



# In the blind spot – How right-wing extremists use alternative platforms for radicalisation

Conference report on the 2021 Annual  
Conference for the project »Counter-  
ing Radicalisation in Right-Wing Ex-  
tremist Online Subcultures«

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## Foreword

Since early 2021, ISD Germany has been conducting the research project »Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures«, commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Justice. For the purpose of this project, the activities of the right-wing extremist milieu on established and alternative online platforms are observed, with particular emphasis on strategies and contents of right-wing extremist actors, their networks, and the current and potential future effects regulations have on platforms. In response to »de-platforming«, and private enterprise or state regulation, right-wing extremists are leaving established social media for alternative platforms. Social media created specifically for this scene, as well as services that do not employ content moderation for ideological reasons, and smaller platforms that are overwhelmed with content moderation and are »commandeered« by right-wing extremists, serve as a catch basin for this milieu.

The extreme right-wing activities on these platforms, along with the coordinated use of alternative and established platforms are the research focus of ISDs project. The ideologically homogeneous, alternative platforms are the spaces where an anti-democratic spectrum coordinates its online and offline activities. There extremists share ideations of violence and disseminate conspiracy theories and the personal data of political opponents. The radicalisation of the Querdenken movement, and the plans to murder the Minister-President of Saxony<sup>1</sup> shared in a Telegram group and discovered in December 2021, underline the worrying currency of the research topic. The research results achieved with this project are regularly shared by the research team in the form of studies. For example, 2021 saw the publication of the studies »Fluchtwege«<sup>2</sup> and »Stützpfiler Telegram«<sup>3</sup>, the context report »Wegweiser«<sup>4</sup> and the annual summary report »Um- und Abwege«<sup>5</sup>.

However, the ISD not only shares the research results through publications and active press work. Annual conferences, where core insights are presented and discussed with representatives from the fields of science, civil society, policy, and platforms, are an integral part of the project.

**The first annual conference of the project was held on 25 and 26 November 2021 in Berlin. It was titled »In the blind spot – How right-wing extremists use alternative online platforms for radicalisation«.**

The interim results of the project were presented at the conference. Furthermore current results from university and civil society research on extremism were shared on panels. Keynotes such as »The future of digital right-wing extremism research« by ISD Senior Research Fellow Julia Ebner, or »Combating hate speech from a criminal justice perspective« by a state attorney for the Bavarian Central Office for Combating Extremism and Terrorism were held. The conference also offered an opportunity for networking and discussion outside of the panels. As a hybrid event, the conference also enabled online participation, including in the panel discussions.

The course of the conference and its topics is documented in this report.



## First day of the conference – 25 November 2021



The conference began with the welcome address by the Executive Director of ISD Germany, Huberta von Voss, and State Secretary Professor Dr Christian Kastrop from the Federal Ministry of Justice. Both addressed the great social and political relevance of the subject of the conference. Von Voss emphasised that it is critical that we do not think of the online and offline world as separate, and instead contextualise hate and violence online on the basis of its consequences and origins outside of the internet. The pandemic has acted as an »accelerant« of anti-democratic sentiments, and the dignity of persons who are subjected to hate and violence online must be protected while cycles of radicalisation are ended. Victims' safety is a responsibility of society as a whole, she said. Professor Dr Kastrop agreed with ISD Germany's Director by underlining the link between hate online and politically motivated crimes offline. Hate and conspiracy theories pose a risk to public discourse and democracy, said Kastrop. The State Secretary also emphasised the states need to remain capable of acting and the necessity to base political measures on scientific research, including in the context of an ever-changing internet.

»The eyes of our Jewish community in Germany and abroad are on the federal government, scientific research, the media - especially the public service broadcasters - and society. I am happy and grateful that the BMJV has paved the way for us to get ahead of radicalisation together, effectively, sustainably, and perhaps even credibly, and to take a stand against the normalisation of hate, violence, and the weakening of our values. [...] Hate is not an opinion. Hate is, in many cases, a violation of human dignity, a serious mental strain, and all too often a physical threat.«

**Huberta von Voss**

»The spread of digital hate and radicalisation online must be observed with concern. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this development. This is why combating hate and harassment in the virtual sphere is a special and urgent priority for me. I would like to thank the ISD wholeheartedly for its work in this area. Your project is an important step in the fight against right-wing extremism and hate crimes. Policymakers and society must actively learn about the communication strategies of right-wing extremists and the channels through which they are spread.«

**Professor Dr Christian Kastrop**

The potentials of data-based research were then underlined by **ISD Research Manager Dominik Hammer** and analyst **Richard Kuchta**. They presented core empirical insights from the ISD project reports. The researchers not only explained the migration of extremist content to alternative platforms as a result of increased content moderation, but also offered scientific contextualisation of ISD's research and an overview of the use of the Internet by right-wing extremists in the past as well as current trends.

