

# Inside the Digital Labyrinth – Right-Wing Extremist Strategies of Decentralisation on the Internet and Possible Countermeasures

2022 Annual Report for the Research Project  
“Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing  
Extremist Online Subcultures”

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# Glossary

## Blockchain technology

Blockchain technology, which was developed primarily for alternative currencies, stands out from other technologies due to its unique data structure, which – due to the transparency it offers and its decentralised design – is particularly tamper proof. The data is stored at many separate locations and regularly compared. Blockchain technology enables (pseudo)anonymous transactions and communication – a feature that also makes the technology attractive for criminals and extremists.

## Cryptocurrency

Cryptocurrencies are digital currencies whose transactions are protected through cryptographic signatures and documented in a blockchain. When cryptocurrencies are sent, these transactions are validated through a process of code comparison. They enable pseudonymous transactions and usually have a decentralised structure. There are no central authorities that define and stabilise the value of cryptocurrencies. Therefore, according to the German Federal Financial Supervisory Authority (BaFin), cryptocurrencies are not actually currencies, but rather financial instruments. The possibility of make pseudonymised payments also makes cryptocurrencies attractive to criminals, who use such methods of payment to conduct illegal business. Some cryptocurrencies and blockchain-based assets are used to commit financial fraud.

## Crypto wallets

A (crypto) wallet is a physical storage medium or software programme that is used to store cryptocurrencies. The accounts have a specific private key and usually protected by means of encryption. Depending on the cryptocurrency, the wallets provide various levels of access to information about users and transactions associated with the accounts for third parties.

## “Incentivised” social media platforms

So-called “incentivised” social media platforms reward users for their activity on the platforms using financial instruments, e.g., in the form of cryptocurrency payments. This creates a financial incentive for users to engage with their platform.

## Free software

The term free software refers to computer programmes with rights of use that allow scrutiny, distribution and modification by third parties. The goal is to enable everyone to work together to develop these programmes. This means the free software movement relies heavily on cooperation, which is what differentiates it from the pragmatic use of open-source software. “Free” refers to the ability to develop and distribute the software. The movement believes that the characteristics of free software prevent what they consider to be illegitimate power relationships between software owners and software users. “Free” explicitly does not mean that the software is free of charge. Free software contrasts with proprietary software which, for example, has not made its source code public, or has restrictive rights of use. Advocates of free software criticise proprietary software for keeping its source code confidential, which in their opinion prevents cooperation and creates knowledge hierarchies.

## Peer-to-Peer (P2P)

Peer-to-Peer technology (P2P) refers to the direct connection between different computers without a central node acting as an intermediary. In an exclusively P2P network, all connected devices are equal. The opposite to a P2P network would be what is known as the server-client model, where devices must access data through a central server.

## Network protocol

A network protocol enables communication between different computers that are connected with each other in a network. The protocol specifies the rules for formatting and sending data so that different devices can exchange messages with each other regardless of the infrastructure and standards of their systems.

## Fediverse

The Fediverse is an attempt to create a decentralised alternative to large social networks. It includes microblogging and video- and image-sharing services. As long as the services use the same network protocol, the different servers can all communicate with each other.

**ActivityPub**

ActivityPub is an open and decentralised network protocol. As an open protocol, it does not belong to one particular company and is not limited to particular products or platforms. It provides client-to-server and server-to-server APIs. ActivityPub is a standard for the Fediverse.

**BitTorrent**

BitTorrent is a Peer-to-Peer-based file-sharing protocol that is used to distribute large data volumes, because it reduces the server load. When a file is downloaded using BitTorrent technology, the file is not transmitted as a single unit but in pieces of data sourced from all devices connected to the network.

**Instance**

In this context, instance refers to a social media platform that was set up using PeerTube or other Fediverse software. You can create accounts and upload content on instances, just like on conventional social media platforms. Each instance is managed independently but can communicate with other instances via optional networking functions.

**Seeds**

Seeds act as predefined gateways for advanced data collections. Seed lists can be made up of keywords, internet addresses (URLs) or social media channels (accounts). In this report, PeerTube instances that were already identified before network analysis due to prior data analyses – in this case by reading out links in relevant public Telegram channels – are referred to as seeds.

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## Key findings from 2022

### Technology and platform affordances

- PeerTube and Odysee are part of a movement away from a centralised platform architecture to cross-platform protocols. Odysee integrates the LBRY protocol to make this happen.<sup>1</sup> PeerTube offers free software, allowing anyone to build their own mini YouTubes that can communicate and interact with each other using the ActivityPub protocol.<sup>2</sup>
- Neither Odysee, nor PeerTube are right-wing extremist in and of themselves. However, the technology used and affordances offered by these video services makes them attractive for right-wing extremist groups which are blocked on larger social media platforms. On Odysee they can monetise their content and store it on decentralised servers so that it is practically impossible to delete. Using PeerTube, right-wing extremists can create their own platforms (known as instances) that they alone can control. The content disseminated there can then only be removed by taking the servers associated with the instances offline.
- Odysee's use of the cryptocurrency "LBRY Credit" allows users to monetise content. A financial analysis of 53 Odysee users from the conspiracy theorist and radical right to right-wing extremist spectrum showed that they had received 1,652,786.96 LBRY Credits since creating their wallet. When converted to USD using the average closing price for LBC over the last 16 months before the end of the financial analysis (0.074 USD), this corresponds to total earnings of approximately 122,306 USD. Some PeerTube platforms also include monetisation opportunities.

