HATE NOT FOUND?!

DEPLATFORMING THE FAR RIGHT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

IDZ INSTITUT FÜR DEMOKRATIE UND ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT

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FACEBOOK

INHALT

Introduction

This study investigates how restrictions on accessing social media platforms impact far-right hate actors in Germany. Social media channels have assumed a significant role for far-right mobilizations and, at the same time, contributed to a reorientation and re-organization of far-right politics. Since 2015, with the heightened influx of migrants to Europe, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have developed into effective amplifiers of far-right messaging and contributed to the transnationalization of far-right discourse and mobilization. Today, many people encounter far-right content via these platforms. Moreover, hate actors make use of instant communication formats to stage their ideology as a lifestyle – a strategy for appealing to young people, in particular.

Companies, states and supranational organizations have increasingly recognized that anti-democratic actors are exploiting the freedoms offered by Web 2.0. Mounting pressure from various segments of politics, the private sector and civil society has forced tech companies to more effectively combat hate speech, causing many hate actors to lose crucial channels for exchange and mobilization. The regulative act of banning a group or an individual and denying them access to interactive platforms that facilitate interpersonal exchange of information and ideas is referred to as deplatforming.[1] The act of deplatforming robs the far right of the possibility of utilizing wide-spread communication structures. Though effective, this strategy is not without controversy: for critics, it is perceived, and also feared, as an illegitimate constraint on people's freedom of expression. In this context, a lack of both transparency and coherency on the part of social media networks, paired with questions about how hate is identified in the first place and who holds the interpretive authority, are highly relevant yet under-researched issues that impact society.

To date, most studies have relied on case-specific evidence to problematize the consequences of deplatforming, rarely moving beyond ad-hoc analyses. There has also been a dearth of systematic investigations that address how deplatforming by mainstream social media platforms impacts far-right mobilization, in general, and the deleted actors, in particular. Looking into the case of Germany, this research report presents the results of the first systematic investigation into deplatforming and its consequences. Our investigation reconstructs patterns of interaction between platforms and hate actors and specifically analyzes:

a) **reductions in scope and reach that hate actors suffer upon banning or deletion,**

b) **innovative responses that they develop to maintain their means of communication, and**

c) **how these hate actors reorient their mobilization activities using social media.**

In our empirical analysis, we start by mapping the relevant hate actors and breaking down their share of activities across platforms. Based on this analysis, we identify the actual extent of deplatforming and the resultant losses of reach and scope among these actors. Drawing from our selected case studies, we then examine recurring patterns concerning the procedures and discourses surrounding deplatforming as well as how it is dealt with. To do so, we make use of process tracing techniques, mainly drawing from a review of primary and secondary sources. Finally, using a framing analysis, we investigate the discursive dynamics of deplatforming in terms of far-right actors' capacity for mobilizing followers; for this, we consider interactions between possible criminal prosecution, platform moderation and self-regulation by these actors.

This diversity of research methods applied in this study indicates that deplatforming falls within a broader complex of far-right mobilization as well as the dilemmas that countermeasures bring about. Touching upon questions of social acceptability, legal transgression and the protection of fundamental rights, how to deal with online hate is understood as one of the central challenges of our times. Within the context of debates about free speech and limitations that are necessary to protect vulnerable groups, deplatforming has become a politically charged topic (Smith 2020). As such, deplatforming necessarily extends far beyond the specific imposition of community standards, a fact that is also confirmed by our findings.

Executive Summary

- Deplatforming key far-right actors significantly limits their networked mobilization capacities and denies them a key resource for attaining what they seek most: attention. Based on our data, we may unequivocally state that deplatforming does work in this sense.

- At the same time, hate actors are neither caught by surprise nor unprepared for repressive policies enforced by mainstream platforms. On the contrary: they have developed innovative approaches for responding to such measures, which signalizes their ability to adapt and act. Strategies includes semantic mimicry tactics, the (audio)visualization of propaganda, the creation of fake accounts, the utilization of proxies[2], recourse to alternative platforms, and the establishment of own digital infrastructures.

- Alternative networks are used for spreading deleted content on large-scale platforms. In this manner, hate actors steer their followers and content across a variety of different platforms.

- The messaging app Telegram has become the most important online platform for hate actors in Germany: 96% of the actors we investigated in our study operate (super)active channels on this platform. Most consider Telegram to be their primary basis for communication. What makes this hybrid platform so special is that 1) it is hardly subject to any forms of moderation by the operator, 2) it displays push notifications directly on phone screens and 3) users can easily switch between its private messaging and public channel functions.

- Resorting to alternative platforms does not completely compensate for deletion from the digital mainstream. Apart from Telegram, no other stable alternative forums have established themselves for the German far right. As such, the ideas they promote are not as effectively circulated on the available alternative platforms because few German-speaking users actually use them.

- In order to avoid the unintended consequences that arise as a result of deplatforming – such as generating even more attention for hate actors and raising their perceived level of importance – measures must be better coordinated, more clearly communicated and implemented in accordance with universal human rights.

[1] A similar (tentative) definition is provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary: https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-good-the-bad-the-semantically-imprecise-08102018.

[2] This term denotes internet users who spread news stories in the name of other individuals, thereby conceal their actual motivations. They are used by activists for sharing their own content.

This report is divided into five chapters. It begins by assessing and classifying how far-right extremism has changed in the era of social media (Chapter 2). We discuss why deplatforming has become an important factor for their chances of success and which unintended consequences deplatforming brings with it. We present our findings in the empirical sections that follow, starting with an outline of the relevant actors and a description of the ways in which the actor landscape has recently changed in the context of protests against measures aimed at controlling the spread of Covid-19 (Chapter 3). Using various case studies, we investigate the patterns and processes associated with deplatforming different actor groups (Chapter 4). The following section explores the innovative discursive strategies that hate actors have adopted to prevent, anticipate and circumvent suspension from digital platforms (Chapter 5). In the final Chapter 6, we look into the limits of deplatforming and present recommendations based on the findings from our study.

WE DISCUSS WHY DEPLATFORMING HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT FACTOR FOR THE FAR RIGHT'S CHANCES OF SUCCESS AND WHICH UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES DEPLATFORMING BRINGS WITH IT.

Social media, deplatforming and the far right

Across the globe, social media has become the primary domain in which the far right operates and recruits its followers. There are hardly any far-right actors who choose to eschew the services offered by digital platforms for circulating their content and disseminating messages to audiences beyond their immediate reach.[3] Their digital activism has become multi-faceted; through the use of manipulative tactics and aggressive behaviors, it poses a threat to the cohesive and emancipatory potential held by these platforms. The following tendencies are clearly visible: comments sections are filled with racist messages, far-right content runs through timelines and derogatory statements about women and minorities are posted public profiles on a daily basis. In one representative survey of hate speech in Germany, 16% of German internet users admit to having left social networks on account of hate-related content (Geschke et al. 2019: 28).

Hate has consequences – for one's individual health, for democratic culture, for the results of elections and for the integrity of life and limb. Even before the attacks in Christchurch, El Paso, Halle and Hanau, it was evident that the diffusion mechanisms offered by social media had become an effective tool used in the preparations and mediatization of attacks associated with the recent wave of right-wing terrorism (Ahmed et al. 2020; Albrecht/Fielitz 2019). Many of the perpetrators who take up arms or attack refugee camps act based on content that they consume on social media. At the same time, these actors do not necessarily have direct contact with far-right offline networks, such as local movements, gangs or political parties. This fact underscores the responsibility that falls upon the operators of digital networks, who frequently are unable to effectively cope with the sheer mass of content that undermines their community standards. At the same time, an all-encompassing system for monitoring accounts specifically used to spread hate, false information or even livestream acts of violence is unfeasible and difficult to implement. The live-broadcasting functions found on Facebook and Twitch served as a stage for the terror attacks in Christchurch and Halle, through which potentially millions of people had the opportunity to view the streams and participate in these acts of violence in real time (Macklin 2019). While the uploaded videos were subsequently deleted from these platforms hundreds of thousands of times, they spread to other platforms.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the toxic potential held by manipulative content during times of crisis has only worsened. Social media is being used as a messenger for disseminating false information about campaigns aimed at controlling the pandemic – and with life-threatening

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[3] Exceptions that should not be overlooked include intentionally conspiratorial actors such as groups that promote violence, grassroots projects and financing and strategy networks comprised of cadres and individuals operating behind the scenes for whom publicity would pose a threat. We may assume that interdependent relations exist between conspirative and public far-right actors.

consequences (Donovan 2020a). Hate groups have doubled down on efforts to spread their own alternative theories about the pandemic and gain political capital from the crisis. Furthermore, we are observing rapid growth in the number of conspiracy theories based on antisemitic views that are being promoted via social media platforms – which repeatedly manifest in protests and acts of violence. Tech companies have, on their part, stepped up their efforts to curtail potentially dangerous dynamics. Recently, Facebook and Instagram banned all content that denies the Holocaust, Twitter has taken a tougher stance against fake news, and TikTok was one of the first platforms to block hashtags that make reference to the far-right conspiracy movement *QAnon*.

a. Hate actors on social media

Social media has become the central arena in which political change is initiated, negotiated, organized and communicated. Low barriers for entry ensure that virtually anyone can make use of the services provided by tech companies. This also applies to political actors who utilize these platforms to propagate their worldviews, mobilize like-minded allies and win over new supporters: with just a few clicks, users can launch campaigns and gather a following. Existing online networks comprising millions of individuals facilitate the process of approaching and recruiting supporters, and actors are able to adapt their communication habits according to the parameters of each platform.