### **Platform-specific research and networking beyond ideologies**

**Right-wing extremism expert Greta Jasser (Leuphana Universität and Universität Hildesheim)** opened the panel on platform-specific research by explaining the relationship between affordances and the formation of communities and movements on the platform Gab. Through her analysis, she found that right-wing extremists form communities on the alternative platform Gab due to the anonymisation and lack of moderation, in particular by presenting themselves as victims of de-platforming by established platforms like Facebook or Twitter. Jasser also shed light on Gab's offer for users to be labelled »donors« for the platform and on how this is another affordance that strengthens communities. However, the political scientist did not discover evidence of the formation of an independent movement on that platform.







Through her analysis of indicators of radicalisation dynamics on the platform Telegram, **Heidi Schulze (Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Medienforschung, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)** confirmed Greta Jasser's results by pointing to the correlation between de-platforming by established platforms and the increasing popularity and relevance of alternative platforms. The communications specialist presented findings from her work with Julian Hohner, Simon Greipl, and Dr Diana Rieger on the research project »MOTRA – Monitoringsystem und Transferplattform Radikalisierung« (Monitoring System and Transfer Platform on Radicalisation). In her presentation, Schulze determined increasing radicalisation of discourse within various Telegram channels used by the »Identitäre« (Identitarian) movement, QAnon, and »Querdenken« (A German anti-lockdown movement). She pointed out that this radicalisation can be observed most clearly within the Querdenken movement, and noted a growing prevalence of appeals for political participation as well as conspiracy theories, anti-elite attitudes, and support for violence.

**Maik Fielitz (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft »Gegen Hass im Netz«)** thematically followed Schulze, and presented a study that investigated the differences and commonalities between the Querdenken movement and the extreme right on Telegram. Fielitz and the co-authors of the analysis, Hendrik Bitzmann and Pablo

Jost, observed only very few direct links between the two groups in 2020. However, they did discover some indirect connections via intermediary channels and alternative media consumed by both spectra. In fact, the Querdenken movement exhibits a rather independent system of thought and action based on a strong internal identity, according to the researcher. However, Fielitz also emphasised that the extreme right has somewhat adapted its ideology to that of the Querdenken movement, and influencers from both milieus are more open to ideas by the respective other movement, thereby forming links.

Following, **Jakob Guhl (ISD)** discussed Salafist online communities as well as Gen Z Salafism and its »alt-rightification«. Guhl presented findings of ISD's studies on the use of established platforms like Instagram and Twitter, as well as Telegram, by a younger Salafist movement. The extremism expert not only discussed the rapid growth of a cross-platform Salafist movement online and its reach, but also analysed a subcultural and aesthetic convergence of this movement with the extreme right. Alt-right memes are redesigned to transport Salafist ideas and are used by smaller Salafist groups online. Like the extreme right, these groups spread misanthropy and anti-democratic sentiments through special memes, sometimes stating that their statements are intended as satire or humour. A humorous guise is thus used to downplay the groups' radical beliefs.



### The role of gaming communities and antifeminist subcultures with regard to extreme right-wing radicalisation

This panel was opened by **Simon Greipl** with an analysis of opportunities for radicalisation in gaming communities. The research Greipl presented was conducted in cooperation with Julian Hohner, Heidi Schulze, and Dr Diana Rieger. The authors work at the **Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Medienforschung of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München**, where they are conducting the research project »MOTRA – Monitoringsystem und Transferplattform Radikalisierung«. Greipl explained that gaming, or online communities for gaming, are not only able to address human needs for entertainment and social acknowledgment, but also make it possible to find likeminded people and cultivate relatively homogeneous groups. Coupled with anonymity and lacking or insufficient moderation, these conditions offer great potential for polarisation and radicalisation. Greipl underlined his findings with a study showing that the specific use of gaming platforms as a news source - in contradistinction to the normal use of these platforms and the consumption of video games themselves – fosters higher levels of conspiracism, authoritarianism, traditionalism, and various types of group-focused enmity (such as antisemitism). The mere use of gaming platforms is negatively associated with antisemitism and conspiracy-oriented mentalities, says Greipl. Normal use furthermore has no significant positive association with other extremist attitudes.