### Content and users

- In the right-wing extremist online milieu on Odysee and PeerTube, the most popular videos are those that are distributed by well-known members of the scene.
- The PeerTube instances investigated in the right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist online milieu are highly connected among themselves, but only have connections to the wider Fediverse via a few highly networked servers.
- Both in a content analysis carried out on Odysee and in analyses of selected PeerTube instances, videos about current affairs dominated. Videos in the right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist online milieu particularly addressed Covid-19 and the measures to control the pandemic, current geopolitical developments like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and different conspiracy narratives.
- Content that is likely illegal and glorifies violence was available during the analysis period both on Odysee and on some of the investigated PeerTube instances. This included videos that promoted holocaust denial, as well as clips of the livestream of the Buffalo shooter and videos by people that denied the legitimacy of the attack on 14 May 2022, attempted to stage it in a "humorous" way or contained disinformation about the attack. Additionally, the livestream of the 2019 Christchurch right-wing terrorist attack was available.

## Moderation and regulation

- In the case of both the investigated PeerTube instances as well as Odysee, content is only subjected to minimal moderation. On Odysee, the platform operators ostentatiously say they do not care what content is shared, but stress that they will block content if it breaks the law. For example, Odysee blocked the livestream of RT DE (previously Russia Today Deutschland) in the EU using geo-blocking. In the case of PeerTube, there is no central moderation authority.
  - In relation to Odysee, the question is to what extent the Network Enforcement Act (ger. *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, NetzDG) is applicable, as the platform is unlikely to meet the threshold of more than two million users in Germany. Additionally, Odysee most likely does not currently fall under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) definition of a Very Large Online Platform (VLOP), but will still have to comply with the general obligations for online platforms. Related questions concerning regulation must also be asked about individual PeerTube instances. The concrete legal status of PeerTube instances presents challenges for regulation efforts as is not always clear whether individual instances can be defined as social networks in the sense of the NetzDG or as online platforms according to the DSA.
  - While on Odysee there is a process for reporting illegal content through the platform, that is not necessarily the case on PeerTube platforms. Content moderation in the Fediverse is a task for the community as a whole, which can isolate extremist instances, for example, to restrict their reach. Here plug-ins developed by the PeerTube community could be used to make it easier for individual administrators to deal with extremist content and compliance obligations that are imposed by the DSA from 2024 onward.
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## Introduction: Ideologies and technologies of decentralisation

At the outset of the project “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” the ISD team developed central leading questions for research, for example:

- What are the most important platforms for right-wing extremist actors in Germany and their online strategy?
- Which so-called alternative platforms are particularly popular in the right-wing extremist online milieu?
- Which narratives are disseminated on the different platforms?
- Which actors are successful on which platforms?
- Which regulatory and non-regulatory countermeasures can be taken?

**The research team repeatedly discovered that key actors from the right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist online milieu use a multi-platform strategy to spread their messages. Many of them use different social media platforms to different ends.** While it is important for right-wing extremists to retain a presence on established social media platforms for the purposes of propaganda and agitation, smaller so-called alternative platforms also fulfil specific purposes. In many cases, they act as a digital safety net for extremist content. They are also used to further radicalise the scene as well as for financial (monetisation) purposes. The research also demonstrated that use of the platforms by the right-wing extremist online milieu is not only driven by strategy and tactics, but also by ideologies that give rise to these strategies and tactics in the first place. The platforms themselves were and are used to project ideological desires, which is particularly clear, for example, when right-wing extremists promote “online eugenics”<sup>3</sup>. The desire to achieve hegemony over large platforms appears to be an expression of the desire for political dominance. The online spaces of the spectrum reflect the ideals of the extreme right.

Right-wing extremist concepts of society are associated primarily with the fascist utopias of a spatial order of various great empires, or even with the idea of global domination based on cultural or racial superiority. At the same time, in the intellectual history of modern right-wing extremism, there continue to be attempts to withdraw and separate into small communities. For example, the French New Right conceptualised the idea of ethnopluralism, which would be achieved through mutual decolonising.<sup>4</sup> This was primarily a cypher for a racist isolationist policy.

The idea of withdrawing into national fortresses of refuge is not exclusively an invention of the New Right. Among American supporters of segregation, references to “states’ rights” that are positioned against a supposedly excessive central state that oversteps its jurisdiction has long been an established part of the rhetorical arsenal. Elements of the alt-right movement, who see themselves as “white nationalists”, promote a territorial separation along racist lines and want a white “ethnostate”<sup>5</sup> that is isolated from other “ethnostates” that are to replace the United States of America. This autarky ought to protect white US Americans from the “globohomo” – a term that refers to a supposed global homogenisation of cultures and ethnicities, and points to the conspiracy narrative of a “global homosexual” agenda. According to proponents of the conspiracy narrative, this agenda pursues the goal of stamping out ethnicities and cultures, particularly those that are white, using homosexuality and “gender ideology”.

The need to escape to small, idyllic spaces extends far beyond the boundaries of the right-wing extremist milieu and is as old as the industrial revolution. Back in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “Lebensreform” [life reform] movements were formed which sought to return to a more natural way of living and turn their back on dirty cities. Similarly, the environmental movement of the 1970s reawakened interest in dropping out of modern society and organising into small communities.

What makes the general social and specifically right-wing extremist withdrawal movements in the 21st century so different is that they are taking place not only against, but also with and through state-of-the-art technologies. This is not just about the online spread of cottagecore aesthetics,<sup>6</sup> which offers commonalities with the “trad” lifestyle that so fascinates right-wing extremists, or the online spaces where a reactionary scene exchanges dietary tips aimed at strengthening the men. This trend also covers the creation of its own platform infrastructure that aims to protect right-wing extremist online subcultures from access by social media companies supposedly infiltrated by left liberals. Some of these alternative platforms were created with the stated goal of establishing separate online spaces. The establishment of separate spaces aims to make it harder to regulate the platforms and allow right-wing extremists to exchange ideas online undisturbed.



**This endeavour seems to be even further supported by the fact that the right-wing extremist online milieu is increasingly able to take advantage of supposedly or truly decentralised platforms.** Social networks that are based on blockchain technology like Odysee and save content on different servers make it difficult, or even impossible, to delete content. Free software, like PeerTube, enables users to create their own platforms with their own moderation rules. The two video services portray themselves as alternatives to the big social media companies – both rely primarily on autonomous regulation by the users.

