Escape Routes

How Germany's Network Enforcement Act is circumvented on established social media platforms through the posting of links to alternative platforms

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Glossar

Affordances: These are the specific technical capabilities offered to users by individual platforms.

Alt-right: This term is used to refer to the US-based right-wing extremist movement that is mostly organised online and engages in activism that has encouraged the development of 'alt-tech'. The alt-right shares a belief in the social decline of the West, a rejection of large swathes of the USA's political spectrum (including 'mainstream conservatism') and an enthusiasm for new technologies. Different parts of the movement include various forms of racism, sexism and antisemitism.

Alt-tech: The term 'alt-tech' refers to both the far-right tech movement and the platforms it creates.

Blockchain: Blockchain technology was developed initially for cryptocurrencies. It has a special data structure that is considered to be particularly secure thanks to its transparency and decentralisation (i.e. data is stored at many different locations and compared on a regular basis). Blockchain technology allows transactions and communication to take place anonymously, making it an attractive option for criminals and extremists.

Deplatforming: This means removing accounts or groups on social media channels, and in the process typically depriving them of their audience reach and sources of income. Deplatforming, along with concerns of accounts or websites being blocked or deleted, has led to the emergence of alternative social media platforms.

Dog whistling: The term 'dog whistling' refers to the use of coded language that is understood only by the members of a specific group. These include words, phrases and references that are not understood by uninitiated audiences.

Fleeting content: This is content that is only available live and is not stored for later access. It includes live streams, as well as videos and images that are shared via social media with pre-defined time limits.

Media outlet: For the purposes of this report, the term 'media outlets' is interpreted as accounts that mostly post links to their own channels and websites. The accounts like this identified in the report range from larger media channels to smaller blogs, including outlets of disinformation that often provide content in the form of news websites to make themselves look more reputable.

Alternative platforms: The term 'alternative platforms' is used to refer to platforms used by groups and individuals that — given the current legal environment — are no longer welcome or no longer feel welcome due to their political views on the large social media platforms.

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

Platform: For the purposes of this report, the term 'platform' is taken to mean websites or apps that can be used to communicate with other users. Social media or social networks, and messaging services, play a particularly important role in this connection.

Right-wing extremism: The working definition of right-wing extremism used by ISD is a form of nationalism characterised by racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy.

Right-wing radicalism: Right-wing radicals share the same the ideological points of reference as right-wing extremists, but do not reject democracy as a form of government to the same extent.

Introduction

Online agitation, hate speech and crime have been a central topic of political discussion in Germany for many years. Despite the introduction of the Network Enforcement Act in October 2017, debate has continued about the balance between preventing extremist agitation and guaranteeing freedom of expression. In addition, an ever-growing network of alternative platforms has emerged. These platforms promise a refuge for those whose content is too radical for a general audience or breaks the community standards of the larger platforms (and therefore would be removed in many cases by moderators). Although right-wing extremist content continues to be shared on websites and apps covered by Germany's Network Enforcement Act, other platforms offering a safe haven for hate speech, recruitment, networking and radicalisation have also developed in parallel and are becoming increasingly elusive. The transnational character of far-right movements has been further solidified by the development of new technology, the promotion of alternative platforms and the spread of anti-Big Tech narratives.

Both the US-based alt-right movement[1] and right-wing extremists in Germany perceive themselves as being censored and persecuted by the owners of social media platforms and the government. This is prompting more and more right-wing radicals and right-wing extremists to migrate to alternative platforms, while they also attempt to retain a presence on established social media channels. The protests that took place in 2020 against the German Government's response to COVID-19 have created additional momentum for this trend. In particular, the messenger service Telegram has increasingly become the go-to app for far-right actors in the aftermath of these protests. This is a worrying development. On Telegram these actors can communicate outside the confines of mainstream debates and transparent structures; anti-democracy activists are 'among friends' and can plan operations, network within Germany and internationally, and spread propaganda without being disturbed or facing opposition.

It was for this reason that ISD is investigating the right-wing extremist milieu on alternative online platforms as part of the Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures project, funded by Germany's Federal Ministry of Justice. There has been no systematic, long-term investigation of this milieu on alternative platforms and the relationship between these platforms and established social media channels. This project is designed to close this research gap. This is the first report published within the framework of the project, investigating the posting behaviour of central protagonists on established social media channels and how they share links to alternative platforms. ISD researchers began by analysing some of the platforms covered by Germany's Network Enforcement Act (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). The aim was to identify the alternative platforms that appeared in the links shared within the far-right online milieu and gain insights into which are the more popular platforms.

The report will first outline the key findings and then explain the methodology used for this research. The results of the link analysis will then be discussed with reference to alternative platforms, messenger services, social networks, video streaming platforms and video hosting platforms. The study will also cover links to podcast hosting platforms, marketing tools and online shops, as well as payment services and donation platforms. Finally, the study will compare the posting and linking behaviour of various groups and propose a typology of different posting types, followed by a conclusion and an outlook to the future.

Executive Summary

This study focused on the connections between established and alternative platforms. Increasing regulation of the online space and changes to the Terms of Service of larger, established platforms have resulted in them removing more illegal and extremist content. This has led to actors who post extremist content to move to alternative platforms. In doing, they have shared links with their followers on established platforms to extremist profiles and channels on alternative platforms. This is a problematic dynamic. It means that anti-democracy activists are shifting their discourse to online spaces that lack public debate and transparent structures that can foster counter-speech. On alternative platforms, extremists are able to plan operations, network and spread propaganda without interruption or objection.

The aim of this report was to identify the relevant alternative platforms and determine the extent to which far-right content is shared on and off established social media channels. To this end, a link analysis was carried out on four established platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). ISD investigated all links shared by a list of pre-selected actors to determine the use of forwarding tactics via links in their content. The research in this report produced the following central findings:

- **Right-wing extremists and right-wing radicals continue to have a presence and share content on the established social media platforms.** Some of these actors use the established platforms as 'points of entry' by posting links to alternative platforms, thereby directing other users into a less regulated online landscape. To avoid bans or deplatforming, these protagonists adapt the content they post to the relevant platform. For example, they publish 'softer' content often containing dog whistles on the established media platforms, while they communicate more directly on the alternative platforms.

- **The dataset analysed by ISD contained a total of 28 links to relevant platforms.** These included not only social networks, online shops, payment services and donation platforms but also audiovisual platforms, which host content that poses new challenges for regulators and researchers.

- **Right-wing extremists, right-wing radicals and partisans all link to different platform types.** Within the dataset used for this report, users categorised as right-wing extremists were more likely to link to the platforms Twitch and BitChute than right-wing radicals and accounts associated with political parties. Certain audiovisual platforms also had a correspondingly high proportion of right-wing extremist content.

- **Broadly speaking, the investigated links were often shared for self-marketing purposes by media outlets and political movements, but also by individuals.** In some cases, these self-marketing efforts were carried out on a cross-platform basis, encompassing both alternative and established platforms.