**Albrecht Hänig (modus | Zentrum für angewandte Deradikalisierungsforschung)** discussed the topic of radicalisation on online gaming platforms with regard to the challenges for primary and secondary prevention. Building his talk on the findings of a study conducted with Linda Schlegel (HFSK), he addressed the lack of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of prevention initiatives. Hänig then explained that platform- and

game-specific infrastructural and subcultural elements are diverse and morph quickly, which makes cohesive research on prevention work considerably more difficult. The political scientist also warned against stigmatising the gaming community, and emphasised the value of empirical research on gaming subcultures, platforms, and games themselves. Such investigations could aid in reducing this risk. For this, connecting and working with gamers themselves is essential, as are the systematic identification of at-risk gamers and support for a bottom-up opposition within the gaming community.

**Veronika Kracher (de:hate/Amadeu Antonio Stiftung)** focussed on the second topic of the panel in her presentation. She examined the significance of antifeminist subcultures in right-wing radicalisation. Kracher analysed the social-psychological background of antifeminism and misogyny and the role this background plays as a part of radicalisation. The sociologist addressed the historical association of antisemitism and antifeminism in extreme right-wing worldviews in which feminist emancipation is seen as a Jewish invention. This idea is part of the modern antisemitic conspiracy theory of a »Great Replacement«, which is viewed as a danger for white, patriarchal supremacy. According to this theory women's liberation (Emanzipation) would create strong women and weak men, with the latter no longer being able to withstand the »tide« of refugees, resulting in the extinction of the white European population. Kracher also mentioned the incel (»involuntary celibate«) online community, which feels rejected by women. Driven by the narrative that sex is the foundation for a good life, and something to which incels are entitled, this group demonises women for refusing them and considers violence against women a legitimate act of revenge. This view, that is common in the incel community, according to Kracher served as the motivation for various killing sprees, including the rampage in Plymouth, England in 2021.





**Ariane Wolf (Violence Prevention Network)** followed Kracher's presentation by discussing the anchoring of antifeminism in a fundamental traditionalism and in the rejection of modern gender roles. This, says Wolf, is a commonality between religious fundamentalist and extreme right-wing ideologies based on narratives of supremacy. The liberated woman and the member of the LGBTQIA+ community are representatives of the modern restructuring of families and of social upheaval. In the anti-modern narrative, these women and the members of the LGBTQIA+ community are considered to be a threat, which results in the legitimisation of antifeminist violence. Wolf emphasised that this violence cannot be understood as scattered, individual instances of misogyny, but must rather be treated in extremism research and prevention as an essential component of extremist ideologies and an element of radicalisation.

»Antifeminist ideologies serve as a sort of glue between extremist movements and also broader social strata, as they are widespread throughout society, and can be particularly appealing to authoritarian and conservative circles.«

**Ariane Wolf**

### Keynote: The future of digital right-wing extremism research

**Julia Ebner**, Senior Research Fellow at **ISD**, concluded the first day of the conference with a keynote speech on three current trends in right-wing extremism on alternative platforms. In the speech, she presented observations from her ethnographic research in recent years. Ebner witnessed the migration of extreme right-wing actors to alternative platforms and described the formation of an alternative, internationally connected ecosystem of extreme right-wing actors. The social scientist also described a gamification of extreme right-wing communication, which is geared toward recruiting younger target groups and spreading propaganda and hate campaigns through gaming and pop culture references. This gamification is also reflected in the strategic planning of Doxxing<sup>6</sup>, hacking or trolling campaigns with the use of gaming jargon. This has an impact on the third trend, the increasing frequency of gamified terror that imitates the aesthetics of and conduct in live-action roleplaying games or online games, so much so, that adherents to the right-wing scene online can no longer differentiate rampages, such as the Christchurch spree, from computer games. Ebner made the case for a continuing diversification and interdisciplinary configuration of right-wing extremism research in order to be able to respond to technological and cultural developments as well as the international networking of the extreme right-wing scene. She emphasised the importance of ethnographic research in order to be able to conduct quantitative digital analyses, as well as the necessity of regulation, prevention, and civil courage online.