**Neither LBRY, the company that founded Odysee, nor Framasoft, the non-profit organisation that supports the development of PeerTube, are right-wing extremist in nature.** However, the platforms they have created provide right-wing extremist actors with additional opportunities to spread their propaganda online. Both platforms are harder to regulate than the large video services against which they position themselves. This is connected to the platform technologies that are a product of particular platform ideologies. In the case of PeerTube, this is a very pronounced do-it-yourself ideal. In the case of Odysee, this is a libertarianism whose concept of freedom of expression is so broadly defined that it includes hate speech.

**Regardless of whether decentralised platforms are used for ideological or purely strategic reasons, with the trend towards what is known as “Web3”<sup>7</sup> the popularity of such services within the right-wing extremist online milieu will likely only increase.** It is therefore necessary to understand the challenges and opportunities of these new types of platforms early on.

This report, which presents the central findings from 2022 of the project “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures”, will compare and contrast the ideological and philosophical foundations of the platforms Odysee and PeerTube. The report closes with a discussion of the implications of decentralised platforms for state regulation and moderation practices. Lastly, possible approaches for (self) regulation of decentralised platforms are presented.

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## Decentralisation and ideology: Libertarian promises of freedom and free software

Some of the platforms that were investigated as part of the “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” project were developed by companies whose leadership adheres to the political-philosophical movement libertarianism. Telegram or LBRY, which launched the video platform Odysee, are both examples of this.<sup>8</sup>

**As a subset of liberalism, libertarianism defines the freedom of the individual as the central value that must be protected against collective (state or community) interventions.** State action – even if this is democratic and legitimised by a majority – is therefore generally seen sceptically in libertarian thought. Instead of governmental, centralised management, libertarian thinkers prefer exchange processes on the markets, which they consider to be voluntary and therefore freer alternatives. This makes markets the ideal regulating principle for many adherents of libertarianism. Depending on their version of the philosophy, some libertarians are also hostile to large companies, which they accuse of manipulating the market and whose links with the political decision-making system they see as being an expression of anti-competitive corporatism. This is why libertarian platform operators often project themselves as distinct from “Big Tech” and present their company as a counter-cultural outsider.

**Private property is crucial for individual freedom for libertarian thinkers. Taxes are seen as theft by parts of the spectrum. For many libertarians, individual freedom means a broadly interpreted understanding of freedom of expression that also includes hate speech.** This is one of the reasons why platforms run by libertarians are only moderated very reluctantly, which makes them attractive for right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists.

**Decentralised platforms (as a counterpart to large social media companies) are not only run by libertarian entrepreneurs.** In the “Fediverse” there is a whole gamut of federated social networks, which aim to offer alternatives to the large tech companies. The platforms assembled in the Fediverse were developed in line with

the central idea of “free software”. “Free software” covers a similar spectrum of programmes and licences as open-source software. However, there are vastly different philosophies behind each of the concepts. According to Richard Stallman, the founder of the Free Software movement, “open source” refers to the use of freely accessible programmes for pragmatic reasons, with no ideological principles behind it, while “free software” is a “movement for freedom and justice”.<sup>9</sup> Free software always implies certain ethical principles.<sup>10</sup> A particular concern here is the avoidance of proprietary software judged to be “antisocial”, which is believed to hinder cooperation and community. Proprietary software is connected to the programmes of the company that developed it. The free software movement instead aspires to a system that is available to everyone to change and improve.<sup>11</sup> PeerTube also follows this central idea of a freely accessible and non-proprietary software, which everyone can develop. Consequently, the operators of instances rely more on community-based moderation and regulation rather than central interventions. This would not be technically possible, nor would it be compatible with the idea of the Fediverse, which enables everyone to use software.

The freedom of the software does not refer to being free of charge in the sense of software that does not cost anything, but rather to the freedom of the user “to run, to copy, to distribute, to examine, to change and to improve software”.<sup>12</sup> For the free software movement, the distinction from software controlled by a title of ownership is the ideal of establishing freedom and justice. If developers who are not the users have control over software programmes, the movement believes this leads to an unfair exercise of power.<sup>13</sup> This is where a strong do-it-yourself ethos is visible, which is an essential component of the idea of free software. **The opportunity to develop software in your own way is supposed to prevent it from being used as an instrument of power. At the same time, this impetus highlights a barrier that prevents truly all people (and not just hypothetically) to participate in the development of free software. Without appropriate programming knowledge, even free software cannot be deployed or developed.**

**The different founding ideas of the platform operators are reflected in the platform architecture.**

Representatives of the “free software” idea – like the developers of the Fediverse protocol – provide the application they have created to everyone. The result is that the distribution and use of the software can hardly be prevented – and ought not to be prevented in any case. The sole exception is the infringement of free licensing, such as in the case of Truth Social.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Fediverse users retain a primarily community-based form of content moderation, such as the way they isolate terrorist or extremist instances. As an example of a libertarian-inspired platform, Odysee also places moderation predominantly in the hands of its users. Channel operators can independently manage the comments on their videos, for example. Despite the company’s declared indifference to the content shared on it, there is a process for reporting illegal content on Odysee. Such content may be blocked or restricted for users from certain countries using geo-blocking. Odysee justifies this approach by saying that the platform must adhere to the laws of the country in which it is active to be able to do business there.

design their own platforms. The Fediverse thus attracts to a greater extent people who design platforms themselves or who exert influence on the design of platforms on smaller servers, for example by donating to cover the costs of server maintenance. Because of the specific guiding ideas of the platforms and the high value of one’s own participation, there is likely a comparatively larger proportion of users in the Fediverse who participate in community moderation efforts based on their DIY ideas.