- **Very active users can be divided into three groups: 'strategists'** who deliberately link to many different platforms as a way of gaining popularity across all platforms and building up a broad follower base; 'loyalists' who link primarily to specific platforms; and 'DIYers' who link to the platforms with which they have a direct relationship.

- **As things stand, none of the alternative platforms have clearly established themselves as frontrunners.** For the time being, the audiences of individual protagonists within far-right online subcultures remain small. This poses a unique challenge in terms of content regulation as smaller platforms are not bound by Germany's Network Enforcement Act and do not need to follow the content moderation rules specified in this law. This leads to the emergence of decentralised audiences (like bubbles) typically grouped around individuals. These small groups are diverse in nature but could foster greater radicalisation and pose fresh challenges for researchers.

- **The messenger service Telegram is an outlier within the dataset, accounting for a large portion of the links to alternative platforms that were analysed.** This platform is linked to more frequently than any other alternative platform within the dataset, resulting in the emergence of parallel channels of communication. Since Telegram has only recently fallen within the scope of Germany's Network Enforcement Act and operates an extremely light-touch moderation system, this has become a targeted strategy pursued by far-right actors,.2 Therefore, the next report will build on this analysis by systematically investigating all outbound links shared on Telegram, comparing them with the links shared on platforms that have been covered for longer by Germany's Network Enforcement Act.

- **Fleeting content may pose a challenge during the remainder of the project.** The problems involved in tracking such content make it difficult for platforms to moderate it effectively. During this analysis, we spotted early signs of users becoming aware of this loophole and exploiting it to share extremist content with impunity.

Methodology

Link analysis

Link analysis is used for various purposes in data-driven social sciences. For example, links posted by groups or individuals may provide information about their (online) networks and serve as basis for a network analysis, for example aimed at understanding political movements. Linking behaviour can also be subjected to a comparative analysis, for example to find out more about the relationship between linking behaviour and ideological tendencies. Alternatively, link analysis may be of an exploratory nature with the aim of identifying previously unknown websites or online spaces. This link analysis focuses on identifying the alternative platforms that are shared most frequently, i.e. the exploratory aspect of link analyses.

For the purpose of this link analysis, data was collected from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. These platforms were selected because they are classified by Germany's Network Enforcement Act as major social media platforms, as well as for being known arenas of right-wing extremist activities. In particular, the established platforms are an ideal venue for redirecting users to alternative platforms, since they have a large user base and thus a wide audience reach. These platforms have easily accessible

Application Programming Interfaces (API), simplifying the task of digital analysis. Although these established platforms fall within the scope of Germany's Network Enforcement Act, they facilitate the migration of right-wing extremists to them.

'Seed lists' (lists of actors whose posts served as a starting point for this investigation) were used to select relevant accounts. The lists were populated with actors investigated during previous ISD projects relating to the far-right online milieu in Germany. These initial lists were then adapted and expanded on the basis of the definition of far-right extremism used in this report, and actors were added or removed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria included within this definition. To ensure that radicalisation processes ranging up to right-wing extremism could be identified, accounts from the right-wing radical spectrum were also included in the seed lists. By observing individual groups and their posting and networking behaviour, the seed lists were coded and the accounts on the list were categorised as: 'right-wing extremist', 'right-wing radical', 'media outlet', 'AfD' (the political party Alternative for Germany [*Alternative für Deutschland*]), 'FPÖ' (the political party Freedom Party of Austria [*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*]), 'Reichsbürger' (member of the souverenist 'Reich Citizens' movement), 'conspiracy ideologues' or 'other'.

Table 1 Overview of categorised seed lists by platform and category

No of accounts/category	Instagram	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	All
Right-wing extremist	24	129	50	16	219
Right-wing radical	7	30	60	46	143
AfD	26	256	29	15	326
FPÖ	4	0	0	0	4
Media Outlet	9	25	14	3	51
Reichsbürger	0	14	0	0	14
Conspiracy Ideologues	20	5	1	8	34
Other	5	2	5	4	16
All	95	461	159	92	

Right-wing extremist accounts corresponded with our definition of right-wing extremism. Accounts were categorised as right-wing radical if they shared the same ideological points of reference as right-wing extremists, but did not reject democracy as a form of government to the same extent. Accounts were coded as media outlets if they mostly posted links to their own channels and websites; ranging from established media channels to smaller blogs, including outlets of disinformation that often provided content in the form of a news website to make themselves look more reputable.

The AfD was included in the dataset since its members include both right-wing radicals and right-wing extremists. Sub-organisations of the party are monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 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. Additionally, according to a court ruling from March 2022, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution is authorised to treat the federal party structure of the AfD as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation.[3] Accounts belonging to the Austrian party FPÖ were also included in the dataset and classified under the FPÖ category. There is consensus among social scientists that the FPÖ is situated at either the right-wing radical or right-wing extremist end of the political spectrum,[4] and it is anticipated that the posting behaviour of the accounts belonging to these parties will be influenced by their affiliation with the party. Accounts were included in the Reichsbürger category if they belonged to one of the various denominations of the sovereigntist Reichsbürger movement. Accounts were categorised as conspiracy ideologues if they spread conspiracy ideologies or narratives; they may simultaneously be right-wing radicals or right-wing extremists, but the key factor influencing their posting behaviour is assumed to be their position within a politically broad and ideologically diffuse space. Accounts are categorised as 'other' if they belonged to the far-right online milieu but could not yet be clearly assigned within this scene.

The dataset

Method52 was used to capture and process the content posted for analysis on social media. It is a software developed by CASM Technology and ISD for the collection, analysis and visualisation of discussions, news and other posts on social media channels, as well as on forums and websites. The links posted by the actors were subsequently filtered and investigated. All data used for this investigation was collected between 1 January 2021 and 13 May 2021. This corresponds with the start and end of the first project phase, running from January to June 2021.

Large volumes of posts were retrieved based on the seed lists. Since some of the accounts on the seed lists were banned during the study period, the number of accounts posting content during this period is not identical to the number of accounts on the seed lists. **A total of 253,814 posts shared by 29,050 accounts on four platforms were collected.** On Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, all posts shared by the accounts on the seed list that were active at the time of collection. On Instagram and Facebook, it was only possible to view public accounts and groups. In the case of YouTube, all comments on videos uploaded by seed list accounts were collected. The fact that these comments were published by a large number of different users meant that the total number of accounts from which posts were collected was vast. The accounts that commented below the videos of the seed list accounts did not necessarily fall into the categories investigated in the report. It is for example not automatically the case that someone who comments on a video uploaded by a right-wing extremist is also a right-wing extremist. However, some of the most shared links in the YouTube comments in the dataset were to alt-tech platforms, right-wing extremist and conspiracy ideological publications.