While free expression on social media has long been understood as an invitation to promote progressive change in the world, the darker facets of this technology in the form of unfiltered hate and racist propaganda have more recently come into focus, demonstrating that social media can level the playing field for far-right worldviews. Other forms of undesired, dangerous or criminal and toxic communication such as overtly terrorist content, pornography and fraud have always been subject to automatic deletion. Which content is deemed to be legitimate varies by culture; this is not exclusively determined by law but also by social norms, values and universal human rights. In terms of anti-discrimination efforts, the latter are crucial points of orientation for how to deal with hate on the Internet.

Only recently have researchers of far-right extremism in Germany started to focus on hate dynamics in the digital world and investigate how they impact and interact with offline mobilization. Since trans-regional groupings are constantly forming, quickly dissolving and being created anew under different banners on digital platforms, applying new research perspectives proves indispensable. As such, one area of concern pertains to the role that digital platform policies play for far-right politics. This question is ever more relevant as platforms have become a central terrain for promoting political change in general and far-right visions in particular. Most visibly, far-right influencers have been gaining traction, many using large fan bases to pursue their own agendas while also combining political activism with commercial interests.

This example shows that the emergence of hate actors online operates quite differently than the creation of organized structures in the offline world. Online hate actors do not have a fixed body of members, they are not bound to a locality and they often blur the lines between the political and the private in that propaganda content appears alongside topics of everyday interest. As the battle for attention can be fought without the need for a large amount of resources, it is also difficult to predict which actors are likely to be the most effective at disseminating far-right campaigns. Considering that social media channels already constitute a meta-organization, it is often the actors with a knack for digital communication that profit the most.

The ongoing transition of politics into digital spheres is also changing the groups and individuals who set the tone within the far-right milieu. There has been a shift away from hierarchically organized actors towards digital entrepreneurs who draw support almost exclusively from their social media channels to reach and influence others. While classic movement entrepreneurs from the neo-Nazi scene gained recognition through the networks and organizational abilities they have built (Erb 2006), many far-right influencers are hardly attached to offline structures at all, instead making use of their base of followers to highlight the relevance of their positions. Combining political and economic interests, digital entrepreneurs may accumulate more political mobilization potential than political parties.

Additionally, individuals occasionally shift between roles as influencers and movement cadres, as exemplified by Martin Sellner, leader of the Austrian chapter of the *Identitäre Bewegung*. Constellations like this make it difficult to differentiate between individual and collective action. Considering these pitfalls, our study uses the term "hate actors" in order to capture organized far-right offline actors as well as informal digital collectives, alternative media and influencers who share basic far-right attitudes such as nativism, authoritarianism, Islamophobia and antisemitism. Hence, the concept of hate actors applies to hate groups that "overtly and aggressively demonizes or dehumanizes members of a scapegoated target group in a systematic way" (Berlet 2004: 21; see also: Blazak 2009) as they appl individual and hybrid types of actors as well.

The social figure of the influencer is important to understand contemporary trends of far-right extremism. Influencers create new forms of community via social media formats, such as You-Tube videos, and cause others to align themselves with an individual content creator (Lewis 2018). These (para-)social interactions bear greater resemblance to those of a community of fans than those of politically-established collectives (Marwick 2015; Abidin 2018). Hence, in contrast to terminologies such as "the far right", hate actors include individuals who have developed influence beyond established structures and may not identify with this political spectrum. Nevertheless, the boundaries are fluid and tend to coalesce over the course of time, rendering a clear analytical distinction impractical.

Hate actors comprise individuals or collective actors who discriminate against or degrade other groups of people for not fitting into their conception of a homogeneous community, be it on account of their skin color, presumed background, ancestry, beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation, social status, serious illness or disability.[4]

The concept of hate actors implies that the socio-technical conditions associated with digitalization are constantly altering the face of far-right extremism. As a bridge to the mainstream, social media platforms facilitate the networked capacities that far-right actors would otherwise lack – with algorithms capable of broadly disseminating racist clickbait in seconds. Today, it is not uncommon for oblivious social media users to encounter right-wing propaganda via non-transparent distribution chains while simply browsing for cooking recipes and beauty tips. Social media are, indeed, giving birth to new actors in this field who deploy sophisticated forms of media activism, leading to the establishment of a cross-platform propaganda system. It takes just a few clicks for one to become part of this broader dynamic and contribute to the spread of disinformation that, in turn, has the potential to derail democratic mechanisms. The use of certain hashtags and narratives serves as a gateway into the ecosystem of far-right media activism, one that does not rest upon any form of authorization, membership or fixed ideological bedrock. As social media brings people together faster than ever, its horizontal structure, at least temporarily, erases the distinctions between organized and the non-organized forms of far-right extremism.

[4] In other cultural contexts, caste is also a characteristic to be protected against hate.

b. The intended and unintended consequences of deplatformings

As social media platforms today connect much more than just users, they assume a vital role in shaping the political culture of democratic societies: they serve as news aggregators, as market-places, as spaces for cultural creativity and as stages for political debate. The measures taken by the CEOs of the involved tech companies have a huge impact on news coverage from conventional media channels, on the outcome of elections and on the way millions of people think. "[T]heir choices about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse" (Gillespie 2010: 359). It is no coincidence, then, that the way these platforms are designed, the way their algorithms are curated, and the ways political actors are made (in-)visible have therefore become core issues of political controversy.

As digital platforms move beyond the bounds of national and democratic controls, the decisions made by their operators require public justification – it is no longer merely a matter of private economic interests. Public Facebook pages have, for example, been used to coordinate events, such as the far-right rallies in Charlottesville in August 2017 and in Chemnitz in 2018, to incite a genocide in Myanmar and to instigate violence against Black Lives Matter demonstrators. The assassination of Walter Lübcke, the municipal president of the German City of Kassel, was called for across various social networks. At the same time, closed groups are used to share fantasies of violence as well as to plan and execute acts of clandestine violence, as in the case of the German right-wing terrorist group the *Oldschool Society*. As similar instances abound, the question, then, is not whether platforms should intervene, but how. The more that far-right extremism takes on a life of its own on social media, the harder it will be to contain.

Deplatforming is the technical act of disabling social media profiles and rendering their content inaccessible to other users (Rogers 2020). For platforms that advertise "open participation, unen-cumbered interaction, and the protection of speech" (Gillespie 2018: 176), this step is an *ultima ratio* for dealing with problems. In this sense, the platform operators are only inclined to delete profiles in exceptional cases so as to not give the impression that they are acting arbitrarily or motivated by political bias. At the same time, deleting individual profiles also represents a highly visible message that can be communicated to the broader public: the act of deplatforming itself establishes standards for when individuals or groups have crossed the line of what is acceptable. This creates path dependency insofar as the same violations committed in the future must be handled in the same manner. Concurrently, banning an individual begs the question of why the respective platform operator did not react to toxic developments before.

Several pages created by far-right actors with a broad public reach have been banned for several years already, including those belonging to the *Identitäre Bewegung* and *Pegida* on Facebook and that of US-American conspiracy theorist Alex Jones on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. In 2020, *QAnon* conspiracists were experiencing so much traction online, that Facebook deleted more than 900 associated groups in one day. Related to this, debates addressing the normative basis for de-platforming have also gained ground (Suzor 2019): What do open societies consider as appropriate speech? When is it reasonable to set boundaries? Indeed, accounts belonging to extremist actors have only been deleted once they managed to build strong communities of support.

Civil society organizations consider the deplatforming of hate groups as one of the most effective tactics for weakening the contemporary far right (Mulhall 2018). This deprives them of four key features offered by social media[5]: the technical infrastructure for internal organization, the free, algorithmic circulation of far-right propaganda, monetization via donations and advertising revenue, and the possibility of harassing communities via trolling. At the same time, others argue that the unintended consequences of deplatforming are largely overlooked (Klein 2020), thereby raising another set of concerns, namely: that migration to different platforms is merely shifting the problem elsewhere; that deplatforming can lead to further radicalization as actors feel vindicated to withdraw from the mainstream; and that, by portraying themselves as victims, such actors can end up gaining more attention in the wake of repressive measures. Moreover, deplatforming posts or profiles does not necessarily put an end to conflict between platform operators and users. Many social media platforms offer the option of appealing bans or deletions through complaint forms or contact channels, and, in recent years, national courts have repeatedly had to rule on the legality of such moves.