The relationship between users and platforms can be described with the concept of platform dialectics.<sup>15</sup> This purports that the existing affordances do not just affect the behaviour of users; the users and their behaviour shape the way in which affordances are applied and develop on a platform. In the case of Odysee, this means de-listing or geo-blocking videos that infringe the terms of use if they are reported. As far as the Fediverse is concerned, this might mean isolating instances that are rejected by broad sections of the community. The different central ideas of the platforms therefore affect the type of content moderation employed. They also influence the type of technologies used.

**Different philosophies attract a diverse public with a wide range of different interests.**

As a platform that primarily enables the distribution of user’s own content, Odysee does not require extensive interaction with the wider platform community. All you must do is upload content for your own target audience and interact with them. In Fediverse instances, the underlying ideas mean that cross-platform interactions and the active engagement of users are expressly desired. Networking with others to share your own and federated content is part of the logic and central idea of the Fediverse. While Odysee also provides affordances for community building among other things, in the Fediverse this is a key part of the philosophy. The activity on Fediverse platforms demonstrates a conscious demarcation attempt from large social media companies – even more so than creating an account on Odysee. While there are users on Odysee that are active there because they are no longer permitted or want to post on large video platforms, there are many completely apolitical users that use Odysee as part of a multi-platform strategy for their content. The Fediverse protocols are designed to allow users to

## Decentralisation and technology: P2P, Blockchain and protocols

P2P is a comparatively old information technology. It became widely known in 1999 thanks to the music platform Napster. You could search for artists or song titles on a centralised register server. If the register discovered the desired piece of music on a device connected with the network, you could download the file, while the data stored on your hard drive was made available for other people to download. Once Napster became a central rallying point for internet piracy, the website had to cease its activities following an injunction.<sup>16</sup> Although there are also countless legal potential uses for P2P, ever since Napster the technology has frequently been associated with the illegal distribution of copyright-protected materials.<sup>17</sup> Another well-known P2P project is “Freenet”, which began in 2000. This platform is geared to the private sphere and freedom from censorship. Freenet offers functions such as exchanging data, chat forums and the creation of your own “Freesite” (websites that can only be visited through Freenet).<sup>18</sup>

**While P2P is a comparatively well-known technology, it is cropping up in current discussions in the context of a vital component of the predicted Web3: cryptocurrencies.** The development of the most popular cryptocurrency Bitcoin was fuelled by the desire to handle payment processes directly between the participating parties without needing financial institutions to act as intermediaries. According to the position paper written by someone under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto, who invented Bitcoin, the cryptocurrency can circumvent third parties because all transactions are recorded on a P2P network using a Proof-of-Work procedure.<sup>19</sup> Some cryptocurrencies use P2P technology to carry out transactions without participants having to produce personal identification. However, not all cryptocurrencies are completely based on a P2P system; some have central intermediaries.<sup>20</sup>

**Decentralised storage locations are not just used for cryptocurrencies. Blockchains can also be employed to store reference information to text, image or video files.** The platform Odysee makes use of one such technology: the LBRY protocol. Users of this platform particularly value the way the blockchain technology makes them especially resistant to censorship. Data stored on the LBRY blockchain

cannot be simply deleted. Nevertheless, Odysee can make access to data difficult by de-listing and geo-blocking. The stored data cannot be accessed with the blockchain address alone. If the address cannot be accessed through the platform, it must be distributed by itself in networks so that, for example, videos can be found by viewers. This means the platform is not as decentralised and resistant to moderation as it appears to some users.

PeerTube also relies on protocols instead of central platforms. Based on the protocol, users can build their own instances – in other words their own platforms. Furthermore, it is possible for the operators of these platforms to connect their platforms with other Fediverse platforms (to “federate” them). The platforms are generally run on their own servers, which can restrict their size, depending on the success of the instance, because the platform operator must organise and pay for the server themselves. The server system means that PeerTube is not completely decentralised. As with PeerTube there are always central servers (instances), it is not a purely P2P network and not all devices in the system are equal. Because the individual instances are generally connected with their own servers, this means they cannot be centrally moderated.

**The idea of moving away from centralised platforms and towards interoperable protocols unites different digital decentralisation movements. The use of P2P technology is also widespread, whether it is for blockchains or for PeerTube instances. However, the element that differentiates PeerTube and Odysee from each other is the concrete platform architectures.** By integrating the LBRY protocol, Odysee enables content to be stored decentralised on the LBRY blockchain and offers access to video addresses on the blockchain with the platform. PeerTube enables users to directly build their own video platform. This means that the decentralised equivalent of a YouTube channel is available to the users of Odysee. The users of PeerTube can create something that works like their own miniature YouTube. **At the same time, neither of the two services is entirely decentralised. As a platform, Odysee continues to be the central node for access to content and the individual PeerTube instances are run via central servers. These nodes offer strategies for regulating and moderating the platforms.**

## Decentralisation and right-wing extremism: A herculean task for regulation efforts?

The decentralisation of parts of the right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist online milieu presents new challenges in the fight against right-wing extremism and its intersection with conspiracy theorist milieus. The emergence of the coup plans of the German Reichsbürger movement in December 2022 has once again raised public awareness of the urgency of investigating right-wing extremist activities on the Internet.<sup>21</sup> These challenges will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### The largest barriers for internet research

Civil society must continue to work with the research community to inform decisionmakers about the latest developments within the right-wing extremist online ecosystem, thereby raising public awareness of narratives and strategies used by these actors. The development of countermeasures, whether by civil society, policymakers, or the platform industry, is particularly effective and sustainable when based on systematic, comparative, and data-driven (qualitative as well as quantitative) research. Whether it is counter-speech, educational campaigns about extremist manipulation tactics, platform or state regulation, or concrete content moderation decisions: analyses of the changing online ecosystem help to assess the threats posed by right-wing extremist activities. Unfortunately, the barriers for this indispensable research have grown with increased decentralisation of the online milieu.<sup>22</sup>

**Technological challenges as a result of the decentralisation of the online ecosystem:** Often the structure of the platforms that are used by the right-wing extremist online milieu make it difficult to develop a systematic research strategy in relation to the public activity on these platforms. As already explained in the background report for this research project,<sup>23</sup> the most common obstacle is a lack of, or insufficient documentation of, the *Application Programming Interface* (API). However, the ISD research team has demonstrated that it is possible, to some extent, to circumvent the technological barriers to investigating right-wing extremist activity on new types of platforms by developing new research methods. The financial and affordance analysis in the research report for the Odysee video platform and the network analysis of the PeerTube Fediverse are exemplary of this.

