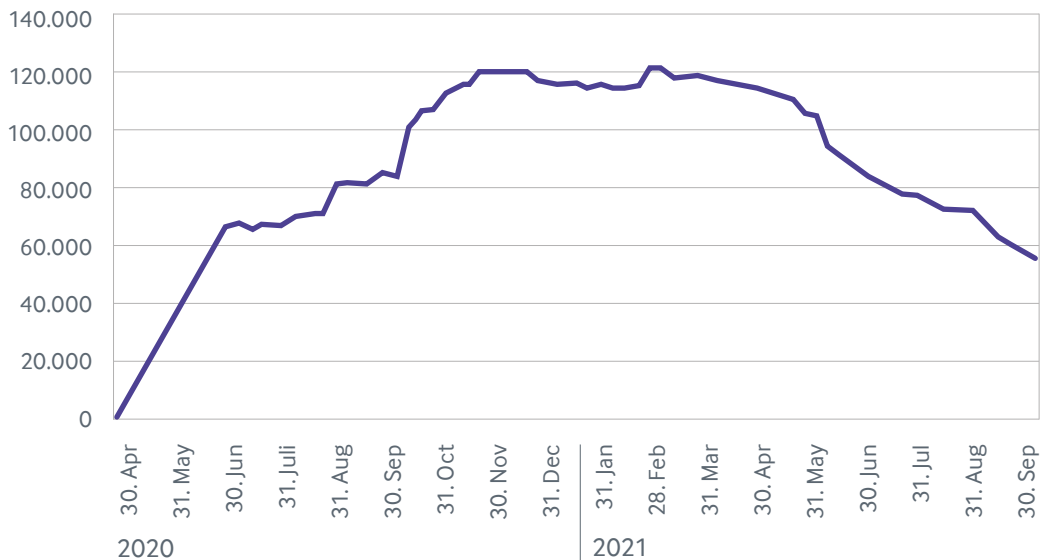
Figure 14
Number of subscribers to Attila Hildmann's former main channel. Note: Data from 30 April 2020 to 28 June 2020 was not available at the time of analysis. Source: tgstat.com

Anonymous gained access to several channels and groups in August 2021 and either deleted them or used them to spread compromising information about Hildmann. The hacker group took control of a Hildmann channel on 13 September 2021, which led to changes in Hildmann's network. Hildmann created a new main channel immediately after the takeover, but his network of channels was reduced in size.

ISD examined the developments in Hildmann's network in more detail from 1 September 2021 to 15 October 2021. Among other things, ISD analysed the channels that functioned as main channels, the channels used to forward messages and the channels followers were referred to. A total of nine group chats and 14 channels were found that were either managed by Hildmann or actively disseminated his content. These groups and channels were either shared by Hildmann himself, synchronously forwarded his messages or were mentioned on AnonLeaks, the website that collected the material leaked by Anonymous. Hildmann's network also included the 32 groups or channels over which Anonymous had taken control, and which had previously forwarded Hildmann's messages. Hildmann regained control of some of the channels that were temporarily taken over

by Anonymous, including the former main channel. ISD observed two central channels where content was produced. One of the channels served as the main channel before the Anonymous hack on 13 September 2021. However, a newly established channel had become the main channel in the aftermath of the Anonymous hack, even though the original channel had not been under the control of Anonymous.

Hildmann also opened a new Telegram account that probably owned the new channel. An indication of this was that several channels from Hildmann's network referred to this account. The channel quickly gained new followers: a total of 20,000 in four weeks.

A qualitative analysis of Hildmann's channels showed that content from two channels, whose names did not refer to Hildmann, were also forwarded and often shared on his new main channel. On the first channel, Hildmann stated in a voice message that he had posted new content there, implying that he was one of the admins managing the channel at the time. On the other channel, which Hildmann said was run by his fans, his messages were shared regularly and within minutes. Both channels spread different conspiracy narratives alongside Hildmann's messages.

Something similar could be seen on another one of Hildmann's channels prior to 13 September 2021. The channel was not under the control of Anonymous, however, Attila Hildmann created a new channel in its place. The old channel was then used to share content from the new main channel. Even before the Anonymous cyber-attack, some messages were published in different channels simultaneously by cross-posting bots.

The other channels were primarily used to increase the reach and to circumvent Telegram's restrictions. This means that these channels primarily forwarded messages from the current main channel and encouraged people to follow the main channel. Messages were rarely initiated by these channels. For example, two channels published a message that listed channels and groups not controlled by Anonymous and called on people to follow them. Among these channels and groups are names that at first glance have nothing to do with Hildmann.

One innocuously named channel contained forwarded messages from Hildmann, videos of various storms from around the world, conspiracy theories and messages from another channel in the network. There was also a group chat of the same name. Both were mainly used to spread Hildmann's worldview and gain new followers.