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[5] For more about deplatforming, see Megan Squire: https://twitter.com/MeganSquire0/status/1281621930202849280.

HATE ACTORS USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOUNDING BOARD FOR THEIR ANTI-DEMOCRATIC VIEWS; WITHOUT THESE PLATFORMS, THEY WOULD CERTAINLY GARNER MUCH LESS ATTENTION AND INFLUENCE.

Mapping German hate actors on social media

In Germany, we have witnessed the emergence of a diverse array of hate-actor networks that use social media to propagate their positions and worldviews. Their fundamental opposition to immigration and the Merkel government can be seen as a unifying banner that lays out a very salient friend-foe dichotomy. Activism carried out via social media channels brings together diverse characters, the gathering of which would hardly be as effective in the absence of digital networking. This has also become evident at demonstrations against government measures aimed at curbing the Covid-19 pandemic: groups as diverse as neo-Nazis, Sovereign Citizens (*Reichsbürger*), conspiracy theorists, reactionary peace activists, and anti-vaxxers all came together through the use of social media. It is difficult to identify who sets the tone or whether a group with a large number of followers or professional influencers are behind a particular online channel. When searching for German hate actors on the Internet – and the potential consequences of their ostracization – we can distinguish among three ideal types, each with its down distinct development and containment dynamics:

- **The appropriation of digital spaces and digital repertoires by far-right organizations.** This category includes the political models fostered by the Identitäre Bewegung, which use social media as a staging platform to communicate a distorted representation of reality.

- **The formation of racist groups on social media that make their way onto the streets.** The countless offshoots of the *Pegida* movement represent a prominent example of how people find each ther online to organize demonstrations in their cities. Far-right chat groups that conspire clandestinely to commit acts of violence function in a similar manner.

- **The formation of mixed scenes emerging from the fusion of digital subcultures and conspiracy theories, leading to the establishment of actors that are difficult to classify.** Conspiracy movements have emerged from this context, including *QAnon* and Covid-19 deniers with far-right sympathies, which delegitimize democratic procedures.

What all three of these scenarios have in common is that they use social media as a sounding board for their anti-democratic views; without these platforms, they would certainly garner much less attention and influence. They directly communicate with their target groups using emotion-ally-charged content and rely almost exclusively on the digital infrastructure for their internal or-ganization. The content they create is capable of reaching an unimaginable number of people through the use of manipulative tactics of online activism and amplification based on algorithms. To better assess just how deplatforming influences the dynamics of this heterogeneous field, the next section maps out the relevant actors and identifies whether and to what extent their actions have been obstructed.

a. Influential hate actors and their habitats

Attempting to measure the relevance of hate actors is prone to a number of pitfalls. Many of them project a highly inflated image of themselves to the outside world in order to impress by way of magnitude and to mobilize followers. To gauge the strength and the threat posed by hate actors today, simply analyzing their behavior on one of the platforms they use is no longer sufficient. Their behavior is mutually coordinated in a transmedial manner – just as in an ecosystem, interdepend-encies emerge between individual or collective actors and their environment (Benkler et al. 2018). Those who are unable to suitably adapt to certain patterns of speech and behavior either succumb to irrelevance or are expelled from the platform. A solid understanding of strategic communication is therefore essential to be able to position one's own content while also directing various messages to different target groups. Well-aware of the restrictions that mainstream platforms impose, hate groups are forced to assume more explicit positions on marginal forums, from which they are able to guide their followers across the other platforms.

For the purpose of this study, we selected relevant hate actors based on four criteria: reach, activity, transmediality and autonomy. (1) *Reach* – measured by the number of followers and interactions, but also in the form of print circulation, members and attention in the media – is the key criteria for visibility and influence in debates. Reach is expanded through regular (2) *activity* and the use of innovative publication formats. Actors who generate their own content on social media, organize meetings or frequently publish in specific forums demonstrate agility in this regard. These activities, in turn, motivate other people to interact with them. A key factor here is the capacity to engage in (3) *transmedial* communication. This pattern refers to converging and mutually-reinforcing media channels – ideally both online and offline (Jenkins 2006). Complementing one's communication flows across platforms is a key strategy for garnering support and reaching as many people as possible. The fourth criterion is the organizational (4) *autonomy* of these actors. This is not often a given as many campaign organizations are either closely connected to one or more host organ-izations or lack coherence in their political beliefs – especially among digitally-born movements.

We therefore excluded hate actors in the orbit of the AfD as well as ad-hoc groups without a clear direction such as the *Corona Rebels* (Coronarebellen). As a whole, our selection is concerned with the extra-parliamentary sector of the far right.

Besides an assessment of racist, nativistic and conspiracy-theory-based content promoted by the selected actors, the extent to which they network among themselves is another essential consid-eration in our choice. The next step entailed identifying the platforms on which these actors were especially active or, as the case may be, inactive and banned. In order to be able to make more valid assertions about this field, we excluded the political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which has served as a sort of anchor point for the far right. Since it is represented in parliament, we deemed it unlikely for this party to lose its strong social media presence. With over half a million followers, the AfD enjoys the highest reach among all political parties on Facebook as well as the largest YouTube channel. Political parties in parliament are also legally protected to ensure equal opportunities among all democratically elected competitors. Nevertheless, the AfD draws on nu-merous hateful narratives and many hate actors are connected to the party in one way or another. This is evident, for example, when recalling whom the party invited to its so-called "Conferences of the Free Media", which it hosted at the Bundestag for the second time in 2020. Many of the 55 hate actors that we identified do, indeed, see themselves as alternative media creators, who actively support the AfD in their activism.

Table 1

Influential Hate actors in Germany (created: November 2020)

	Facebook	Youtube	Twitter	Instagram	Website	Telegram	VK	Gab	BitChute
achse:ostwest	4461	109.000				14.906			
Anonymous News	[2000000]		3527			3.505	1.622		
Antaios	5578	10600	5520	1878					
Anti-Spiegel	4694	43600	6455	188		5472			
Arcadi Magazin	2772	1910	764	[1341]		415			
Attila Hildmann	[132500]	71200	6559	[68000]		81816		33	1797
Chris Ares*	8096	[80000]	997	23100		13996	660		
Compact	[90000]	139000	30000			22293	2899		
Connectiv Events	5656	16100	78	13		13406			
Contra Magazin	27133	1120	2241			40	3405		
Der Dritte Blickwinkel	5664	1670	1227	5420		5461	1400	8	529
Der III. Weg			3229			1774	2079		
Der Volkslehrer		[70000]	1741	6175		27226	1831		7843
Deutschland Kurier	69229	81300	12121	276		1500			
Die Rechte Dortmund	[10000]	2010	2846			1934	1158	37	
Die Schwarze Fahne		1230	1426	446		896			
Die Vulgäre Analyse		8480				10993			3740
Ein Prozent	[96000]	11700	15444			8691			31
Einzelfallinfos	101		19793			3146		2700	
Eva Herman		69700				141160			
Hagen Grell	4089	[85000]	5247	1183		12800			5266
Hans-Joachim Müller	[13292]	94800	2426			40501	4308		580
Heiko Schrang	14188	178000	8586	17300		78510	4074		2765
Henryk Stöckl	6728	40400	4127	[1200]		7288	1199	1	503
Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland		27000	[29600]			7967	2670		46
Ignaz Bearth	689	34800	1138	590		16958	2791		3633
Info Direkt	[21000]	2560				5109			
Journalistenwatch	33130	1620	11648	107		8592	4376	477	
Junge Revolution	[300]					1698			41
Klemens Kilic		26600	6283	90300		6998			2449

Legend:
- **Active** (green)
- **No account** (red)
- **Private profile** (blue)
- **Idle since 6 months** (grey)
- **Deplatformed Self-deleted** (black)

*　In the case of the identitarian activist Chris Area, we considered the numbers before his withdrawal from social media in September 2020.