**Legal uncertainties and research ethics:** Although the focus of this research project is the analysis of *publicly available* right-wing extremist activities on alternative platforms, the collection and processing of all data must follow all relevant data protection regulations and ethical guidelines for research. However, the biggest legal challenge when researching new online spaces that are used by right-wing extremists is the general terms of service (ToS) of the individual platforms. It is often unclear when and in what way the systematic, data-protection-compliant collection of public data for clearly defined research purposes can be interpreted as a breach of contract of the terms and conditions of the platforms. A legal review of the terms of every single platform takes time and resources and hence can impede analyses of decentralised online ecosystem that extends across various platforms.

### Possible actions against right-wing extremist activities on Odysee

“Incentivised” platforms that have integrated monetisation affordances in their platform architecture fulfil distinct functions for right-wing extremists. They are used for content distribution as well as for financial gain and community building. Regarding the assessment of the individual platforms and threats associated with their specific functionalities, affordance analyses, as described in the research report on the video platform Odysee,<sup>24</sup> can help with internal risk assessments conducted by the platforms themselves. Additionally, regulators and external auditors can use such analyses as a blueprint for future inspections and audits to ensure compliance with, and ultimately the effectiveness of, future legislation such as the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and the UK Online Safety Bill. The affordances and functions of a platform must be considered when developing measures to prevent them being used by right-wing extremists. The architecture and structure of the platform play key roles here – whether it is a microblogging service like Twitter, a video platform like YouTube or a messenger service turned social network like Telegram. Additionally, the prevalence and type of harmful or illegal content that is distributed on the platform must be assessed. Finally, the financial incentives and monetisation opportunities provided by the platform to its users must be taken into account when developing countermeasures. In relation to the platform Odysee, all three aspects offer the potential for regulatory measures.<sup>25</sup>

**Systematic regulation of “incentivised” platforms:**

In relation to systemic regulatory approaches, such as those in the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) or in the British Online Safety Bill (OSB), future-proof legislation aimed at combating hate speech and extremism online should consider the specific risks of “incentivised” platforms. It is important to highlight the gamification strategy of Odysee in this context, where the platform’s cryptocurrency can be used to promote user’s own videos and for community building. When viewed in combination with the volatility of cryptocurrency, this business model should also be critically examined in terms of gambling risks, especially for the youth.

**Content-based regulation of decentralised platforms:**

According to the German Network Enforcement Act (ger. *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, NetzDG), for-profit social networks are obliged to designate authorised recipients for legal requests within Germany. In the case of Odysee, compliance with this obligation could be reviewed by the relevant authority to guarantee legal accountability. While the platform does provide reporting avenues for users to flag potentially illegal content, it is unclear how frequently Odysee deletes illegal content following the notice. The platform’s stated reluctance to moderate content conflicts with Odysee’s statements that claim the company follows the relevant laws of the countries where the platform is active. The term “decentralised” suggests that there is no single node through which content can be filtered. However, in the case of Odysee, this is a fallacy. Even though the platform uses partially decentralised blockchain technology, ultimately, the individual content is only visible to the wider, less technically adept public through a central point of access, the Odysee website. ISD’s analysis within the research project has demonstrated that the operators of Odysee are perfectly able to make certain content or entire channels unavailable for visitors to the website at their own discretion through de-listing, or to block these for certain regions by means of geo-blocking.<sup>26</sup> From a technical perspective, platforms that market themselves as decentralised are often able to, and do, moderate content and should therefore not be viewed as immune to content-based regulation.

**Crypto regulation and the Action Plan to counter right-wing extremism:**

The financial analysis of Odysee as part of this research project demonstrated that increased transparency requirements for cryptocurrency trade are necessary to trace, and where necessary disrupt, financial streams within the right-wing extremist milieu via the monetisation of illegal content. However, even without new legislation, authorities can already examine the public transaction data on the relevant blockchain and identify potentially criminal content, thanks to publicly accessible analysis programmes such as the LBRY Block Explorer. The Action Plan to combat right-wing extremism (ger. *Aktionsplan gegen Rechtsextremismus*) introduced by German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser in March 2022 proposes significantly expanding “the investigation and analysis of right-wing extremist financial activities”. This plan must also include an awareness of monetisation affordances, such as those that platforms like Odysee offer right-wing extremist actors. In general, the use of cryptocurrency as a means of financing extremist movements should be subject to greater scrutiny.

**Regulatory challenges concerning the right-wing extremist use of the Fediverse**

The Fediverse and the protocols on which it is based aim to enable users to develop software and build platforms on their own servers. This also means that individual platforms – for example, PeerTube instances – are not subject to any form of central control. Instead, each individual server administrator is responsible for the moderation of extremist or illegal content. As freely accessible software, PeerTube cannot be covered by regulation intended for large, for-profit platforms like the NetzDG or the EU Digital Services. Studying individual examples illustrates the specific problems regulation attempts will face as regards PeerTube instances:<sup>27</sup>