The analysis included an investigation into the links shared. During the study period, 98,272 links were shared within the dataset, almost half of which pointed to the users' own platforms or other established social networks. On Twitter, 125 users shared 35,636 links (in a total of 94,322 posts). On YouTube, 28,476 users shared 757 links (in a total of 81,414 posts). The number of links on YouTube was small because the links were posted as comments below YouTube videos, which appeared to be less popular than posting links on other social media channels. On Facebook, 394 users shared 68,834 links (in a total of 77,492 posts). On Instagram, 53 users shared 135 links (in a total of 584 posts), a possible reason for this number being so low is the difficulty of posting links on Instagram; users that have not reached a certain follower count can only share links by including them in their 'account biography'. The links collected from each platform correspond with all the links posted by the accounts investigated. The domains the links led to were also recorded. The numbers provided in Table 2 show the number of times links appeared in the dataset. Not all links appeared in their entirety, for example, some were abbreviated using link shorteners. This could theoretically result in individual links appearing multiple times within the dataset in different forms. By comparing domains, distortions to the results were limited as effectively as possible.

The investigation involved a qualitative analysis of the 500 most-shared domains, with particular focus on alternative social networks and news platforms. The differences between right-wing extremist, right-wing radical and posting behaviour by political party affiliates were also analysed. In addition, the online shops and payment services shared by the protagonists were investigated.

**Table 2** Overview table of the posts, links and users identified on each platform

Platform	Posts	Links	Users
Twitter	94,322	35,636	125
YouTube	81,414	757	28,476
Facebook	77,492	68,834	394
Instagram	584	135	53

Outcome of the link analysis

Overview

A link analysis was carried out for the purpose of analysing which alternative platforms appear in links posted by right-wing extremists and right-wing radicals, the networks that exist between the protagonists, and the websites and products they recommend. This investigation was based on an evaluation of the posts of these protagonists on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. A central outcome of the analysis was that around half of the links in the observed sample (49,390 out of a total of 98,272) led to established social media platforms, in most cases to pages on the same platform where they were posted. This can be partly attributed to the data structure of the established social media channels. However, it also indicates that established platforms continue to play an important role for right-wing extremists, functioning as a key pillar of their online strategy in terms of both mobilisation and propaganda (in the form of 'soft' content, dog whistles and seemingly moderate positions).

Figure 1 Links from established platforms to established platforms or other websites.
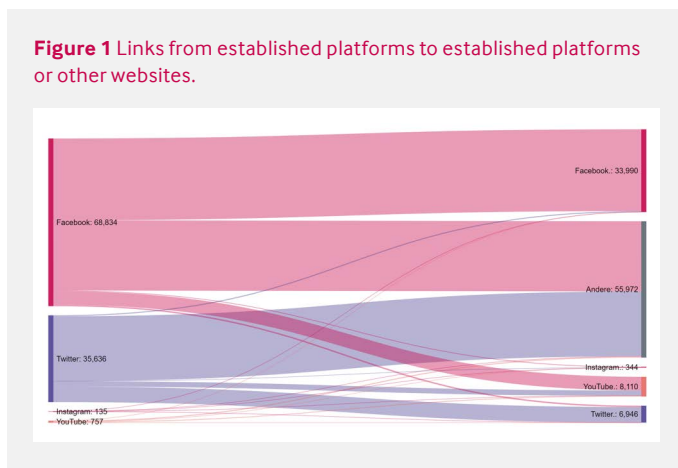
During the study period, 40,007 links to established social media platforms were posted on Facebook, of which 33,565 pointed to Facebook itself, 283 to Instagram, 569 to Twitter and 5,590 to YouTube. Links pointing to alternative platforms totalled 28,827 or 42% of all links posted on Facebook.

Meanwhile 58% of the links posted on Facebook pointed to established platforms.

For Twitter, 9,020 (25%) of the links in the dataset pointed to established social media platforms; 411 to Facebook, 57 to Instagram, 6,364 to Twitter itself and 2,188 to YouTube.

For YouTube, 350 (46%) of the links pointed to established social media platforms; 12 to Facebook, 3 to Instagram, 12 to Twitter and 323 to YouTube itself.

Instagram is somewhat of an outlier in this respect. The number of links posted on this platform was generally low and pointed to other platforms more frequently than to Instagram itself. In the dataset, 12 (8%) of the links pointed to established social media platforms, 2 to Facebook, 1 to Instagram itself, 1 to Twitter and 9 to YouTube.

During the link analysis, alternative platforms were identified and the frequency of which they were linked to was listed. The platforms in individual categories that proved to be particularly popular are outlined briefly below. The link analysis incorporated research into the differences in posting behaviour between accounts belonging to the protagonists in different categories, including the online shops and products that were shared particularly frequently within the dataset, and the podcasts (as well as the alternative platforms) that proved particularly popular. These investigations served assisted in forming conclusions not only about popular podcasts within the dataset, but also linking behaviour. An evaluation of the payment services and donation platforms linked to also revealed which accounts raised funds and for which causes, as well as the accounts that supported these fundraising campaigns. Individual users who were particularly active and who frequently advertised their own media content, shops or products were repeatedly observed in the various categories.

Alternative platforms

Within our dataset, links were shared to **28 different tools and alternative platforms, including sites which do not aim** at providing a safe haven for right-wing extremist content. Links were for example shared to Zoom, Vimeo and Clubhouse.

Four of the alternative platforms are already well-known and relatively widely used (Parler, Gab, Telegram and VK). Not all the platforms linked to in the dataset can be considered to fall within the alt-tech category. The domains appearing in the links included not only alternative platforms that have a clear ideological affinity with the far-right online milieu, but also websites without any clear political alignment. As a basic principle, the online services used by right-wing extremists can be divided into three categories: alt-tech platforms that welcome extremist users; platforms that are indifferent to such use (and that typically justify their indifference on the grounds of either commercial considerations or a broad definition of freedom of expression); and platforms that do not have the resources to take effective steps to reduce this kind of use, or necessarily know about it.

The websites shared within the dataset display different features and affordances. Along with sites that offer livestreaming services, there were also platforms that host podcasts, audio files and videos. It is noteworthy that of all the alternative platforms shared, over half hosted audiovisual content. In total, our dataset contained 10 alternative video hosting platforms, four video livestreaming platforms and four podcast hosting or audio hosting platforms.

Table 3 Overview of the linked alternative platforms

Platform	Category	No of posts
t.me (Telegram)	Messenger service	2951
VK.com	Social network	41
Parler.com	Social network	37
Gab.com	Social network	26
Joinclubhouse.com	Social network	13
DLive.tv	Viceo live streaming platform	242
Veezee.tv	Viceo live streaming platform	176
Trovo.live	Viceo live streaming platform	113
Twitch.tv	Viceo live streaming platform	10
3Speak.online	Video hosting platform	173
Bittube.tv	Video hosting platform	95
Odysee.com	Video hosting platform	95
Frei3.de	Video hosting platform	54
Bitchute.com	Video hosting platform	50
Youmaker.com	Video hosting platform	47
Rumble.com	Video hosting platform	31
Vimeo.com	Video hosting platform	28
Countervoice.tv	Video hosting platform	12
Lbry.tv	Video hosting platform	12
Zoom.us	Online video conferencing	34
Spreaker.com	Podcast hosting platform	43
Anchor.fm	Podcast hosting platform	30
Soundcloud.com	Podcast hosting platform/ Audio hosting platform	27
Podbean.com	Podcast hosting platform	26
Dlvr.it	Marketing tool	4356
Paper.li	Marketing tool	124
Mailchimp	Marketing tool	77
Creativecommons.org	Marketing tool	73

Alt-tech platforms based on blockchain technology were a special group within the dataset. This technology was developed for alternative currencies and is characterised by a special data structure regarded by some as particularly secure owing to its transparency and decentralised structure, which means that data is stored at many different locations and regularly compared.[5]

Our dataset contained links to a total of five blockchain-based video hosting or livestreaming platforms (DLive, 3Speak, BitTube, Odysee and LBRY). Blockchain-based social media platforms frequently advertise the fact that users can earn tokens for posting content; these tokens are awarded based on clicks and can typically be redeemed for money. A further feature is that users alone manage their own content. For example, the video hosting platform 3Speak not only states that content deletion is reserved exclusively for the owners of the relevant content, but that users can move their content to a different platform if they are unhappy with 3Speak.[6] Features of this kind put pressure on the operators of these platforms to moderate as lightly as possible to ensure that users do not migrate away from their platforms.