Table 1 – Continuation

	Facebook	Youtube	Twitter	Instagram	Website	Telegram	VK	Gab	BitChute
Kolja Bonke				48			1033	5700	
Laut Gedacht	[6000]	54700	4812	[5000]		5389			1858
Lutz Bachmann	11390	20800	9577	25400		5746	2897	146	566
Malenki		21000	4987			4719			176
Martin Sellner		[151157]	[44900]	[11000]		57005	5042	1000	16358
Naomi Seibt	26695	101000	41100	5854		12847			707
Neverforgetniki	67627	178000	35243	45000		22365			
NPD Bundesverband	152911					1139	1092		
Oliver Flesch	8936	57800				17421	439		
Oliver Janich	18425	[158000]	15879			141325	6625	197	7373
Pegida	[15600]			1569		2861	5698		
Philosophia Perennis	9386	262				458	861		
PI News		8410	4998			3961	633		
Politikstube		2920	2573	1		788	1073		327
Politikversagen	[16300]		1939			1184	245		
Prototyp NDS	728		433	8101		1717			
Qlobal Change		[108000]				126682	69	42	2230
Roman Möseneder		3670	8905	7222		1591		93	
Sezession	4901	10700	7192			533			
Sonnenkreuz Versand	3653	714	226	1185		1341			
Sven Liebich/Halle Leaks	[8000]	4980				8973	3533		
Tim Kellner	267189	256000		31300		41112	4763		
Tommy Frenck	[1000]	4150				4593	3696		
UNBLOGD/Miró Wolsfeld	[1700]	33300	2658	2604		21559	66	19	8353
Zukunft Heimat	17504		3892	2195		431			
Aktive Profile	20	36	36	17	39	52	22	6	20
Private Profile	5	0		0		0	1	0	0
Inaktive Profile	3	4	2	8	1	0	7	7	2
Deplatformte Profile	20	9	8	12	0	0	0	0	0
Gesamtreichweite	781553	1732806	297837	277455		1030791	72237	10453	67171
Durchschnitt Reichweite	26950	44430	7316	11098		25072	2409	804	3053

Active

No account

Private profile

Idle since 6 months

Deplatformed Self-deleted

Table 1: Influential Hate actors in Germany (created: November 2020)

As Table 1 shows, over half of the hate actors we investigated, 29 out of 55 (November 2020), either had their accounts deleted or banned or dissolved them on their own. These interventions generally occurred on the platforms where the actors were the most active, thereby causing them to lose the communities they had built up over time. Added to this are profile restrictions: as we illustrate using specific examples later in the text, such restrictions lead to massive losses in terms of reach. Our investigation does, however, show that such bans tend to be very fragmented: for example, while actors including the far-right conspiracist magazine *Compact* and the identitarian musician *Prototyp* NDS lost important platforms for exchange, they remained highly active on others. To avoid being banned from additional platforms, these actors use posts to direct followers to their own websites – the content of which not every platform operator ultimately scrutinizes. The only actors who were ejected completely from the digital mainstream were Austrian identitarian Martin Sellner and the neo-Nazi youth organization *Junge Revolution*.

Among the hate actors identified here, most were banned – or deleted themselves – from Facebook (20), followed by Instagram (12), YouTube (9) and Twitter (7). One point to note is that Instagram is not frequently used by the actors we investigate in this study, which does not, however, imply that this platform does not have its own problems with far-right extremism.[6] Moreover, few actors in Germany are attracted to Twitter since this platform reaches far fewer users than the other large platforms and its comment function is not as popular as that, for example, of Facebook; as a result, high interaction rates and extended user chains are less likely to occur on this platform. Overall, YouTube offers hate actors the greatest degree of reach, both in absolute and relative terms. On average, their YouTube profiles reach 44,430 followers while this number falls to just 26,950 on Facebook, particularly on account of the company's deplatforming measures.

In terms of the significance of social media platforms for the far-right ecosystem, we may clearly state that the messaging app **Telegram** assumes a central function for hate actors. With just two exceptions, all of the actors we investigated maintain a channel here. For far-right groups and influencers, their Telegram channels serve as a basis from which they can communicate their messages directly and without interference. The option of rapidly forwarding posts, which instantly spread messages as push notifications, are one of the most effective means of constantly staying connected to content and its creators. As opposed to the messaging service WhatsApp, which limits the size of groups to 256 users and only allows messages to be forwarded to up to 5 people, Telegram has opted against regulations, ensuring unrestricted communication for all of its users – with very few exceptions. This position is welcomed in far-right circles: in contrast to mainstream social media channels, which may place limitations on the reach of malicious content, far-right groups are able to share unfiltered information here. Furthermore, Telegram is a back-up channel in the event of a ban from other platforms and a perpetual info point for followers to find updates.

Large-scale commercial platforms such as YouTube and Facebook are still indispensable for effectively disseminating content. As YouTube is based on audio-visual formats that offer a great degree of flexibility for communicating messages, it is especially popular among hate actors. Content

creators are dependent on creating their own personal style while the community format aims to achieve consolidation with a target audience. Forms of showmanship are heavily reliant on a personality cult and communicate a sense of immediacy that hate actors take advantage of to create relationships with individuals based on supposedly authentic content. As Rebecca Lewis has pointed out, this inevitably represents a one-way para-social relationship, giving followers the feeling that they truly know the protagonists and are close to him/her (Lewis 2019).

In recent years, **Facebook** has progressively lost its role as a key mobilization platform among hate actors in Germany. Today, most actors use it merely as a hub for sharing links or to comment on posts from other sites. Moreover, many discussions take place within the confines of closed groups, in which news stories are debated and networking takes place among the participating actors. In this manner, hate actors create a coordinated image that conveys a polished message to the outside world while sharing extremist content in closed groups and via Facebook Messenger. **Twitter** is used for its potential to generate scandal and for instigating online hate campaigns. However, as Twitter accounts hardly produce original content and instead tend to repost content from other platforms, far-right activists here rely on resonance from the media and their political opponents.

When the accounts of far-right hate actors are deleted, they move to back-up accounts on alternative platforms – also referred to as alt-tech.[7] In the case of video streaming, **BitChute**[8] has emerged as an alternative hosting channel that permits neo-Nazi and terrorist content (Davis 2020). While the Russian platform **VK**[9] functions as a back-up for Facebook, it suffers from limited capabilities to reach the broader masses, and, at least in the German context, it lacks reach and interactive potential due to a limited number of users. Finally, the alt-tech forum **Gab**[10] and the right-wing conservative media platform **Parler**[11] have arisen as alternatives to Twitter; so far, however, these platforms have barely come into wide-spread use by the far right in Germany. A recent study by the *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (ISD) shows that platforms based on fixed user profiles are not the only places that the far right frequents (Guhl et al. 2020). Erstwhile subcultural online communities open to far-right views are increasingly being infiltrated, as well. For organized actors, so-called imageboards often serve as recruitment pools that hate actors use to make troll-activists aware of specific target-content on social media channels. Since actors remain completely anonymous on these boards, formal mobilizations are difficult to trace – for users and researchers alike.

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6 https://correctiv.org/en/top-stories-en/2020/10/16/no-filter-for-the-right/.

7 For more, see: IDZ Fact Sheet Alt-Tech.

8 BitChute has existed since 2017. Since then, the platform has developed into an alternative to YouTube for the far right and conspiracy theorists. The company's donation account was blocked by PayPal.

9 VK is a Russian social media platform that bears a strong resemblance to Facebook in terms of appearance and functions. The platform has over 600 million registered users worldwide.

10 Gab has increasingly been used as an alternative to Twitter since it was launched in 2017. The right-wing terrorist who launched an attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh announced his plans on Gab, an attack in which eleven people died.

11 Parler was launched in September 2018, making it one of the newer alt-tech platforms. According to a report by the Washington Post, Parler had 2.8 million registered users as of the summer of 2020. After being banned from Twitter, Martin Sellner called on people to start following him on Parler.

b. Recent developments in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an influence on the actions pursued by hate actors and altered their parameters for success. Ever since the debate on migration to central Europe has subsided, hate actors have been taking issue with how the German government is managing the new global pandemic. The AfD, as a catch-all platform for the far right, was initially unable to decide on a position and faced diametrically-opposed opinions within the party, which conveyed an incoherent image. While some MPs have participated in demonstrations of Covid-19 deniers, others have demanded harsher measures for containing the spread of the virus.

Conspiracy theorists have managed to gain greater traction and make use of their own explanatory models to mobilize discontent in an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty. It has become evident that, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, established actors on the far right who promoted heavy-handed policies to prevent the virus from spreading have stagnated among their followers, whereas hate actors propagating conspiracy theories (especially via Telegram) gained ground (Image 2). Conspiracy theorists such as Oliver Janich, Eva Herman and Attila Hildmann have enjoyed particular success in this landscape: stringing together suspicions, racist fear mongering, false information and abstruseness, they have managed to galvanize followers by communicating an emotional state of exception. They repeatedly assert, for example, that the use of face masks and vaccinations is either harmful or useless, while also drawing on classic antisemitic tropes (Image 1).