- **Illegal content via participation in the federation system:** On some instances it is possible to view likely illegal content, although the instance itself does not in fact host any content of that type and does not permit such content either according to its own rules. However, because the instance is linked to other instances through the federation system, terrorist and other illegal videos hosted on other instances within the federation can be viewed there. This raises the question of how any legal obligations for a notice-and-takedown procedure regarding illegal content (as provided for in the DSA for services “normally provided for remuneration”)<sup>28</sup> can be enforced within the Fediverse.
  - **Instance operators based abroad:** Some of the instances analysed appear to be run by private individuals or organisations that are headquartered outside the EU. In some cases, it seems likely that shell companies are used. This situation could make it difficult to identify an authorised person and hence enforce sanctions against breaches of the law.
  - **Providers of a social network or publishers of editorial content:** Most of the instances investigated permit the sharing of user-generated content. Some instances also offer their own editorial formats. Other instances only allow specific people or media organisations to upload content. These different usage types mean that some instances could legally be considered social networks, while others would be seen as publishers of editorial content (and therefore would bear editorial responsibility).<sup>29</sup>
  - **Profit motive, microenterprise or mere hobby:** A social network only falls within the scope of the NetzDG if the platform is run with the “intention to make a profit”. The business status of the instance operator is also critical in terms of whether the “micro or small enterprises” exception for parts of the DSA provisions can be applied to PeerTube instances. For most instances, however, it is unclear what the nature of the (business) relationship between the instance operators, the content providers and users is, let alone which company structure is behind the instances. It is only certain that most of the instances attempt to (partially) finance themselves through donations, often via cryptocurrency.
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### Implementation of the EU Digital Services Act: Compliance plug-ins for the Fediverse?

In contrast to the NetzDG, it is still unclear whether the DSA will also be applicable to platforms not operated with a profit motive and/or that can be used without remuneration.<sup>30</sup> If the DSA also applies to non-commercial platforms, most PeerTube instances would probably be considered an “online platform” in the sense of the DSA. In this case, from 2024 most PeerTube instances will have to implement procedures for reporting and removing possible illegal content, publish annual transparency reports in relation to how the platform handles illegal content and establish central contact points for authorities and users and a legal representative in EU member states. In addition to the aforementioned challenges regarding enforcement, it is generally questionable to what extent the individual instance operators can fulfil these obligations, particularly if the instance is run by an individual person as a mere hobby.

**One way of reducing costs for instance operators could be to create DSA compliance modules, that are developed by the PeerTube community and then made freely available to administrators as a plug-in to install on their own instances.** For example, a reporting plug-in could support instance operators to comply with the obligation for clear and transparent procedures for reporting and removing content. Similar plug-ins to support administrators with content moderation already exist.<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, these modules could be developed directly by Framasoft, the non-profit organisation behind PeerTube, and thereby inserted into the PeerTube source code itself. Similar plug-in modules could at least partly automate the creation of transparency reports.<sup>32</sup> Although most of the new DSA obligations cannot be comprehensively fulfilled by plug-in modules, and there will still be significant additional resources required by instance operators, the Fediverse community could use these plug-ins to demonstrate its willingness to find joint solutions with regulatory authorities. Conversely, the state or the EU could financially support the development of these kind of open-source compliance plug-ins.

### Self-regulatory and civil society measures against the right-wing extremist use of the Fediverse

**The lack of a central authority in the Fediverse means the moderation of extremist or otherwise illegal content must primarily be carried out by the server operators and administrators of the individual instances.** As described in the ISD research report on PeerTube,<sup>33</sup> attempts have already been made by developers and users to isolate terrorist or extremist content from the rest of the Fediverse, e.g., through jointly curated blocked lists that can be voluntarily implemented, or even by deleting instance entries in the central PeerTube search engine “Sepia Search”.<sup>34</sup> This reduces the reach of the content and minimises the probability of stumbling upon it without actively searching for it. Civil society should attempt to work together with the administrators involved to exchange experiences, share expertise and develop joint best-practice strategies (e.g., drafting clear terms and conditions or community guidelines) for handling extremist content, user groups and instances.

**Even if individual extremist instances are successfully isolated, the instance and its videos are still accessible so long as they have a hosting provider and other essential internet structures.** These kinds of PeerTube videos can then be linked to from other platforms with a broader reach (like Facebook, Twitter and particularly Telegram) or on websites and therefore will continue to be accessible to the general public. In this case, pressure could be put on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram to block links to illegal PeerTube videos, or videos that otherwise contradict the terms of use of the larger platforms. In this way, videos would still be directly available via the URL, but the reach would be significantly restricted. Similar procedures have been established to deal with terrorist videos on smaller platforms that then have links to them posted on large platforms.<sup>35</sup>

**As an ultimate step, pressure could be put on internet service providers so that they withdraw their support from or block access to certain websites.** This is what happened in the case of Kiwi Farms, an online forum that was notorious for stalking, doxing and what is



known as "swatting"<sup>36</sup>. In September 2022, the DNS and security service provider Cloudflare withdrew technical support from Kiwi Farms, with the result that the website was no longer accessible. Initially Cloudflare spurned repeated demands to withdraw its service from websites (including the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer and Al-Qaeda websites). Ultimately, in these cases the company yielded to public pressure.<sup>37</sup> **However, putting public pressure on companies does not always work. In addition, switching off entire services or websites can also create precedents that are misused by authoritarian regimes for its censorship efforts. Additionally, content that is illegal or anti-constitutional often only makes up a fraction of the entire content on an instance. Therefore, entirely blocking access to the instance would only rarely be proportional and justified.**

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## Outlook

In 2023, the project “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” will tackle new thematic and technical challenges. Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter and the associated “re-platforming” of prominent right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist accounts,<sup>38</sup> will both impact right-wing extremist activities on established, highly popular platforms and influence the growing offer on alternative platforms. **This leads to the question of whether and to what extent hate speech and right-wing extremist campaigns will increase on Twitter in the medium term. It will also need to be investigated how Twitter fulfils its obligations in line with the NetzDG and, from 2024, the EU Digital Services Act.**