## Second day of the conference – 26 November 2021

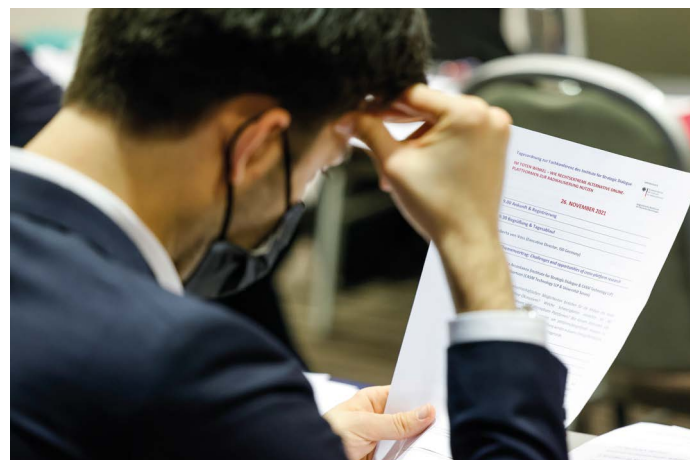
### Presentation on cross-platform research

The second day of the conference was devoted to methodology and regulation, and included perspectives from regulatory practice. The discussion was opened by an English presentation held by **Dr Francesca Arcostanzo (ISD/Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, CASM)** and **Dr Andrew Robertson (CASM)**. This keynote addressed the »challenges and opportunities of cross-platform research - from harmonising cross-platform data sets to integrating new platforms«. Dr Arcostanzo outlined the potential of this research. Cross-platform analyses are perfectly suited for examining how topics are discussed in various contexts and how, for example, extremist actors are connected with the broader online ecosystem. Cross-platform research approaches can also help to understand the dynamics of more broadly coordinated activities, such as disinformation campaigns. However, cross-platform approaches are not without their challenges. Different platforms grant access to their data to widely varying degrees and by various means. This has implications for the comparability of said data because, for example, sample sizes may vary considerably. This means that different social media services provide different types of data. This challenge can be solved by harmonising platform data and research methods. At the same time, such a process brings about further questions.

Individual platforms use different metrics. Furthermore, what these metrics represent also varies. For example, how individual »views« are counted and what they describe differs between platforms. In order to develop a better understanding of these metrics, it is useful to first determine comparison values within a platform in order to see which content is successful and how success is measured. One final challenge the political and data scientist identified in the cross-platform analysis concerned how individual platforms are used for communication. The various types and styles of communication entail that specific natural language processing programs created for one platform, or specifically for text analyses, are not automatically transferrable. The length of texts, platform-specific readability requirements for text in images, and other factors pose challenges to the

integration and harmonisation of platforms in research software.

Dr Robertson's presentation concerned the technical requirements that may arise during the integration of platforms for comparative analyses. Problems may for example occur if the platform does not possess a publicly accessible programming interface (API), if the API documentation is insufficient, or if there is no API documentation at all. Even with a public API available, the integration process could be quite difficult, especially if there is no client library available. Client libraries refer to codes that facilitate better access to the API. Further factors that complicate integration of new platforms include, in Dr Robertson's view, the access barriers and security restrictions of the platforms. Social media services that require the creation of an account are harder to integrate than those that allow anonymous posting without access restrictions. Furthermore, platforms that are centrally structured offer easier access than decentralised social media pages managed by multiple actors, as Dr Robertson emphasised drawing from the examples of YouTube (centralised) and PeerTube (decentralised) respectively. The integration of livestreaming platforms is a very complex process in general, as the computer scientist pointed out. He concluded his presentation by saying that the spread of audio-visual platforms is posing unprecedented methodological and technical challenges to social media research which previously relied heavily on text analysis.