Once again, it is not always easy to pinpoint the ideological affiliation of platforms based on blockchain technology. Although the technology was originally developed as a means of offering censorship-free alternatives to people living under totalitarian or corrupt regimes,[7] blockchain-based platforms are particularly popular among extremists, primarily because of the lack of content moderation.[8]

There were four marketing tools used by users within our dataset that merit particular attention. Two of these services offer automated content publication on social media channels as a means of advertising and distributing content more efficiently. One of the tools (the website of the charitable foundation Creative Commons) was used

as a resource for openly licensed images, another was a software service used to create landing pages and email campaigns.

The online video conferencing tool Zoom was also used both for private meetings and public events.

The following section discusses the most-shared platform within each category.

Messenger-Dienst

Table 4 Number of posts containing links to the messenger service Telegram

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
1	t.me	Messenger service	2,951

Telegram
(Messenger service)
Telegram is a messenger service that offers end-to-end encryption and the option of distributing messages to up to 200,000 users via 'channels', ensuring a very broad reach. It is easy for users to find channels on related topics, thanks to the message forwarding feature. At the time of publication (of the original German version of this report), Telegram occupied a special position in the social media landscape. It was unclear initially whether the messenger service was covered by Germany's Network Enforcement Act despite its group- and channel functions, which go beyond those of a traditional messaging service. In 2021, the German government made Telegram comply with the NetzDG. However, the company has shown reluctance to cooperate, and content posted to the platform is still rarely regulated. Telegram's Terms of Service primarily prohibits the promotion of violence and illegal pornographic content on publicly viewable channels.

Telegram was founded in 2013 by brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov. The two Russian entrepreneurs had previously launched the VKontakte network (now known as VK) but left the company after it was taken over by individuals close to the Kremlin.[9] Telegram currently has around 500 million active users per month, making it

the 11th most popular social media platform worldwide. It was used by protesters in Hong Kong and Belarus to organise anti-government rallies.[11] Furthermore, Telegram gained around 25 million additional users in early 2021 following changes made by the messenger service WhatsApp to its Terms of Service.[12] This prompted many former WhatsApp users to switch to the messenger services Telegram and Signal out of concerns relating to data protection and privacy.

Telegram has repeatedly been criticised for its failure to moderate content and its willingness to tolerate illegal content. For example, the platform became the go-to communication channel for the terrorist group ISIS and has since become extremely popular among right-wing extremists in many countries wishing to spread propaganda and organise their activist campaigns. Telegram does not moderate violent content, making it especially favoured among a range of different pro-violence groups. A study by ISD in 2020 on 208 right-wing extremist Telegram channels publishing English-language content discovered that incitements to violence and the glorification of terrorism are easy to find on the platform. Of the channels investigated, 60% shared terrorist propaganda, and some made available instructions for carrying out attacks.[13]

In January 2021, the company removed at least 15 channels belonging to US-based right-wing extremists.[14] Telegram has appeared to be willing to take at least some action against right-wing extremists based in Germany, such as Attila Hildmann. For example, in June 2021, access to Hilmann's Telegram channels was restricted on Apple iPhones and certain devices running the Android operating system.[15]

Within our dataset, links to Telegram were shared in particular by pro-AfD channels and often pointed to channels belonging to AfD groups, party members or media outlets affiliated with the party. This might be an indication that AfD members are worried that

some of the content they have published on the established platforms might be removed, or that they prefer to chat amongst themselves in a non-public space. Telegram appears to function for them as a supposedly censorship-free alternative and an increasingly popular tool for organisation. Other protagonists also appear to regard Telegram as an important platform. Many link to their own content and channels on the platform, while others link to a wide range of different channels, for example as follow-up recommendations or references for shared content.

Social networks

Table 6 Number of posts with links to various social networks

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
2	VK.com	Social network	41
3	Parler.com	Social network	37
4	Gab.com	Social network	26
5	Joinclubhouse.com	Social network	13

VK
(Social network)
VK is a Russian social network that has been notorious for its lack of content moderation for many years.[16] Over the period analysed, we identified a total of 41 posts by 10 users on 3 platforms linking to the domain ('vk.com').

Most of the links pointing to VK were shared by the Facebook page of an Islamophobic organisation, and all these links led to the VK profile of the group itself, which hosted content that was similar or identical to that of the corresponding Facebook profile. The Twitter account of a German conspiracy ideologue and the YouTube account of a Swiss right-wing extremist each linked to the platform seven times. The conspiracy ideologue most frequently shared links to various videos on VK. While the Swiss right-wing extremist always linked to his own profile on VK where he mainly posted ads for his livestreams. The Facebook page of a small right-wing extremist party linked to its own VK profile five times, although the group posted more regularly on Facebook than on VK. A right-wing extremist YouTube channel, whose videos are no longer available, shared

seven different links to VK pages, including videos by various VK users and links to private profiles.

Live video streaming platforms

Table 8 Number of posts with links to various live video streaming platforms

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
6	Dlive.tv	Live video streaming platform	242
7	Veezee.tv	Live video streaming platform	176
8	Trovo.live	Live video streaming platform	113
9	Twitch.tv	Live video streaming platform	10

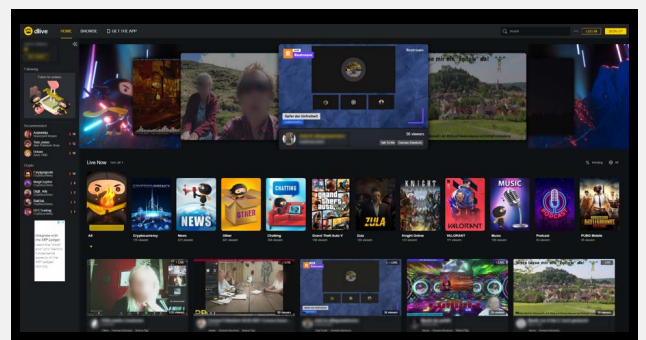*DLive*
(Live streaming platform)
The domain 'dlive.tv', which belongs to the live streaming platform DLive, appeared in total 242 times in our dataset. The website's structure and functionality are very similar to the mainstream platform Twitch. At the time of our analysis, most of the videos appearing on the homepage were live gaming streams, as well as videos about cryptocurrencies or conspiracy narratives.