It is also unclear what the impact of Twitter’s new policy will be on the alternative microblogging services popular within right-wing extremist online subcultures. Will they be able to compete on the market, or will they go under because users are returning to the “original”? The migration of users to Mastodon, a Twitter alternative from the Fediverse, might also have interesting effects. The decentralised network was widely reported on in the media as countless Twitter users announced their departure from the platform or created back-up accounts on Mastodon following Elon Musk’s takeover.<sup>39</sup> **It is very possible that an ecosystem of dedicated right-wing extremist Mastodon instances will grow as general awareness of the Fediverse and its protocols increases. This will likely lead to software such as PeerTube or other parts of the Fediverse being used more intensively by right-wing extremists for their propaganda, recruitment and agitation purposes.**

These developments present topical and technical challenges for research. This includes i.e., dealing with the “hydra effect”, in other words the multiplication of right-wing extremist online platforms on decentralised networks. As already discussed, they are harder to investigate as part of systematic analyses of the online ecosystem. The dissemination of content on these kinds

of networks is also harder to trace. Furthermore, federation systems like the Fediverse make it harder to classify instances and their respective administrators. **In terms of regulation, these new types of social media platforms raise the question of what interventions are possible, desirable and effective. One option, based on the willingness for voluntary self-regulation, would be civic support for the Fediverse community financed with public funds for training on identifying hate speech and effectively isolating right-wing extremist instances – including the development of possible DSA compliance plug-ins, as described above. The possibility of establishing, or further developing existing, online help centres or complaint websites for reporting illegal Fediverse content could also be explored in more detail.<sup>40</sup>**

Additionally, the research project will further analyse the impact of the narratives that the right-wing extremist milieu disseminates regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis in the context of increased energy prices. It is also to be expected that the 2023 federal state elections in Bremen, Hesse and Bavaria will be used as an opportunity by right-wing extremists to run additional disinformation campaigns and increase their propaganda activities.

Based on the project findings, recommendations will continue to be made to the German government and political institutions at EU level to empower politics and civil society to counter right-wing extremist activities on so-called alternative platforms in and outside of the Fediverse. **It is already clear now that governments and supranational organisations must address the topographical changes of the right-wing extremist online ecosystem. This means clarifying which platform architectures are truly decentralised and which only market themselves as such to skirt responsibility and legal accountability. It also means finding out which opportunities exist for regulatory and non-regulatory countermeasures.**



## Endnotes

- 1 The platform Odysee was investigated as part of this research project by ISD. Cf. Matlach, Paula; Hammer, Dominik; Schwieter, Christian: "Auf Odysee: Die Rolle von Blockchain-Technologie für die Monetarisierung im rechtsextremen Onlinemilieu", ISD Germany, 10/08/2022, <https://isdgermany.org/auf-odysee-die-rolle-von-blockchain-technologie/>, accessed on 06/12/2022. English translation forthcoming.
- 2 The free software PeerTube was investigated as part of this research project by ISD. Cf. Gerster, Lea; Arcostanzo, Francesca; Prieto-Chavana, Nestor; Hammer, Dominik; Schwieter, Christian: "Die Hydra im Netz: Herausforderung der extremistischen Nutzung des Fediverse am Beispiel PeerTube", ISD Germany, 19/12/2022. <https://isdgermany.org/die-hydra-im-netz/>, accessed on 22/12/2022. English translation forthcoming.
- 3 The demand for "online eugenics" refers specifically to the idea of bullying users who do not suit right-wing extremist ideals away from platforms.
- 4 For example, the sociologist Alain De Benoist, one of the key intellectual figures in the French New Right, talks in his text "Contre tous les racismes" about a "décolonisation réciproque" that should be achieved through "ethnopluralism".
- 5 Cf. Stern, Alexandra Minna 2019: *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate. How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press. p 51 – 69, on the issue of geographical separation see p 54 and p 58.
- 6 Cottagecore describes a style of dress or decoration that is borrowed from an idealised representation of rural British life. The name of the style is taken from small houses (cottages) found in rural Britain. Posts with the cottagecore aesthetic have been circulating on social media under this name since the 2010s and have become particularly popular on image and video platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Cottagecore is a popular aesthetic in various online communities. It is in no way a right-wing extremist phenomenon. It is just that this generally popular style online is also popular with right-wing extremist actors, who consider it to be compatible with their ideology.
- 7 The journalist Gilead Edelman describes Web3 as follows: "At the most basic level, Web3 refers to a decentralized online ecosystem based on the blockchain. Platforms and apps built on Web3 won't be owned by a central gatekeeper, but rather by users, who will earn their ownership stake by helping to develop and maintain those services". See Edelman, Gilead: "The Father of Web3 Wants You to Trust Less", *Wired*, 29/11/2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/web3-gavin-wood-interview/>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 8 Since 2021, Odysee has been an independent company and is no longer part of LBRY. Therefore, we cannot say whether the current CEO of the company is also a proponent of libertarianism. The continued inclusion of the LBRY protocol and LBRY Credits mean that the company's ideas continue to have an effect on the architecture of the platform.
- 9 Stallman, Richard: "Why Open Source Misses the Point of Free Software", GNU, <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html.en>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 10 Peterson, Scott K: "What's the difference between open source software and free software?", *Open-source.com*, 07/11/2017, <https://opensource.com/article/17/11/open-source-or-free-software>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 11 Stallman, Richard: "The Free Software Community After 20 Years: With great but incomplete success, what now?", GNU, <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/use-free-software.html>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Stallman, Richard: "Free Software Is Even More Important Now", <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-software-even-more-important.html.en>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 14 Kan, Michael: "Trump's Social Media Site Quietly Admits It's Based on Mastodon", *PCMag*, 01/12/2021, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/trumps-social-media-site-quietly-admits-its-based-on-mastodon>, accessed on 25/11/2022.