### Theory, methodology, and research ethics

This theory and methodology focussed panel was opened by **Dr Lena Frischlich**, Director of the junior research group DemoRESILdigital (Democratic Resilience in Times of Online Propaganda, Fake News, Fear and Hate Speech) at the **University of Münster**. The psychologist presented the core findings of two studies created in cooperation with Tim Schatto-Eckrodt (University of Münster), Julia Völker, and the scientific network CoRE-NRW (Connecting Research on Extremism in North Rhine-Westphalia). According to Frischlich, the team conducted the first systematic analysis of the literature on »dark social media« and their opportunity structures for extremist groups and »dark participation« (e.g., incitement, conspiracy theories, extremist propaganda, disinformation). Two thirds of the existing literature on the topic addresses established platforms, although the interest in dark platforms is increasing greatly. However, studies that systematically compare the platforms or analyse the users are scarce. The second study by the research team addresses this research gap with a systematic, comparative analysis of various types of dark and established social media, Frischlich explained. The study confirmed the finding, that the platforms various opportunity structures create breeding grounds for dark participation. This process and its extent depend on the clientele, norms, and affordances of the specific platforms and their positioning in relation to the established platforms.

**Dr Annett Heft**, Director of the research group »Digitalisierung und transnationale Öffentlichkeit« (digitalisation and transnational public) at the **Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society - The German Internet Institute**, and **Kilian Bühling**, research assistant in the research group, addressed a meta-topic for research. In their talk, they examined theoretical concepts and methodological approaches for the measurement of the digital diffusion of conspiracy theory content, the potential of these concepts and approaches, and their challenges.

One of the challenges of automated content analyses and network analyses is that the dictionaries underlying the data collection are limited, especially when it comes to cross-thematic analyses. It is difficult to ensure comparability of topics and constructive validity when using automated, content-based approaches, especially in the context of a dynamically changing digital information ecosystem. In actor-focussed analyses, dynamic relationships between users and unclear authorship of content pose challenges as well. Researchers in this field generally face difficulties such as the restriction of accessible content to publicly digital communication, deletion of data, and matters concerning ethics and data protection.



**Jan Rau** from the **Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI)** presented one way to make it easier to overcome shared challenges in research. Rau advocated for strengthening open science principles in the field of digital right-wing extremism research. He argued that the many challenges in this field of research pose a greater risk of errors in the research. Increasing social awareness of digital (right-wing) extremism research means that there is great potential for severe ramifications, if research contains errors. Open science could, says Rau, create synergies between the various research projects and thus help to guide research efforts more efficiently. Open science could also facilitate better and faster assessment mechanisms, so that the scientific community can discover and resolve errors early. At the same time, however, the considerable ethical challenges of open science in this field must be addressed, for example questions regarding possible

security concerns, privacy and data protection, as well as the possible unintended dissemination of extremist ideologies. Open science, understood as (more) open methods, data, codes, and software, offers a great potential to benefit the research field, but must be coupled with high ethical and legal standards, and a structured and regulated exchange, access to decentralised data collections, as well as the establishment of trustworthy institutions as mediators of data exchange.

»Open science can help ensure quality in our research [...]. It is a necessary step, especially in the application of computational social science methods, for this transparency to exist.«

**Jan Rau**

### Policy measures and regulation

The panel was discussing questions of regulation from the perspective of practical experiences in the field. It started with a presentation by **Angelika Heyen** from the **Landesmedienanstalt Thüringen (The state media authority of Thuringia)**. She presented the results from a focus point analysis conducted by the state media authority on alternative media and influencers as multipliers of hate, disinformation, and conspiracy theories<sup>7</sup>. The cross-platform analysis examined more than 700 relevant websites, YouTube channels, and social media presences for adherence to the requirements of the Jugendmedienschutz-Staatsvertrags (Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Human Dignity and the Protection of Minors in Broadcasting and in Telemedia, JMStV). The analysis showed that the combination and the accumulation of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hateful comments on many networks

Are especially harmful to young people and their development. In around 35 per cent of cases, the state media authorities assessed content as justifying a reasonable suspicion of illegal or otherwise harmful content that threatens youth and its development. The percentage of such content varied considerably between different platforms: Especially on VK and Telegram, content justifying a reasonable suspicion could be found. The analysis also showed that many creators use all platforms to reach various target groups and to circumvent restrictions, prosecution, and de-platforming. As a result, problematic content is increasingly spread via less regulated platforms. However, there it also has a much lower reach. Along with high-reach YouTube channels and Facebook profiles, traditional websites play an important role as multipliers of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