DLive was founded in 2019 by a US-based company and uses blockchain technology for its servers and donation systems. The platform has operated on the TRON network since it was taken over by BitTorrent in 2019.[17] Since the end of 2019, right-wing extremists and conspiracy ideologues have increasingly made use of the platform to host their content after being banned from larger platforms. A former DLive employee told *Time* magazine that "they care more about having good numbers than weeding these people out". According to insiders, the platform is aware that a large proportion of its income comes from these users.[18]

DLive was one of the platforms used to host livestreams of the assault on the Capitol Building on 6 January 2021 in Washington. Afterwards, members of the House of Representatives asked DLive to explain how it moderated content on the platform and how it prevented extremists from collecting donations using its donation feature. DLive responded by saying that it had deleted 100 streams and removed or restricted 10 channels in connection with the assault on the US Congress.[19]

Viewers can support live-streamers by subscribing and donating; the platform allows them to keep the majority of this income. According to the aforementioned article by *Time* magazine, eight of the top 10 earners on DLive in 2020 were right-wing extremists or conspiracy ideologues.[20] Calculations by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a US-based civil rights group, suggest that DLive has paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars to right-wing extremist streamers.[21] A report by ISD and the Global Disinformation Index on the funding of right-wing extremist groups in the US identified a discrepancy between the platform's Terms of Service and their real-life enforcement. Researchers identified three racist groups that were active and collecting donations on DLive.[22]

Figure 2 Screenshot of the DLive homepage on 28 May 2021.

In total, 17 users shared links to DLive. The Twitter account of a prominent conspiracy ideologue published 104 posts linking to this domain, with a total of 92 pointing to his own profile on DLive, two to the profile of an Identitarian activist from Austria, two to a group livestreaming rallies against COVID-19 measures, and finally, two to the DLive homepage. A Swiss right-

wing extremist posted a total of 98 links to DLive on his Facebook page, 97 pointing to his own profile and another to his partner's profile. He also published the link to his DLive account seven times on his Twitter account. DLive was mentioned 10 times on the Facebook page of a xenophobic group, with all these links pointing to the DLive profile of the group.

Video hosting platforms

Our dataset contained a strikingly large number of links to platforms where videos can be uploaded, embedded or archived. Video platforms presented researchers with certain challenges since the content shared there can only be partially captured by text recognition software, instead image text recognition software and ethnographic research methods must be used.

Table 10 Number of posts linking to various video hosting platforms

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
10	3Speak.online	Video hosting platform	173
11	Bittube.tv	Video hosting platform	95
12	Odysee.com	Video hosting platform	95
13	Frei3.de	Video hosting platform	54
14	Bitchute.com	Video hosting platform	50
15	Youmaker.com	Video hosting platform	47
16	Rumble.com	Video hosting platform	31
17	Vimeo.com	Video hosting platform	28
18	Gegenstimme.tv	Video hosting platform	12
19	Lbry.tv	Video hosting platform	12

These platforms can be used to broadcast both short propaganda videos and longer panel discussions, and their interfaces are often similar to that of YouTube. Alternative platforms deliberately advertise the fact that they moderate more lightly than the established platforms. Links to alternative platforms of this kind can often result in users being led deeper into the ideological bubbles ('down the rabbit hole') that exist there, away from the scrutiny of the wider public.

3Speak
(Video hosting platform)
3Speak is a decentralised video hosting platform based on blockchain technology which claims to uphold the principle of freedom of expression. The platform also allegedly prevents censorship through its use of blockchain technology, since only the creators themselves can delete their own content. Users earn 'tokens' for using the website, which translate into privileges and a say in how the platform works. At the time of our analysis, the videos advertised on the platform's homepage were predominantly amateur music videos, while the videos in the top 10 leader board included several far-right actors and conspiracy ideologues.

The platform forms part of the Hive ecosystem based on the blockchain technology of the same name. The sidebar on the homepage offers several different features, such as 'trending content' which lists the latest uploads. These included several videos containing disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as music videos and discussions about cryptocurrencies. The platform also hosts a livestreaming feed, although nothing was being streamed at the time of our analysis. The 'community' section lists videos on similar topics, while a leader board displays the channels that currently have the highest number of points.[23] At the time of the analysis, the top 10 included extremist channels, including those of a right-wing extremist group from the US and a well-known right-wing extremist from the UK.

Figure 3 Screenshot of the 3Speak homepage on 28 May 2021.

During the study period, links to the associated domain '3speak.online' were posted 173 times, in each case by the Facebook account belonging to a media library of conspiracy ideology videos.

Podcast hosting platforms and podcasts

The dataset contained posts sharing podcasts and videos, therefore analysis included looking at the most shared podcast hosting platforms and podcasts. Since links to the hosting platforms often led to specific podcasts, both the specific media and the platforms used to host the media were examined.

One of the most popular podcasts in the dataset belonged to the AfD. Its domain was shared in a total of 403 posts, in particular via the party's Facebook pages. The second most frequently shared podcast (44 posts) was hosted by a conspiracy ideologue. It was shared within our dataset exclusively via their own Twitter account. A podcast by a national AfD group was advertised by a number of different party accounts and members, with a total of 17 accounts sharing links to it in 37 posts on two platforms. Podcasts by a right-wing extremist publishing house (13 posts by two accounts) and a New Right campaigning project (11 posts by one account) were also shared but much less frequently.

Table 11 Number of posts linking to various podcast hosting platforms

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
21	Spreaker.com	Podcast hosting platform	43
22	Anchor.fm	Podcast hosting platform	30
23	Soundcloud.com	Podcast hosting platform/ audio hosting platform	27
24	Podbean.com	Podcast hosting platform	26

Self-marketing tactics could be seen throughout the dataset. Many accounts advertised and shared their own products, including podcasts. The podcasts produced by the AfD and one of its national groups represent an exception to this rule, since they are advertised within the party's own ecosystem.

Spreaker
(Podcast hosting platform)
Our dataset contained 43 links by two users, all published on Twitter, to the domain 'spreaker.com', which is associated with the podcast hosting platform Spreaker. Most of the links (40) were posted by a Twitter account belonging to a media outlet popular among right-wing radicals. Three were posted by the Twitter account of a small neo-fascist party.

Marketing tools

In this report, the term 'marketing tools' describes services that support or simplify the marketing or distribution of content, including both software that distributes content on social media channels and websites that provide free media. These marketing tools may be used by different people for different purposes; they have no ideological affiliations and boast a broad user base. Their use by right-wing extremists for online activism is evidence of the strategic deployment of established platforms for content distribution.

Table 12 Number of posts linking to various social networks

#	Platform	Category	No of posts
25	Dlvr.it	Marketing tool	4356
26	Paper.li	Marketing tool	124
27	Mailchimp	Marketing tool	77
28	Creativecommons.org	Marketing tool	73

Dlvr.it
(Marketing tool)
'dlvr.it' is a service for the automated publication of content on social media channels. According to its website, it automatically recognises new content on pre-selected websites and then publishes this content on the user's other accounts as scheduled, making it possible to auto-post a large number of links.