- 15 Cf. Squirrel, Tim: “Interplay of authority and expertise in online self-improvement communities”, 2020, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/37283>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 16 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: “Napster”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Undated, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Napster>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 17 Johnson, Dave: “What is piracy? Here's what you need to know about digital piracy, and how to avoid stolen digital content”, Business Insider, 21/03/2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/guides/tech/what-is-piracy>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 18 Freenet Project: “What is Freenet?”, Undated, <https://freenetproject.org/pages/about.html>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 19 Cf. Nakamoto, Satoshi: “Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System”, Undated, Bitcoin.org, <https://bitcoin.org/de/bitcoin-paper>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 20 Frankenfield, Jake: “Peer-to-Peer (Virtual Currency)”, Investopedia.com, 23/09/2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/ptop.asp>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 21 Cf. Guhl, Jakob and Hammer, Dominik: “The Reichsbürger Movement”, ISD, 08/12/2022, <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-reichsburger-movement-explainer/>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 22 For a more intensive discussion of the topic, see Guhl, Jakob; Marsh, Oliver; Tuck, Henry: “Researching the Evolving Online Ecosystem: Barriers, Methods and Future Challenges”, ISD, 21/07/2021, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/researching-the-evolving-online-ecosystem-barriers-methods-and-future-challenges/>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 23 Hammer, Dominik; Matlach, Paula and Baaken, Till: “Signposts: Background report for the project Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 24/10/2022, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/signposts-a-background-report-on-right-wing-extremist-online-subcultures/>, accessed on 12/12/2022, p 9-10. Originally published in German on 23/10/2021.
- 24 Matlach, Paula; Hammer, Dominik; Schwieter, Christian: “Auf Odysee: Die Rolle von Blockchain-Technologie für die Monetarisierung im rechtsextremen Onlinemilieu”, ISD Germany, 10/08/2022, <https://isdgermany.org/auf-odysee-die-rolle-von-blockchain-technologie/>, accessed on 06/12/2022. English translation forthcoming.
- 25 For further elaborations concerning options for action, see “Auf Odysee”, p 22-24.
- 26 Ibid., p 12.
- 27 For a further discussion of this issue, see also Rozenstein, Alan Z.: “Moderating the Fediverse: Content Moderation on Distributed Social Media”, 23/11/2022, 2 Journal of Free Speech Law (2023, Forthcoming), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4213674](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4213674); Kayser-Bril, Nicolas: “The fediverse is growing, but power imbalances might stay”, Algorithm Watch, 02/11/2022, <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/fediverse-growing-power-imbalances-stay/>; Komaitis, Konstantinos; de Franssu, Louis-Victor: “Can Mastodon Survive Europe’s Digital Services Act?”, Tech Policy Press, 16/11/2022, <https://techpolicy.press/can-mastodon-survive-europes-digital-services-act/>, all accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 28 It is still unclear whether DSA obligations will also apply to instances that are operated without the intention of making a profit or can be used free of charge. The definition of a digital service as an “Information Society service” according to Art. 1(1)(b) of Directive (EU) 2015/1535 is key here. This requires that the service is “normally provided for remuneration”.
- 29 As described in the ISD report “Die Hydra im Netz”, many actors frequently use PeerTube instances as an alternative platform because their accounts have been deleted on established video platforms like YouTube for breaching the terms and conditions of use. This phenomenon is observed in both the right-wing extremist and the conspiracy theorist spectrum. But the reach of the videos cannot be compared with the previous reach on YouTube. However, it can be observed that some of these actors do not use PeerTube instances as YouTube alternatives. Often these actors switch off social network features like commenting or creating user accounts. The PeerTube instance then acts as a kind of video archive – the contents are primarily shared by embedding in websites or links in Telegram messages.
- 30 Also see “Die Hydra im Netz”, p 36-37.
- 31 Peter Gervai, Gitlab, <https://gitlab.com/grin/peer-tube-plugin-glavliiit>, accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 32 For further discussion about modularity as a possible instrument for internet regulation, see Riley, Chris; Ness, Susan: “Modularity for International Internet Governance”, Lawfare, 19/07/2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/modularity-international-internet-governance>, accessed on 12/12/2022.

- 33 Cf. “Die Hydra im Netz”.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT): “Incident Response”, Undated, <https://gifct.org/incident-response/>; Tech against Terrorism, <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/>, both accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 36 “Swatting” refers to the practice of making fake emergency calls to the police, or sending police officers to a particular address with complaints about allegedly armed conflicts in the hope that the armed special police forces storm that address and possibly kill, injure or traumatise the residents. The word swatting comes from the acronym for the American special police forces, known as “**S**pecial **W**eapons **A**nd **T**actics teams”.
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- 39 Cf. for example Tagesschau articles: “Mastodon – das bessere Twitter?” [Mastodon – the better Twitter?], 28/10/2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/mastodon-twitter-alternative-kurznachrichtendienst-101.html>; Drosdowski, Johannes: “Auf einem anderen Planeten” [On another planet], TAZ, 20/11/2022, <https://taz.de/Twitter-Alternative-Mastodon/!5893407/>; Meineck, Sebastian: “Wie Behörden, Medien und NGOs Mastodon für sich entdecken” [How authorities, media and NGOs are discovering Mastodon], Netzpolitik.org, 18/11/2022, <https://netzpolitik.org/2022/twitter-exodus-wie-behoerden-medien-und-ngos-mastodon-fuer-sich-entdecken/>, all accessed on 12/12/2022.
- 40 The European Data Protection Officer (EDPS) established its own Mastodon instance (*EU Voice*, [social.network.europa.eu](https://social.network.europa.eu)) and PeerTube instance (*EU Video*, [tube.network.europa.eu](https://tube.network.europa.eu)) through a pilot programme as part of the EU strategy for data and digital sovereignty. In the meantime, many German ministries and agencies now have an account on the official German Federal government instance ([social.bund.de](https://social.bund.de)), led by the Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information (BfDI). Governmental promotion of the Fediverse, not just through its use by state bodies, but also through financial support, would be one possible way to bolster the Fediverse community in the fight against right-wing extremism and compliance with the DSA regulations.





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