**Reem Ahmed (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg)** addressed current developments in the legal framework in Germany and in the EU concerning extremist online content. Ahmed also discussed the EU Regulation on Addressing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online, which is set to come into effect in 2022, and the EU Digital Services Act, which is currently undergoing the legislative process. These laws will in the future include all online platforms and will use a »notice and takedown« approach to terrorist and illegal content online. The scientist also outlined the current NetzDG, which concerns illegal content on social media. Changes to the NetzDG in 2021 resulted in more rights for users, greater transparency, and better data access for researchers. Ahmed questioned the reasonableness of an expansion of the NetzDG to cover small platforms as well. For these providers who have fewer resources, she said, for smaller platforms it would be helpful to offer content moderation training and implement clearer standards and definitions. Such an approach would be more effective than overwhelming the platform administrators with mandatory moderation, the researcher explained.



**Alexander Ritzmann from the Counter Extremism Project (CEP)** determined that key actors of violence oriented right-wing extremism do not necessarily migrate to alternative platforms. In his presentation »Wo Wölfe Kreide fressen – Die rechtsextreme Infrastruktur auf Facebook, Instagram, YouTube und Twitter« (Where wolves eat crow – The right-wing extremist infrastructure on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter), the political scientist referred to the eponymous study by the CEP. This study revealed that a large part of the right-wing extremist milieu remains active on established platforms and uses them as a base for their international network. Right-wing extremists are using a new strategy of »extreme normalisation« to avoid obviously illegal content and are using their greater reach for commercial purposes like the promotion of online shops, where items like scene clothing, crossbows, or machetes, for example, can be ordered. Ritzmann emphasised that much of the content of the individual posts from these actors usually does not violate the community guidelines of established platforms. However, these guidelines prohibit the operation of extreme right-wing/white supremacy profiles, with offline activities of the profile owners being considered as part of the evaluation, according to the platforms.

It is important to note, Ritzmann explained, that this is an issue concerning tech companies' freedom to conduct their business, not an issue concerning freedom of speech. According to current federal judicature, companies are free to decide for themselves whom they form a contract with.

The political scientist closed his presentation by calling for the enforceability of community standards akin to that of a »certified organic« seal. If social media companies promise in their community standards that extreme right-wing or white supremacist profiles are not tolerated on their platforms, the implementation hereof should be suable by users. This is in line with the slogan, »If it says organic on the package, it must be organic on the inside.«

Four months after the CEP research findings were published, all profiles and e-shops belonging to the key actors of violence oriented right-wing extremism were still active on the platforms.

»[We should] treat [social media] just like any other manufacturing industry: The product is the deciding factor, and if the product is toxic there must be a considerable fine and it must be removed from the market until it is no longer toxic.«

## Alexander Ritzmann

In his presentation, **Jonatan Schewe** from the Center for Technology and Society at the **Technical University of Berlin** expressed doubts regarding current developments of the NetzDG. He presented the findings of a topical study that he conducted with Dr Robert Pelzer (Center for Technology and Society, TU Berlin). The study was undertaken in the context of developing an AI to process digital mass data for criminal prosecution. Schewe argued that the planned obligation to report illegal content via diverse selection mechanisms could in fact weaken the desired, generally preventive effect of prosecution. This is partially due to the high dependency of criminal prosecution on voluntary and competent cooperation of platform operators. The state, Schewe explained, can only influence the platforms to a limited extent in their investigation into illegal content.





The obligation to report merely binds platform operators to forward the data to law enforcement agencies which they themselves used to identify illegal activity. In cases of less competent or unwilling cooperation, this could result in largely unusable or defective data sets. Secondly, the expected amount of data would likely be overwhelming for many processing police departments for state security, given the limited resources available. Schewe also predicted that further selective enforcement would occur, because, right-wing extremist power users, for example, often better understand how to conceal their identities online than the average hateful commenter. The limited usability, manageability, and completeness of the data would thus severely inhibit the generally preventive effect of criminal prosecution and the principle of legality, Schewe concluded.

of Hate Speech at the General State Attorney Office in Munich.