The domain 'dlvr.it' appeared in 4,356 posts within the dataset and was used by a total of seven users on two platforms.

Domains shared within the dataset via this automated posting service were posted mostly by the Twitter account of a right-wing radical author. This account linked to the author's alternative news website on which blog posts focusing on topics, such as COVID-19, censorship and the US elections, were published up to January 2021 (no new content has appeared since then). The second most frequent sharer of 'dlvr.it' links was the Twitter account of an internationally active media company known for spreading disinformation. The five other accounts that shared links with the 'dlvr.it' domain did so only rarely.

Online shops

The 500 most-shared domains within our dataset included 13 online shops, with the online retailer Amazon accounting for most of the domains shared (74 posts by 8 different users on 2 platforms). The majority of the links were for the same spiritual self-help book and shared primarily by a single Facebook page from Austria that posts conspiracy narratives. In addition to the Amazon links to various books that appeared in posts shared across various platforms, the dataset also included multiple links to the podcast of a right-wing radical media activist, available on Amazon. The content produced by this individual, who shared links to his podcast via Twitter, can be categorised as conspiracy content. An ISD report, published in 2021, noted that Amazon's algorithm tends to recommend products of a similar kind to users who have viewed books written by conspiracy ideologues and extremists, which might result in them being channelled further into a vortex of disinformation and radical ideologies.[24]

The most-shared domains also included links to a German publishing house (31 posts by three users on two platforms), which published outdoor and survival articles, as well as esoterica, conspiracy ideologies and right-wing radical content. The domains of two New Right publishing houses were also shared (24 posts by one user on one platform and 21 posts by four users on another platform). An online retailer distributing magazines created by the neo-Nazi community appeared in 14 posts by four users on two platforms, and the retail wing of a publishing house operated by a small right-wing extremist party appeared in 11 posts by four users on two platforms.

Online retail is often a profitable source of income for actors who are well regarded and who have close links within the right-wing extremist scene. Profits earned on sales to and by members of the scene via online retailers do not merely enrich individual supporters, they are also used to fund political activities, concerts and other events. A notable feature of the linking of online shops was that the domains were shared by a small number of users who frequently shared links to specific pages on the websites of online retailers, often advertising their own products (as was the case for a prominent conspiracy ideologue who shared links to his podcast episodes). Online shops run by members of the scene tended to play a lesser role within our dataset.

Another point worth emphasising is that online retail was dominated by book sales and publishing houses. Links to books and publishing houses that are popular in the far-right spectrum were shared via the established platforms. These also included neo-Nazi publications. This shows that the established platforms continue to function as a safe haven for right-wing extremist propaganda, highlighting not only a gap in the general Terms and Conditions of business on many of the platforms when it comes to fighting extremism and hate, but also a failure on their part to enforce the Terms and Conditions that do exist. Within our sample, links to a right-wing extremist online shop were shared on Twitter and on Facebook. This online shop also had accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

Payment services and donation platforms

Links to payment services and donation platforms were shared repeatedly within the dataset. It is a common practice for political figures to use their platforms for these purposes. It also reflects the trend of professionalisation, which was observed within the dataset. Fundraising is more than a merely financial endeavour, as donations to a political cause also increase the donor's commitment to the given cause. It is noteworthy that the two most shared platforms — PayPal and Patreon — both have clauses in their Terms and Conditions that prohibit fundraising for the promotion of hate speech or misinformation, but these clauses appear to be poorly enforced in our dataset.[25]

PayPal
(Payment service)
The dataset contained 658 posts linking to PayPal accounts, shared by a total of 77 users on three different platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Facebook ranked the highest in terms of number of shares.

The most-shared PayPal account, with 408 posts, belonged to a pro-AfD discussion platform. The account was shared most frequently by its own Facebook page (379 posts). Many posts were also shared by the Facebook pages of local AfD branches. The operators of this platform asked for PayPal donations to fund what they claimed to be truthful and censorship-free reporting. The posts in the dataset frequently contained links to video clips posted on their own media portals promoting right-wing radical content and conspiracy narratives, including in relation to responses to the pandemic or the work of law enforcement and politicians.

A PayPal account belonging to a media portal promoting conspiracy narratives and pseudo-science was the second most shared account, with 173 posts appealing for PayPal donations to finance its own videos. Within our dataset, this media portal shared the PayPal account exclusively via its own Facebook page. The posts contained links to the media portal's YouTube channel, which broadcasts conspiracy narratives in a variety of formats. The video topics included: the media, COVID-19 pandemic responses, esoterica and philosophy, geopolitics, Bill Gates' alleged control over our digital identities, the 'Great Reset'[26] and 'global elites'.

Overall, the most shared payment service during the study period was PayPal, specifically the PayPal accounts of alternative news sites or bloggers attempting to finance their content through donations. The content produced by these media outlets covered a broad spectrum, from conspiracy narratives to right-wing radical material. It was frequently shared by pro-AfD accounts.

Patreon
(Donation platform)
Our dataset contained a total of 16 posts with links to the donation platform Patreon, by six users on two platforms.

Patreon allows users to make monthly contributions to support content creators. Different contribution amounts are set by the creators themselves. The service is often used by YouTubers, podcasters, artists and other freelancers. Patreon has already banned several creators from the platform in response to their statements or actions. It recently announced that in the future it would no longer support accounts that promote QAnon-related content.[27]

The most links to Patreon were posted by an Austria-based Facebook page that publishes conspiracy ideological content, followed by the Twitter account for a right-wing extremist vlog.

User behaviour

Comparison of user groups
Based on our observations, the user behaviour of the protagonists categorised as right-wing radical, right-wing extremist or partisan (AfD and FPÖ) differed according to their ideological orientation. Although these actors may prefer different platforms based on their personal tastes, differences in user behaviour suggest that it might be useful to continue analysis during the remainder of the project, assessing the trends between users in different categories and broadening the dataset.

Comparison between right-wing extremists and right-wing radicals
Right-wing radical users tended to link to Parler, Trovo, BitTube, Odysee and Rumble domains, as well as to all of the podcast hosting platforms observed. By contrast, right-wing extremist users linked more frequently to Twitch and BitChute. The two groups hardly differed at all in their use of some platforms like Telegram, Gab, Veezee, VK and DLive. The frequent sharing of links to certain domains can be partially attributed to a small number of 'power users' who were particularly likely to share certain platforms.

Difference between AfD and right-wing radicals/right-wing extremists
Further differences became apparent upon comparing the user behaviour of AfD channels with that of channels categorised as right-wing radical or right-wing extremist. Compared to the AfD channels, right-wing radical and right-wing extremist users linked more frequently to alternative social networks like Parler, Gab and VK, and to streaming and video platforms (including Veezee, DLive, Trovo, Odysee, Frei₃, Rumble, Vimeo and Gegenstimme). Right-wing radical and right-wing extremist users also shared podcast hosting platforms more frequently, whereas AfD channels shared links to the messenger service Telegram particularly often.