Image 1: An image disseminated by Oliver Janich saying:
Those who know the least obey the most, posted on 10 August 2020

The Telegram channel of former newscaster Eva Herman grew from 24,319 subscribers on March 18 to 106,744 by May 13, gaining another 30,000 subscribers by the beginning of September 2020 (Image 2). Oliver Janich, a former journalist like Herman, increased his number of subscribers threefold between January and September 2020. With the promise of providing alternative truths, people have gradually come to stop relying on facts as a basis of exchange for generating understanding and have instead adopted classic black-and-white views offered by conspiracy theories.

Classic far-right actors, such as the *Nationaldemokratische Partei* (NPD), the Ein Prozent initiative and the *Identitäre Bewegung* are, in comparison, stagnating, implying that they have been unable to take advantage of the crisis. Only Martin Sellner has achieved prominence on Telegram after his other social media channels were deleted in the summer of 2020. For all other channels, it appears that previous bans or deletions have not been decisive factors for raising interest and attention recently. The channels shown in Image 3 were affected by deplatforming in the past. Eva Herman is one exception here: while promoting messages with racist undertones, these conspiracist influencers saw a sharp increase in her number of subscribers during the pandemic.
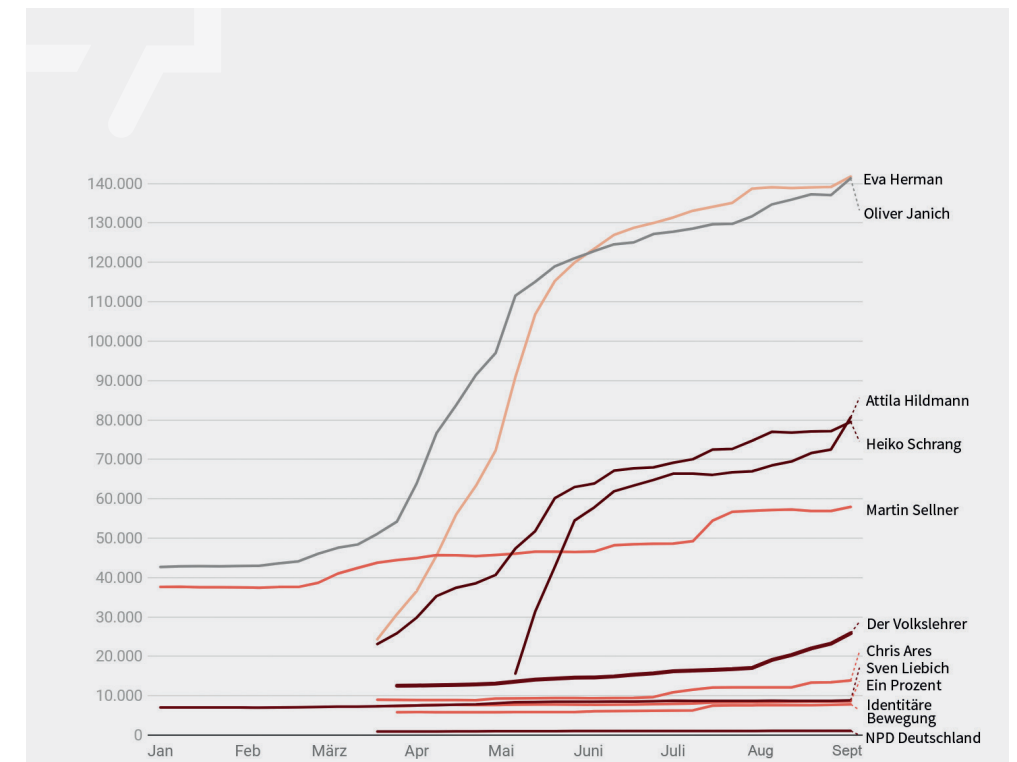

Image 2: Growth in the number of subscribers on Telegram channels between January and September 2020

The conspiracy theory movement *QAnon* has played an important role in this regard, winning a following in Germany, especially among supporters of the anti-system Sovereign Citizens (*Reichsbürger*). In the past, outgoing US-President Donald Trump, has also repeatedly shared tweets from accounts affiliated with respective groups. *QAnon* represents a sort of super myth that brings together various conspiracies with the aim of delegitimatizing democratic structures. Their ideas are based on abstruse conceptions according to which a pedophile elite wields influence over the so-called deep state, which they combine with accusations that the government seeks to make the populace submissive using vaccinations, and all rife with antisemitic undertones. Outgoing US-President Trump is considered a figurehead here who seeks to reclaim a sovereignty that is believed to have been lost. Violence has also emanated from the adherents of this largely virtual movement, which has even led the FBI to classify it as a national threat that can give rise to terrorism.[12]

The effectiveness of racist and antisemitic conspiracy narratives also depends on the distribution mechanisms that tech companies offer and design: attempts have been made to contain the "infodemic", through which false information is being more effectively circulated than serious information. Platforms have increasingly created alerts to flag harmful content and redirect users to verified information about the pandemic. Following numerous series of account deletions on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in the spring and summer of 2020, YouTube followed suit in October 2020 with a push to delete related content. Limiting and deleting dangerous misinformation made it easier to ban accounts for offenses against community standards. Prior to this, the operators of online platforms had found it more difficult to present concrete reasons for implementing a ban.

The (potential) deletion of content on mainstream platforms has increased the importance of back-up channels on alternative platforms, which, in the case of Telegram, have led to the establishment of a new set of priorities. With Telegram serving as the primary medium for these groups, the focus has shifted to platforms that are either subject to less moderation or none at all. This is also explained by preventative measures against deplatforming. For example, becausse Facebook has moved to flag and marginalize questionable content during the pandemic using algorithms, little growth is expected for (far-right) Covid-19 deniers on this platform. One of paradoxes arising from this situation is that actors such as the AfD-aligned publication *Deutschlandkurier* have been permitted to post ads on Facebook that denounce the censoring of free speech on this platform (Image 3).

Image 3: Advertisements posted by Deutschlandkurier on Facebook bemoaning censorship on social media platforms.

12 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2019/08/02/online-conspiracy-theories-like-qanon-pizzagate-domestic-terrorism/.

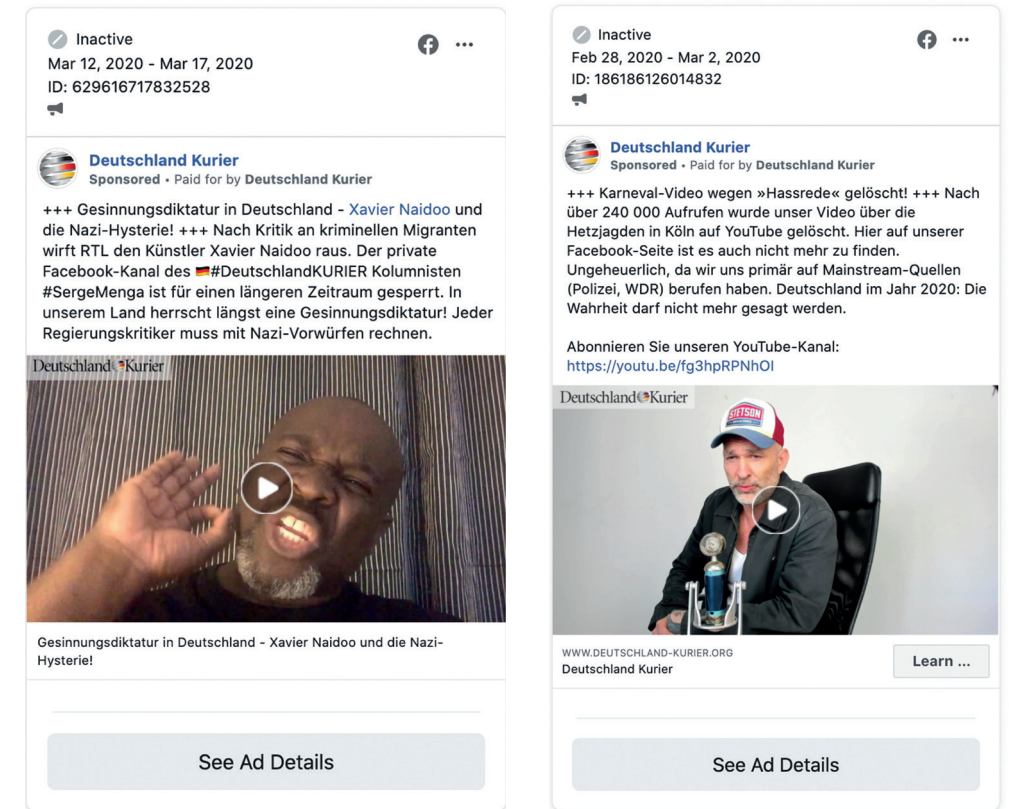# The patterns and processes of deplatforming

For a more fine-grained analysis, we selected one particularly compelling sample from our collection of identified cases to analyze recurring patterns of deplatforming. In order to make assertions as to the causes, processes and consequences associated with the deplatforming of hate actors, the behavior of platform operators must be contextualized in relation to the affected profiles. One apparent tendency here is that deplatforming is often carried out in waves. Rare are cases in which one politically relevant account is deleted on its own – a trend that is shared across platforms. Operators expose themselves to rebuke when they continue to provide a stage for political actors whom other platforms have flagged as dangerous.