On 12 October 2021, Hildmann regained access to his channel, which had 65,816 followers on 12 August 2021. All messages posted there by Anonymous members or their allies between 13 September 2021 and 12 October 2021 were now no longer accessible. The trend regarding the number of followers changed only briefly after the takeover. The number of subscribers increased again slightly after a few months, namely by 600. After that, the channel continued to lose its followers with about 700 to 800 less subscribers each week. Despite the larger number of followers of this channel, another main channel remains active. Hildmann's initial channel was only used to redirect its followers.
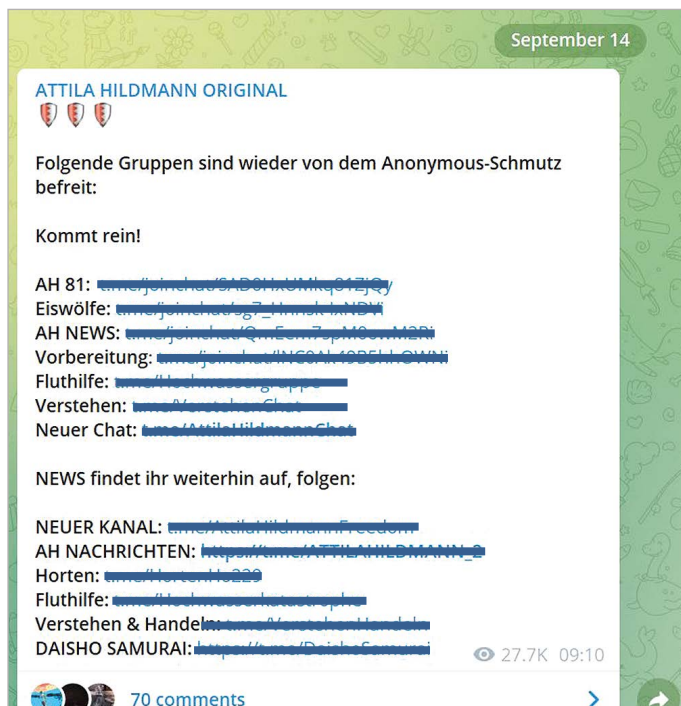
Hildmann had been trying to move to new platforms like Gab, which he promoted to his followers on 2 October 2021. As of November 2021, the move to Gab did not appear to have been successful. Hildmann had only 55 followers on the alternative platform as of 9 November 2021, a fraction of his Telegram audience. Activity on the Gab account was comparatively low. Only three messages were published, all on the day the account was created. It is therefore likely that much of Hildmann's activity will remain on Telegram in the medium term, where his reach is currently highest.

Conclusion

Telegram's history as a messenger service - whose founders were committed to enabling uncensored communication and protecting the privacy of users - attracts not only activists in authoritarian states, but also extremists who spread illegal content. The affordances offered by Telegram also contribute to the platform's popularity with right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists. It is used to distribute messages and links, as well as share files. In particular, links to video platforms are distributed via Telegram. Also, large platforms that are required to delete content in accordance with the NetzDG are linked to more frequently than smaller, alternative platforms in the dataset. Posting and linking behaviour on Telegram differs in accordance to the ideological orientation, but also the function of the respective Telegram channel.

As on other platforms, the activity of individual 'power users' was significant, as they posted and shared links with above-average frequency. One such 'power user' was prominent right-wing extremist Attila Hildmann, who built up a network of Telegram channels that he strategically used to increase the reach of his posts on the platform.

What sets Telegram apart from other alternative platforms was the use of the service as a file-sharing platform. To better explore this and understand the nature of its use, ISD and CASM Technology are currently working on integrating new metrics for Telegram. The aim is to determine the number of files stored and their formats, as well as that of embedded videos. In addition, Telegram offers the possibility to embed multiple links within the text of a message using hyperlinks. These types of links could not be considered for this report; however, they will be evaluated in future studies within this research project.

Annex: Methodology

This report employs the methodology used in the ISD research report »Escape Routes«. »Escape Routes« investigated the alternative platforms, advertising tools and financing platforms that are shared frequently on platforms that were obliged to remove illegal content according to the NetzDG. As with the first report in the project »Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures«, this research was based on a link analysis, whereby URLs were collected from Telegram channels.