Table 16 Comparison between the user behaviour of right-wing extremist and right-wing radical accounts

Domain (#posts)	Right-wing extremist (#users)	Right-wing radical (#users)
t.me (Telegram)	266 (35)	274 (40)
DLive.tv	111 (4)	119 (6)
Veezee.tv	81 (1)	91 (2)
Frei3.com	22 (3)	30 (4)
VK.com	18 (4)	16 (3)
Bitchute.com	17 (5)	10 (2)
Vimeo.com	10 (3)	6 (2)
Gab.com	10 (2)	10 (3)
Twitch.tv	10 (1)	0 (0)
Odysee.com	6 (2)	76 (7)
Gegenstimme.tv	4 (4)	8 (3)
Anchor.fm	4 (4)	13 (6)
Spreaker.com	3 (1)	40 (1)
Lbry.tv	2 (2)	3 (1)
Joinclubhouse.com	1 (1)	11 (2)
Patreon.com	1 (1)	6 (3)
Soundcloud.com	1 (1)	9 (5)
Parler.com	0 (0)	32 (2)
Trovo.live	0 (0)	106 (1)
Bittube.tv	0 (0)	95 (1)
Rumble.com	0 (0)	19 (4)
Podbean.com	0 (0)	38 (1)

Table 17 Comparison between the user behaviour of AfD and right-wing radical/right-wing extremist accounts

Domain (#posts)	AfD (#users)	Right-wing radical/extremist (#users)
t.me	1999 (193)	540 (75)
Soundcloud.com	16 (6)	10 (6)
Bitchute.com	14 (4)	27 (7)
DLive.tv	11 (6)	230 (10)
Odysee.com	9 (6)	82 (9)
Vimeo.com	7 (7)	16 (5)
Anchor.fm	7 (5)	17 (10)
Trovo.live	6 (5)	106 (1)
Parler.com	5 (4)	32 (2)
Rumble.com	5 (3)	19 (4)
Veezee.tv	4 (3)	172 (3)
Frei3.com	2 (2)	52 (7)
VK.com	2 (1)	24 (7)
Podbean.com	1 (1)	38 (1)
Gab.com	1 (1)	20 (5)
Joinclubhouse.com	1 (1)	12 (3)
Patreon.com	1 (1)	7 (4)
Lbry.tv	1 (1)	5 (3)
Youmaker.com	1 (1)	0 (0)
Bittube.tv	0 (0)	95 (1)
Spreaker.com	0 (0)	42 (2)
Gegenstimme.tv	0 (0)	12 (7)
Twitch.tv	0 (0)	10 (0)

'Power users'
Many accounts belonging to blogs, alternative news sites or other media outlets shared links that mainly led to their own websites. For example, the Twitter account of a right-wing extremist media portal shared in total 3,272 links to its own website, while the Twitter account of a right-wing radical blogger shared 2,405 links to his own website. The primary goal of these protagonists appeared to be increasing the number of visitors to their own websites. Other actors took different approaches. Power users can be divided into three broad categories.

Strategists
Strategists deliberately link to specific platforms in order to build up a follower base there. One example of power users in this category is the account in our dataset that posted the most links. It belonged to a conspiracy ideologue who first rose to fame on YouTube. His videos contain criticism of the established parties and the Left's supposed 'thought policing' tactics, as well as conspiracy narrative content. At the time of our analysis, his YouTube channel had grown its subscriber count to 93,000, nearly doubling since April 2020 after gaining 40,000 new followers over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The amount of pandemic-related content posted to his YouTube channel decreased during the final few weeks of the study period. Around one fifth of the content published in May related to the German political party Bündnis90/Die Grünen, in particular their candidate for chancellorship (Annalena Baerbock).

The 10 most shared links in the dataset for the conspiracy ideologue's Twitter channel all pointed to his profiles on various websites or channels. It is notable that six of the 10 most shared domains belonged to alternative platforms. Three of these were livestreaming providers. This suggests a strategic decision to establish as broad a base as possible: firstly as a safeguard against deplatforming by mainstream platforms (by establishing a following on other platforms), and secondly having a presence on alternative platforms ultimately gains favour with the online far-right. Given that the conspiracy ideologue's website contained listings and links not only for his main channels on mainstream platforms, but also for a total of 11 channels on alternative platforms and networks, offers further evidence of this strategy.

A Swiss right-wing extremist was also attempting to diversify. The 10 most shared domains from his Facebook channel included five alternative platforms, with the livestreaming platforms DLive and Veezee shared particularly frequently. It can thus be assumed that he is following a similar strategy to the conspiracy ideologue discussed above by attempting to establish as broad a base as possible as a safeguard against any future bans.

This does not appear to be the only strategy he is pursuing. A majority of the links shared on his Facebook channel point to his YouTube channel (with 39,000 followers). At the time of our analysis – one day after the federal state elections in Saxony-Anhalt – a livestreamed video was being watched by over 400 viewers, but no saved videos were listed. When the channel was visited again, the live-streamed video about the elections in Saxony-Anhalt was also no longer available. The channel's exclusive focus on livestreaming might be a deliberate tactic to reduce potentially incriminating evidence to avoid being banned. It is therefore likely that YouTube's new livestreaming feature is being used strategically by those concerned about deplatforming.

Loyalists
A number of other protagonists follow a less diversified strategy. They too attempt to build up a follower base on alternative platforms, but their platform choices are much more selective.

For example, the links within our dataset pointing to the alternative video hosting platform BitTube were all shared on the Twitter account of a Reichsbürger podcast. The podcast also has a presence on BitTube, almost exclusively sharing conspiracy ideology content calling into question the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany. BitTube advertises itself as a safe haven for free speech and a censorship-free space. At the time of our analysis, most of the videos advertised on the homepage related to cryptocurrencies and video games, as well as right-wing extremist music and narratives.

BitTube is the only video hosting platform in the top 10 domains linked to within our dataset by the Reichsbürger podcast, which also shared links to the messenger service Telegram and the social network Parler. It would thus appear that this account has selected a single platform for each specific function, linking exclusively to these platforms.

A similar strategy was also pursued by a media portal operated by conspiracy ideologues. The majority of links posted were either to their own website and the associated YouTube channel (which has 245,000 subscribers) or to their own Facebook page, which at the time of our analysis had just over 40,000 followers.

The media portal presented itself as a major trailblazer for the alternative media scene. It published content in many different formats, covering a broad spectrum of topics from politics and history to esoterica, with an underlying current of conspiracy narratives. The formats included a talk show, whose host has long been a prominent member of the conspiracy ideology scene and who discusses social trends with invited guests. Anti-science and conspiracy narratives about secret power grabs have also been discussed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The host makes appearances on the Russian state-linked broadcaster RT and has presented another conspiracy narrative programme for the same organisation. The YouTube channel has 88,700 subscribers, and a news show produced by the same (pro-Kremlin) umbrella organisation has 60,500 subscribers. This show is presented by a German citizen living in Russia. Its name is a play on words of a well-known news magazine, which is accused by the showrunner of being pro-NATO propaganda. The presenter supports Russian interests, giving coverage to analysis published by a Russian think tank.