This common behavior across platform operators does, however, suggest that decisions are increasingly made with reference to other platform bans or even coordinated with other operators. It is not unusual for this action to be driven by governmental regulations, or the threat thereof. This also demands collaboration among the platform operators. *The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)*, for instance, is an organ that was created to prevent "terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms"[13] in the aftermath of the Christchurch attack. Along with the constant expansion of the hash database that prevents terrorist content from being uploaded, this forum also considers gray areas, especially since terrorist activities resonate with digital subcultures. While the deletion of violent or terrorist content is undisputed, the same procedure proves to be far more complicated when dealing with legal organizations and activists with a high degree of visibility – further compounded by the fact that numerous actors test the limits of community standards and legal obligations.

a. An incomplete chronicle of deplatforming

The Federal Republic of Germany has received international attention for its fight against digital hate dynamics. This has to do, in part, with the country's clearly defined set of laws, under which the use of symbols with reference to the Third Reich and Holocaust denial is a punishable crime. Beyond this, the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) has assumed an internationally pioneering role in obliging platform operators to enforce national laws and regulations within a given timeframe. This strict approach stems from the realization that social networks have played a major role in the emergence of violent right-wing actors in recent years.

Based on our mapping of the 55 hate actors, combined with primary and secondary analyses of far-right sources and media reports, we identified prominent hate actors who have had their accounts temporarily, permanently and/or repeatedly banned on the relevant platforms. Some of these actors have been subject to numerous deletions. Many bans and deletions, however, either fall below our radar or fail to fulfill our relevance criteria (see Chapter 3a). While platform operators share information on how many posts they delete, they do not divulge numbers on how many hate actors they have banned or deleted or the reasons behind this. Nevertheless, some tendencies based on the statistics can be identified, and we were particularly interested in discovering which spectra of the far right has been particularly affected in this regard.

To begin with, we divided the spectrum of selected hate actors into four categories: neo-Nazis, identitarians, right-wing populists and conspiracy theorists. These categories are, of course, ideal types, and the respective actors consciously act and mobilize across these categories. Regardless, our division is useful for providing some differentiation within a heterogeneous spectrum and it allows us to identify central tendencies that we use to assess general developments related to deplatforming. As such, we differentiate between neo-Nazis, who orient their political views towards historical National Socialism and either deny or glorify the Holocaust; identitarians, who primarily use social media to promote their phantasma of ethno-culturally homogeneous nations and contempt for Islam and globalization; right-wing populists, a terminology used here as a umbrella term for nativist and racist groupings and individuals whose mobilization is premised on an antagonism between a pure people and a corrupt elite, thereby supposedly acting in the name of democracy and the constitution; and, lastly, far-right conspiracy theorists, who are convinced that secret forces dominate politics and society and who reject the common ground for interpersonal understanding based on evidence and reason. As mentioned previously, these categories should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

Moreover, we found it useful to distinguish among the different forms of organization adopted by these actors. This spectrum can be broken down into parties, movements and subcultures, to which we also add influencers and alternative media outlets that have recently raised in prominence. Far-right influencers are actors who operate without any fixed organizational basis and "adopt the techniques of [lifestyle] influencers to build audiences and 'sell' them on far-right ideology" (Lewis 2018: 4). Their primary modus operandi is projecting their lives on social media for others to experience, using their own personalities to offer young people, in particular, easy access to far-right views (Fielitz 2020: 243). Right-wing alternative media, on the other hand, is characterized by the belief that political news reporting serves as a main vehicle for social change (Holt 2020). In contrast to the "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*), this type of media activism projected here first and foremost assesses contemporary political events on the basis of the political benefit of the news story in question.

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[13] https://gifct.org/about/.

Table 2

Chronology of deplatforming processes [14]

	Date of deletion	Plattform	Hate actor	Organizational form	Ideology
1	09/14	Facebook	Der III. Weg	Party	Neo-Nazi
2	01/16	Facebook	Die Rechte	Party	Neo-Nazi
3	02/16, 05/17	Twitter	Kolja Bonke	Influencer	Right-wing populist
4	*02/16*	*Facebook*	*Sven Liebich /Halle Leaks*	*Influencer*	*Neo-Nazi*
5	*07/16*	*Facebook*	*Pegida*	*Movement*	*Right-wing populist*
6	*05/17*	*Facebook*	*Jürgen Elsässer*	*Influencer*	*Right-wing populist*
7	02/18	Discord	Reconquista Germanica	Subculture	Neo-Nazi
8	05/18	Facebook, Instagram	Identitäre Bewegung	Movement	Identitarian
9	*07/18, 08/18*	*Facebook, Instagram*	*Chris Ares*	*Influencer*	*Identitarian*
10	*11/18*	*Facebook*	*NPD Sachsen*	*Party*	*Neo-Nazi*
11	07/19	YouTube	Der Volkslehrer	Influencer	Neo-Nazi
12	*07/19*	*YouTube*	*NuoViso*	*Alternative media*	*Conspiracy theories*
13	07/19	Facebook	Epoch Times Deutsch-land	Alternative media	Conspiracy theories
14	08/19	Facebook, Instagram	Laut Gedacht	Alternative media	Identitarian
15	*08/19*	*YouTube*	*Neverforgetniki*	*Influencer*	*Right-wing populist*
16	08/19	Facebook, Instagram	Ein Prozent	Movement	Identitarian
17	08/19	YouTube	Martin Sellner	Influencer	Identitarian
18	10/19	Facebook	Tommy Frenck	Influencer	Neo-Nazi
19	10/19	Facebook	Info-DIREKT	Alternative media	Right-wing populist
20	*12/19*	*YouTube*	*UNBLOGD*	*Influencer*	*Identitarian*
21	*12/19*	*YouTube*	*Oliver Flesch*	*Influencer*	*Right-wing populist*
22	05/20	Facebook, Instagram	Attila Hildmann	Influencer	Conspiracy theories
23	05/20	Facebook	QAnon	Movement	Conspiracy theories
24	07/20	Amazon, Spotify, iTunes	Chris Ares	Subculture	Identitarian
25	07/20	Twitter	Identitäre Bewegung	Movement	Identitarian
26	07/20	YouTube	Martin Sellner	Influencer	Identitarian
27	07/20	Twitter	QAnon	Movement	Conspiracy theories
28	08/20	Facebook, Instagram	QAnon	Movement	Conspiracy theories
29	08/20	YouTube	Chris Ares	Influencer	Identitarian
30	08/20	Facebook, Instagram	Compact	Alternative media	Right-wing populist
31	10/20	YouTube, Etsy	QAnon	Movement	Conspiracy theories

[14] Actors that were not permanently banned are indicated in cursive.

This distribution of cases (see Table 2) clearly shows that different waves of deplatforming have taken place, experiencing peaks in the summer of 2019 and again in the summer of 2020. Of note here is that neo-Nazi actors were particularly affected by account deletions early on while, in terms of overall numbers, identitarian activists and groups were deleted from these platforms most often. This distribution in no way reflects the relations of power among the far right: for instance, the activities of identitarian groups started to decline after the attack in Christchurch in 2019, at the latest. This data does, however, clearly indicate just how sophisticated identitarian actors have been at using social media for mobilizing and recruiting. Throughout the digital campaigning strategies, identitarians have assumed the role of an online anchor point around which loosely organized groups come together. With the progressive banning of their profiles, they are losing their position as hubs for far-right activism as well as key resources for engaging in the subversion of digital spaces.

This is likely the reason why many identitarian activists prefer to depict themselves as private individuals and influencers, thereby providing platform operators with less opportunity to impose repressive measures on them – a move that does not, however, completely shelter them from bans or deletions. In fact, a large number of the banned or deleted hate actors we identified were far-right influencers. As many influencers are dependent on direct or indirect monetization of their online activities, they lose their political as well as economic bases of support. Ultimately, influencers become victims of their own success: were it not for the high degree of public attention received online, they would likely not have been targeted by the platform operators in the first place. Being that formats such as YouTube's content creation tools make it imperative for such actors to post more and more radical content to remain relevant among their own community of followers and vis-à-vis growing competition from similar profiles (Lewis 2018), far-right actors are faced with a dilemma: risk getting banned by the platforms for posting content that is too radical or risk losing followers by posting content that is too moderate. Not least, commercial interests may weigh out political steadfastness.