Telegram only allows the collection of data in channels or groups in which the data collectors themselves are members. Therefore, as a first step, Telegram channels whose content was relevant for answering the research questions were identified through ethnographic research. In order to better compare the different categories of users, only channels were analysed, but not chat groups, as the latter tend to produce a much larger volume of messages. This seed list also contains channels and participants outside the right-wing extremist spectrum, but who align with right-wing extremists in specific ideological and activist areas. This happens mainly in political movements in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subdivision of the channels according to ideology

Channels were coded as 'extreme right-wing' if they corresponded to the definition used by ISD for this project, i.e. a form of nationalism characterised by its reference to racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy. A channel was classified as 'radical right-wing' if it shared certain characteristics of the extreme right-wing channels but did not act in an anti-democratic manner to the same extent. *Reichsbürger:innen* and other Sovereignists, are not automatically right-wing extremists. The Reichsbürger:innen, a German equivalent to the Souvereign Citizens movement, broadly believe that the Federal Republic of Germany is not a state but a corporation and that it is an illegitimate entity whose laws are not binding. Instead, depending on the specific tendency, Reichsbürger:innen believe that earlier states are still sovereign, or that members of the movement can declare themselves sovereign over a defined territory. The Reichsbürger:innen milieu is, for example, listed separately from right-wing extremists in the Office for the Protection of the Constitution's annual reports. However, Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists were included in this research because

members of this movement use right-wing extremist and nationalist narratives, as well as propagate revisionist and distorted views of history that feeds into right wing extremist narratives. There is, nonetheless, a certain ideological diversity within this movement and not all groups belonging to it can be described as right-wing extremists. Instead of the commonly used male form spelling »Reichsbürger«, this report refers to the members of the spectrum as »Reichsbürger:innen«, using a gender inclusive spelling.

The category 'conspiracy ideologues' includes actors whose main activity is the dissemination of conspiracy narratives. These usually revolve around the alleged sinister machinations of 'secret societies' as well as pseudo-scientific content. Supporters of the QAnon movement, which is gaining support in German-speaking countries, were included in the seed list as conspiracy ideologues. While conspiracy ideologues are not necessarily right-wing extremists, ideas from the extreme right-wing spectrum, such as conspiracy related antisemitism, ideologies from the field of far-right esotericism and ahistorical or revanchist depictions of the Second World War, can often be found in these channels. The declared aim of supporters of the QAnon movement is to promote a military takeover and to imprison or kill opponents they described as a cultural outgroup.

In addition, many conspiracy ideologues now find themselves in the same situation as right-wing extremists, as their content is repeatedly deleted from major platforms. This situation encourages an exchange between these camps, as well as the use of the same alternative platforms. Channels that focused almost exclusively on disinformation and mobilisation around the COVID-19 pandemic were coded as 'anti-lockdown'. This mainly includes channels of the *'Querdenken'* movement. Compared to conspiracy ideologues, anti-lockdown groups had a more limited scope of topics that were mainly aimed at COVID-19 measures. 'Media outlets' which, in particular, linked to their own websites were listed separately. Channels of the AfD were included because sub-organisations of the party are monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution[113] and some state associations are classified as right-wing extremist suspects by the state offices for the protection of the constitution of the federal states.[114] Channels can only belong to one category and were classified according to their basic purpose.

User category	Number of channels
Right-wing extremist	81
Right-wing radical	17
Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists	3
Conspiracy theorists	53
AfD	5
Lockdown opponents	53
Media outlets	26

User category	Number of channels
Right-wing extremist	89.984
Right-wing radical	33.521
Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists	31.623
Conspiracy theorists	388.982
AfD	2.272
Lockdown opponents	54.897
Media outlets	57.831

User category	Number of channels
Right-wing extremist	47.509
Right-wing radical	26.585
Reichsbürger:innen and Sovereignists	22.501
Conspiracy theorists	187.708
AfD	1.637
Lockdown opponents	39.236
Media outlets	46.812

After one person had collected and coded the channels, two people independently examined the entities and classified them into one of the seven categories. The research team then compared the results and discussed various coding in order to standardise the categorisation of the channels. At this point, five of the 243 original channels were no longer accessible and were removed from the seed list.

Data collection and evaluation

Members of ISD joined the selected channels using a Telegram account. The messages from these channels were then collected via Telegram's public application programming interface (API) and analysed in *Method52*. This software has been developed by CASM Technology together with ISD.

For this report, the period between 1 January 2021 and 12 September 2021 was considered. 12 September 2021 was chosen as the end date because on the following day some of the channels of Attila Hildmann, one of the best-known representatives of the far-right scene in Germany, were hijacked by the hacker collective Anonymous. To prevent content posted by the hackers from influencing the dataset, no data posted from 13 September 2021 onwards was analysed.
During the study period, the channels studied produced a total of 659,110 news items and 371,988 links.

The links led to a total of 8,252 domains, which were listed according to frequency.
Researchers manually reviewed the dataset and noted platforms that had been shared more than 15 times. In contrast to the Escape Routes report, no donation or podcast platforms were examined for this study due to the quantity of domains. Using the Tableau analysis software, ISD explored the available data on the selected domains. This includes the total number of links to the domains, the number of different links to a domain, the number of channels in which they were shared, the number of 'views' that posts with these domains received, as well as how the links were distributed during the period under consideration.

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