Furthermore, an online reporting process was implemented for media companies in 2019, for elected representatives in 2020, and concerning antisemitic crimes in 2021. This was a response to the increasing prevalence of toxic content online, the legal expert pointed out. It is important that citizens and affected companies are encouraged to report illegal content, because the platforms and social networks are so far only obligated to delete content, but not to report it, explained the State Attorney. Nicka explicitly underlined criminal prosecution's dependence on reporting, and that prosecution of hate crimes is always in the public interest.

### Panel discussion: Standing together against (digital) right-wing extremism – what measures do we need?

In the subsequent discussion with **Daniela Heinemann**, Head of the Moderation Team for the platform **nebenan.de**, and **Sven Winter**, Head of Community Management and Marketing at **gutefrage.net**, the State Attorney supplemented the perspectives from platform operators with insight from the prosecutorial side. Both Heinemann and Winter emphasised their platforms' interest in an internet without toxic content and actors. They described the presence of such content on their platforms and their approaches in moderation.

Winter explained that it is essential for small and large platforms alike to understand the relevance of moderation. State Attorney Nicka mentioned the importance of education on the topic, and described successful training measures and cooperation with media providers executed by the Bavarian General State Attorney Office. Heinemann also underlined the importance of cooperating with platforms and communicating legal changes early with clearer standards and definitions so that moderation teams can prepare and rearrange their resources accordingly. The panel also discussed the usefulness and possible implementation of an obligation to use real names online. State Attorney Nicka fundamentally supported this measure, depending on how it is implemented, because IP addresses are often not sufficient to trace criminal acts back to a specific individual.



### Thematic presentation: Combating hate speech from a criminal justice perspective

In her presentation, **Bavarian State Attorney Nicka** offered insight into the practical side of prosecution of right-wing extremist and other antidemocratic content online. The jurist explained the work done by the **Bay-erische Zentralstelle zur Bekämpfung von Extremismus und Terrorismus** (Bavarian Central Office for Combating Extremism and Terrorism, ZET), which she works for. The Bavarian State Ministry of Justice has established departments specialised in prosecuting hate speech in all offices of Bavarian state attorneys since 2020, and appointed an Officer for Criminal Prosecution

Winter was somewhat more critical of the idea. He emphasised the crucial importance of anonymity on gutefrage.net, but also underlined that such anonymity could remain in place if platform operators were the only party that had access to information connection anonymous profile names and the respective real names. The unique identification of individual user-names via a number system would also be a possibility – however, such a system would be very difficult to implement and would entail certain data security risks. Winter and Heinemann ultimately expressed support for more social awareness of moderation work and for strengthening media competence. This should be the subject of greater political attention, and moderation teams should be supported through resources, such as a state-funded contact points for therapy.

»I firmly believe that racism and extremism never help a platform. Whether it is content that may be polarising or may draw more people, it ultimately harms the platforms. This is why it is in both of our interests for such elements to disappear from the Internet, and soon.«

**Sven Winter**

In the closing speech of the conference, **Project Director Christian Schwieter (ISD Germany)** summarised the presentations and findings from the conference. One key insight was that overcoming the challenge extremist online milieus pose to a democratic society necessitates, among other things, an exchange between academic disciplines and social groups. A mutual understanding of science, politics, business, and civil society is crucial for finding democratic responses to digital extremism and formulating effective political solutions. Schwieter expressed his gratitude that the »Combating radicalisation in extreme right-wing online subcultures« project enables providing a research-based perspective and promoting the exchange of viewpoints at events such as the »In the blind spot« conference. By supporting this project, the Federal Ministry of Justice has laid the groundwork for evidence-based regulation in the digital space. Schwieter, on behalf of ISD Germany, thanked the speakers and conference attendants for their active participation in the discussions.