More generally, our investigation found that the patterns of deplatforming vary depending on the political organization in question and its orientation.

Political parties: Die Rechte, Der Dritte Weg and NPD

The most relevant political parties situated to the right of AfD have all, at some point, been affected by either temporary bans (NPD) or permanent deletion (Die Rechte and Der Dritte Weg). Numerous Facebook accounts created by the neo-Nazi party *Die Rechte* were concurrently banned in January 2016. Its subchapters in Saxony and Bavaria were impacted along with the party's primary Facebook page, whereas a number of municipal chapters were not targeted by the platform. The party currently does not have any Facebook pages. While it has a presence on Twitter, party representatives seldom post tweets apart from providing information about other newly created Facebook pages; at the time of writing, the last communication was a tweet from January 2019. All newly advertised Facebook pages have since disappeared, leading the group to rely on their

own website. The party also maintains several channels on Telegram, though none of them has more than 2,000 subscribers.

The Facebook pages belonging to the neo-Nazi party *Der Dritte Weg* were repeatedly subject to bans starting in January 2019. Following a ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany from May 2019, the party's Facebook page was ordered to be reinstated shortly before the European elections – though only for a limited period until the official election results had been announced. The court justified its rapid ruling and provisional decision in consideration of the possible outcomes of a future decision:

The consequences that would arise if the applicant were denied access to its Facebook page but the respondent in the original proceedings were obliged to reopen access clearly outweigh the consequences that would arise if the respondent in the original proceedings were temporarily obliged to restore access but restricting access and disabling the profile were justified.[15]

Prior to this, the NPD had won a case in court after its Saxonian Facebook page was banned in 2018. Thereafter, Die Rechte used the occasion to launch new Facebook pages. In the event of renewed bans, the party announced it would take legal action: "Should Facebook once again delete our new profile, we will, of course, feel obliged as a party to file a lawsuit against Facebook."[16] However, despite a newly imposed ban, this announcement failed to materialize. After winning the case in court, NPD officials called Facebook's ban "arbitrary"[17]. The court based its decision on the fact that Facebook should initially have abided by its own regulations and issued a warning to the party before proceeding with the profile ban.[18] The NPD's youth association, *Junge Nationalisten* (JN), has likewise been subject to numerous bans on Facebook and now no longer has a profile. Despite this, the NPD still commands a large following on Facebook gathering more likes than the liberal party FDP, which has been elected to the Bundestag. However, during our period of investigation from January to September 2020, the NPD lost around 6,500 likes, the most of any party in Germany (Image 4).

COMBINED TOTAL PAGE LIKE GROWTH
01/01/2020 – 30/09/2020

		PAGE LIKES	GROWTH	% GROWTH
		1.85M	**+22.0K**	**+0.60 %**
NAME		TOTAL	GROWTH	% GROWTH
AfD	AfD	**502.8K**	**+17.3K**	**+3.57%**
DIE LINKE	DIE LINKE	**552.1K**	**-1.4K**	**-0.566%**
CSU	CSU Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern e. V.	**216.7K**	**+8.9K**	**+4.26%**
BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN	BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN	**200.0K**	**+1.7K**	**+0.85%**
SPD	SPD	**191.7K**	**-261**	**-0.136%**
CDU	CDU	**191.5K**	**+5.0K**	**+2.69K**
NPD	NPD – Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands	**153.2K**	**-6.5K**	**-4.063%**
FDP	FDP	**146.7K**	**-2.7K**	**-1.821%**

Image 4: Comparison of total number of Facebook likes of parties represented in the Bundestag and of the NPD from the beginning of January to the end of September 2020. | **Source: CrowdTangle**

Identitarians: Ein Prozent, Martin Sellner and Chris Ares

The group Ein Prozent – which promotes itself as a right-wing "citizens network" but is actually one of the most vibrant far-right, identitarian think tanks –[19] was banned from Facebook and Instagram in August 2019. Ever since, the association has made numerous failed attempts in court to have this ban lifted. In November 2019, the Saxonian state court in Görlitz first ruled that the ban by the platform operators was lawful. In June 2020, the Higher Regional Court in Dresden upheld this ruling on the grounds that the organization fell within Facebook's definition of a hate organization.[20] After the decision was announced, the *Ein Prozent* chairman, Philip Stein, posted a video on YouTube stating that he would pursue further legal steps against the ban: "We will not accept this judgment. We plan to proceed further against it. And rest assured, this will not be the final act." [21] By mid-October 2020, the association had not yet specified how exactly it would proceed further.

[15] https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/EN/2019/05/qk20190522_1bvq004219en.html.

[16] https://die-rechte.net/allgemein/auf-ein-neues-wir-sind-wieder-bei-facebook-vertreten/.

[17] https://www.facebook.com/npdsachsen/posts/1913756598723163.

[18] http://web.archive.org/web/20190203000129/https://www.mdr.de/sachsen/dresden/urteil-prozess-npd-facebook-100.html.

[19] The Ein Prozent sponsors the podcast *GibMaKaffee* by the identitarian actor from Leipzig Alexander "Malenki" Kleine. The home-grown *Identitarian Movement* in Halle, which has since been dissolved, also made donations to the *Ein Prozent*. The "alternative media" platform *InfoDirekt* in Austria lists the association on its website as a donation partner.

[20] https://www.mdr.de/sachsen/bautzen/goerlitz-weisswasser-zittau/urteil-sperrung-ein-prozent-facebook-instagram-100.html.

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb6DogKvN9M.

The *Identitäre Bewegung* (IB) and the activists associated with the movement experienced several episodes of deplatforming, with intervals of over a year apart. In May 2018, several of movement's accounts were banned from Facebook and Instagram. In response to this ban, the organization circulated a visual calling on its followers to disseminate IB content on their own as well as to provide financial support for possible legal action (Image 5). In August 2019, Martin Sellner's YouTube channel was blocked, only to be reinstated 24 hours later – an episode for which YouTube provided no explanation. Previously, the reason cited for the ban had been a breach of YouTube's community rules. A message from YouTube can be read in a screenshot on Sellner's website, stating that the ban had to do with guidelines regarding hate directed at individuals or groups as well as "content that glorifies or incites violence against individuals or groups".[22]
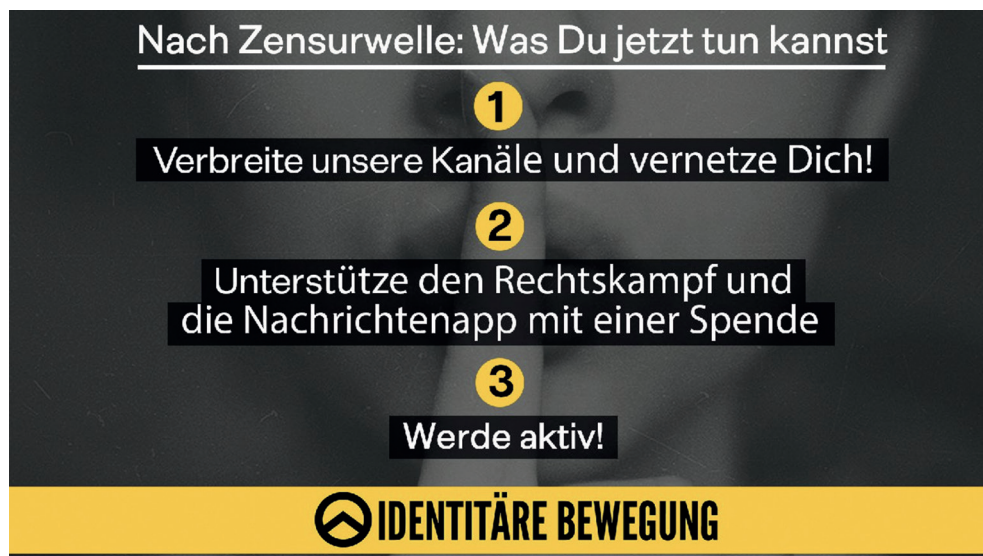

Image 5: Digital flyer of Identitäre Bewegung on the guidance in response to Facebook bans. It reads: After the censorship wave: What you can do now 1) Share our channels and network yourself! 2) Support the right's battle and the messenger app by donating. 3) Get active!

Source: Identitäre Bewegung on Telegram

In July 2020, the far-right hate group was once again subject to a wave of bans, including on Twitter (Oct. 7, 2020), YouTube (July 15, 2020) and TikTok (July 16, 2020). The web host for Martin Sellner's website also terminated its services, forcing him to move the site elsewhere. Ever since, the group has increasingly made use of alternative platforms – which has, however, significantly reduced the target audience the far-right extremists can connect to. After amassing 180,000 followers on YouTube and Twitter by July 2020,[23] Sellner's audience has since shrunk significantly: of the 144,000 subscribers of Sellner's now banned YouTube channel, only around 16,9000 subscribe to

22 https://martin-sellner.at/2019/08/29/pressemeldung-die-wiederherstellung-meines-kanals/.