The media portal also features a vlog whose host presents a wide range of conspiracy narratives in lengthy videos. It has 46,000 subscribers on YouTube, where the host claims that he wants to give his viewers the complete picture regarding complex topics. The channel includes a combination of esoteric, pseudo-scientific, religious and cultural content, as well as conspiracy narratives.

During the study period, the links shared by the media portal's account pointed not only to the associated website and channels on mainstream platforms, but also to the blockchain-based video hosting platform 3Speak. As in the case of the Twitter channel belonging to the Reichsbürger podcast, it appeared that a choice had been made to link to a limited selection of alternative platforms, instead of establishing a broader base.

It is also worth pointing out that the account frequently published posts containing multiple different links. Identical boilerplate text was placed below almost all of the account's posts, functioning as a signature and containing links to a number of different platforms. Many AfD channels also followed this strategy.

DIYers
DIYers link to platforms connected to their own media channels. This can be seen in the content published on Facebook by a foreign news portal. This newspaper has attracted worldwide criticism for spreading disinformation and is classified as a right-wing populist mouthpiece in Germany, in particular because of its positive reporting on a xenophobic movement.

The majority of the links posted by this page point to the associated website and to established platforms (Facebook and YouTube). The video hosting platform Youmaker is the only alternative platform shared by this page on multiple occasions. According to media reports, there is a media partnership between the online newspaper and Youmaker. It is assumed that the controversial online newspaper is developing partnerships like this as a way of securing its continued existence in the event that its channels are banned from mainstream platforms. This partnership also explains why the German channel of this online portal has opted for Youmaker as an alternative. It seemingly assumes that content will not be deleted from this channel.

DIYers sometimes incorporate different platforms into their online strategy. For example, one of the analysed accounts posted brief summaries of its videos on YouTube along with links to the full versions on the alternative platform Frei[3]. It also raised funds via Patreon.

Links also appear to exist between certain protagonists within the Identitarian movement and the owner of the video hosting platform Frei. This crowdfunded platform was originally set up by a right-wing, populist YouTuber as a back-up for deleted YouTube videos. Many of the videos are embedded YouTube links, meaning that they will not be available on Frei₂ if they are deleted from YouTube. Frei has attracted a great deal of criticism within the right-wing scene for this approach, which differs from the promises made to its crowdfunding backers.[28] The platform only later enabled the hosting of videos.

At the time of our analysis, the Frei homepage displayed conspiracy narrative content, as well as a video featuring a convicted Holocaust denier. The majority of the videos had almost no views or comments. However, despite this low interaction rate, the platform was regularly linked to during the study period by an account belonging to a New Right movement, as well as by the Twitter account of a right-wing extremist vlog whose hosts are leading members of the Identitarian movement in Germany. This suggests that a close link exists between the founder of Frei and key players within the Identitarian movement. This supports a hypothesis that emerged from research on right-wing extremism in 2019.[29]

Conclusion

This empirical analysis looked at the links shared within the right-wing extremist and right-wing radical online milieu. It used a seed list as a starting point for researching the relevant accounts on the established social media platforms covered by Germany's Network Enforcement Act. Posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube were analysed. It was found that around half (49,390) of the shared links in the dataset were to platforms covered by Germany's Network Enforcement Act. The way established social media channels work also meant that most of the links within our dataset pointed to the same platform on which the link was originally posted, e.g. Facebook users typically shared links to other Facebook pages.

The messenger service Telegram accounted for a significant proportion of the links to alternative platforms within the dataset, with links shared more often to this platform than to any other alternative platform. This use of parallel communication channels is a strategy of right-wing extremists and right-wing radicals. Even though Telegram is covered by the Network Enforcement Act, content moderation is almost entirely absent on Telegram and enforcement appears to be rare.

Overall, the dataset contained links to a wide range of platforms, in particular audiovisual platforms. The content shared on these platforms cannot be fully captured using text recognition software and must instead be analysed using image recognition software or ethnographic methods. Technical processes for collecting data from a range of platforms must be developed and used in order to be able to effectively monitor or research this content.

The dataset revealed differences in posting behaviour by right-wing extremists, right-wing radicals and partisans, in particular with regards to links to alternative platforms.

Individual 'power users' were another notable feature of the dataset. They shared a particularly high number of links and often advertised their own content or media products, such as podcasts or alternative platforms. The links analysed were frequently posted for self-marketing purposes and led to media outlets or political parties, as well as to individual influencers. These very active users can be divided into three groups: 'strategists', who deliberately link to a range of different platforms on which they want to gain followers; 'loyalists', who link to one platform in particular; and 'DIYers', who link to platforms with which they have personal ties.

In relation to our dataset, it can be assumed that banning a small number of very active users would massively reduce the amount of right-wing extremist content that is shared. Companies like Amazon and PayPal should be held accountable for cutting off sources of funding for right-wing extremists and conspiracy narratives, to ensure they do not facilitate their financing and proliferation.

There is no single platform that appears to have gained universal acceptance so far, or at least in our dataset. This has several different implications. Firstly, the variety of platforms leads to decentralisation and therefore less reach. At the same time, this process of decentralisation results in the formation of small bubbles within which users may become radicalised further and where they are increasingly dependent on individual influencers. A platform landscape that is so broadly diversified is significantly more difficult to analyse. However, ISD will be able to draw on in-house expertise and the *Method52* software for more in-depth research in the future.

Outlook

Based on the above findings, future research by ISD will focus on platforms which are largely unregulated. For example, research will analyse posting and link sharing behaviour of platforms that are linked to on Telegram, in comparison with established platforms. Other priorities for the remainder of the project include observing and analysing changes in content moderation policies on individual platforms, for example Telegram's apparent ban of channels belonging to right-wing extremist Attila Hildmann on certain devices.[30]

In addition, CASM Technology and ISD Germany will jointly develop technical solutions that can be used for more in-depth analysis of audiovisual platforms in future research. Particular emphasis will be placed on fleeting content, with an aim of investigating whether the use of this functionality is in fact a strategic choice, as suggested by evidence uncovered during this analysis.

Platforms based on blockchain technology will also be investigated in greater depth during the remainder of the project, given that our analysis has already confirmed that they are particularly popular as alternative platforms. Their decentralised structure and associated lack of moderation (including of extremist content) is highly problematic given their increasing popularity, as well as the sparse research that has been carried out to date into the content shared on these platforms. During the remainder of this project, ISD will address this research gap and investigate in greater detail the challenges involved with content moderation.

The link between deplatforming and persecution narratives will also be examined, along with analysing corresponding user migrations in greater depth. In order to investigate in detail the relevance of the alternative platforms that have been identified, various other factors like the degree of extremism of the content and user numbers will be incorporated into an ethnographic analysis. The analysis will also focus more on newsletters and websites, which have so far received little attention. In terms of content, the focus of this project will be current events and their impact on discourses within the right-wing extremist online milieu.

Endnotes

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