## Conclusion

At this conference, a wide range of topics and a lot of presentations were discussed. A variety of perspectives was shared. Nonetheless, there was a broad consensus on some of the conclusions that were reached. For example, it was noted that regulations and laws caused a migration of problematic actors from established to less regulated platforms. This by no means resulted in the absence of these users on established platforms, but rather in a change to the content shared on these platforms. Actors undertake such changes to avoid the risk of de-platforming. The advantages and drawbacks of upcoming changes to the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) have been discussed controversially, also with regard to the potentially necessary measures resulting from these changes. Cooperation between platforms, the scientific community, civil society, and law enforcement, as well as the procurement of resources, are paramount in ensuring the effectiveness of regulation. Furthermore, diversified, interdisciplinary, and cooperative approaches are fundamental requirements for quantitative and qualitative research of subcultures and networks, the facilitation of solid prevention, and adherence to ethical standards that comply with data protection requirements. Only such cooperative approaches enable, for example, the understanding of gaming subcultures, inter-ideological and transnational networks, and the role of antifeminism in radicalisation and extremist narratives. This conference not only stood out for the discussion of results and reflections, but also for its integration of perspectives from regulatory practice. Representatives from platforms and from criminal justice shared their experiences and expressed support for more cooperation between the scientific community, platforms, and the criminal justice system.

The ISD is grateful to the Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ) for its cooperation and support. We are thankful, that the project not only facilitates research, but that this conference and future conferences will also foster dialogue among researchers and practitioners.

»Hate and harassment on the Internet can be a breeding ground for extremist acts of violence. Hate online can morph into violence offline. The disturbing acts of right-wing extremist violence in the recent past exhibit a palpable correlation with hate on the Internet.«

**Professor Dr Christian Kastrop**

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example: *Mordpläne auf Telegram: CDU-Politiker Kretschmer im Visier* – ZDF Heute. <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/corona-leugner-sachsen-kretschmer-mordplaene-telegram-100.html>
- 2 Hammer, Dominik; Matlach, Paula; Gerster, Lea und Baaken, Till »Fluchtwege. Wie das Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz auf etablierten sozialen Medien durch die Verlinkung zu alternativen Plattformen umgangen wird«. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 28.07.2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/fluchtwege-wie-das-netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz-auf-etablierten-sozialen-medien-durch-die-verlinkung-zu-alternativen-plattformen-umgangen-wird/>
- 3 Gerster, Lea; Kuchta, Richard; Hammer, Dominik und Schwieter, Christian: »Stützpfiler Telegram: Wie Rechtsextreme und Verschwörungsideolog:innen auf Telegram ihre Infrastruktur ausbauen«. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 17.12.2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/stuetzpfiler-telegram-wie-rechtsextreme-und-verschwoerungsideologinnen-auf-telegram-ihre-infrastruktur-ausbauen/>
- 4 Hammer, Dominik; Matlach, Paula und Baaken, Till: »Wegweiser: Hintergrundbericht für das Projekt Radikalisierung in rechtsextremen Online-Subkulturen entgegentreten«. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 23.10.2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/wegweiser-hintergrundbericht-fur-das-projekt-radikalisierung-in-rechtsextremen-onlinesubkulturen-entgegentreten/>
- 5 Kuchta, Richard; Hammer, Dominik; Gerster, Lea und Schwieter, Christian: »Um- und Abwege. Online-Strategien zur Verbreitung rechtsextremer Inhalte.« Jahresbericht zum Forschungsprojekt »Radikalisierung in rechtsextremen Online-Subkulturen entgegentreten« für das Jahr 2021. 21.12.2022. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/um-und-abwege-online-strategien-zur-verbreitung-rechtsextremer-inhalte-jahresbericht-zum-forschungsprojekt-radikalisierung-in-rechtsextremen-online-subkulturen-entgegentreten-fur-das-jahr/>
- 6 Doxxing refers to the publication of a person's private information online against their will or without their consent. Doxxing includes, for example, the publication of residential addresses.
- 7 Passing, Carole und Heyen, Angelika. *Alternative Medien und Influencer als Multiplikatoren von Hass, Desinformation und Verschwörungstheorien. Schwerpunktanalyse Jugendschutz der Medienanstalten 2020*. In: *Jugendschutz- und Medienkompetenzbericht der Medienanstalten. Fakt oder Fake? Jugendschutz, Medienkompetenz und Desinformation*. Seiten 54 - 65. <https://www.diemedienanstalten.de/publikationen/jugendschutzmedienkompetenzbericht/fakt-oder-fakejugendschutz-medienkompetenz-und-desinformation>



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