23 http://web.archive.org/web/20200610040924/https://twitter.com/martin_sellnerhttp://web.archive.org/web/20200628030712if_/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZ8uFo1RKSgEg-od3Yu10Pw.

his channel on the alternative video platform BitChute and around 6,300 to the streaming platform DLive. While the significance of such alternative platforms has been rising in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, they cannot substitute the algorithmic mass circulation that large platforms offer. As a result, the groups have lost an essential tool for mobilization and they are prone to sink (further) into obscurity. Without access to mainstream platforms far-right actors also lack access to public discourse – and become consequently must less influential.

The approach taken by these platforms has, however, been rather inconsistent: While the IB has lost some of its most influential social media accounts, the movement continues to be represented on mainstream platforms via accounts belonging to the identitarian activist Alexander "Malenki" Kleine on Twitter and YouTube or via the YouTube channel of the IB. Moreover, activists create new accounts for new projects, such as Kleine's podcast *GibMaKaffee*. The identitarian rapper Chris Ares was also hit with a block in the summer of 2020: Amazon and Spotify removed his music from their catalogs and his YouTube channel and the associated YouTube channel of his music label, NDS, were banned. Nonetheless, until officially announcing his retirement from the music business and activism on September 25, 2020, Ares continued to maintain a presence on other mass platforms (Twitter and Instagram).

Alternative media: NuoViso and Compact

Far-right 'alternative' media outlets are also occasionally susceptible to bans. This type of digital media activism views social media as the battleground where the struggle for political hegemony unfolds, drawing strength from the fact that they are not attributed to any political force – at least not in appearance. More recently, however, it has become evident that the AfD is taking much of this spectrum under its own auspices and has managed to increasingly employ the services of well-known influencers. For example, YouTubers as well as authors and content producers from alternative media outlets have sounded out opportunities for cooperation: elected representatives of the AfD are offered op-eds on relevant portals such as *PI-News* and, in October 2020, the AfD convened the various media activists to their second "Conference of the Free Media".

NuoViso, a news portal from Leipzig which, among other activities, specializes in the dissemination of conspiracy theories, was banned by YouTube in July 2019. This generated a wave of solidarity from other like-minded projects, such as the Russian-influenced internet TV station RT Deutsch, which interviewed one of the leaders of the project. *NuoViso* made an appeal for donations and created a new channel on YouTube the very same day. The old channel is now back online and was even officially verified by YouTube. It has over 220,000 subscribers and features videos on topics such as anti-vaxxing, historical revisionism and disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Like *NuoViso*, the periodical Compact led by editor-in-chief Jürgen Elsässer is also involved in the spread of false or manipulated information related to the pandemic. Since 2020, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) has been monitoring the publication as a suspicious case for extremist tendencies. On August 29, 2020, the magazine's

Facebook page was banned one day before a large demonstration held by Covid-19-deniers and far-right activists in Berlin. One evening prior, Elsässer had appeared alongside identitarian leader Martin Sellner at an event.[24] Elsässer frequently writes about the banning of his Facebook account and those of other authors on the *Compact* website. In the fall of 2019, he wrote an article lambasting a final warning that Facebook had sent him indicating that his account was about to be blocked. At the time, he told his readers on the website to follow him on the magazine's Telegram channel. Since being banned, Elsässer has requested donations on other channels so that he can take legal action against the bans. Additionally, the website of *Compact* suffered from frequent outages in September 2020. Elsässer provided the following information: "We have now set up an alternative dissemination channel on Telegram [...], but our reach has been seriously disrupted, right on this critical weekend, through the loss of Facebook and Instagram."[25]

Mixed scenes: QAnon takedowns

The conspiracy theory movement *QAnon*, mentioned above, has also lost access to several important platforms. First, Facebook deleted a series of it associated sites in May 2020 along with a number of accounts and groups in response to signs of coordinated activities for disseminating content. According to the company, this encompassed 5 Facebook sites, 20 accounts and 6 groups that reach over 133,000 followers and with over 30,000 group members[26]. In July 2020, Twitter removed over 7,000 accounts connected with *QAnon* and also altered its recommendation algorithms in order to keep *QAnon* content and accounts out of searches and trending topics.[27] Additionally, links can no longer be included to websites with associated content. In a statement, Twitter justified its decision based on the danger posed by this movement: "We've been clear that we will take strong enforcement action on behavior that has the potential to lead to offline harm. In line with this approach, this week we are taking further action on so-called 'QAnon' activity across the service."[28]

In August 2020, Facebook once again banned numerous groups and pages along with a number of hashtags on Facebook and Instagram alike. According to an investigation by the New York Times, activity among some of these groups had grown by 200% to 300% during the pandemic.[29] A total of 1,500 advertisements were also affected by the ban. Facebook confirmed that, in August, 1,500 groups were deleted from the platform in the first month after its new *QAnon* strategy was implemented.[30] In October, the online retailer Etsy banned *QAnon* products from its site. YouTube finally followed suit on October 15, announcing a series of corresponding bans.[31] However, several

German-language YouTube channels associated with the *QAnon* scene were still accessible after this deletion wave. These bans had no apparent impact on the growth of the largest German-language *QAnon* channel on Telegram. The number of subscribers here rose significantly after March. Since then, growth on this channel has, however, slowed to some extent.
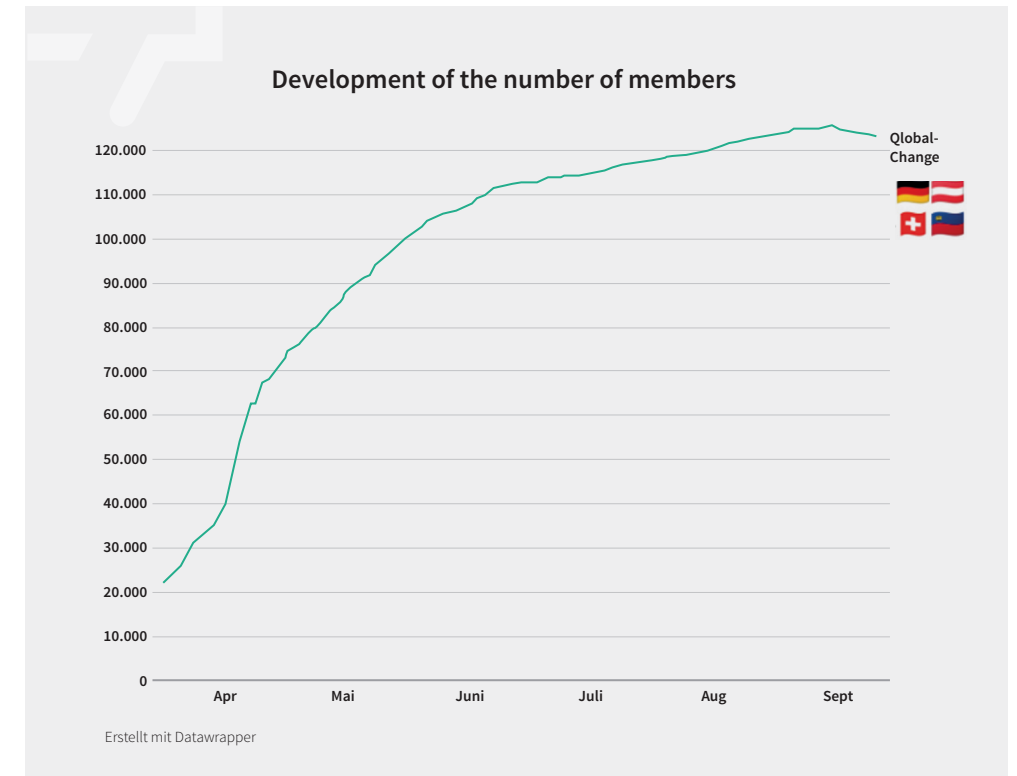

Development of the number of members

Qlobal-Change

Erstellt mit Datawrapper

Image 6: Growth in membership numbers on the largest German-language QAnon channel on Telegram in 2020.

[24] https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000119682348/warum-sellner-und-co-von-youtube-und-facebook-gesperrt-werden.

[25] https://www.compact-online.de/skandal-facebook-loescht-compact-account-kurz-vor-start-der-querdenker-demo/.

[26] https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/April-2020-CIB-Report.pdf.

[27] In its Trending Topics feature, Twitter highlights topics that the platform has classified as relevant. This may be because many users tweeted about a specific issue within a short period of time.

[28] https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1285726277719199746.

[29] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/technology/facebook-qanon-groups-takedown.html.

[30] https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence/.

[31] https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/harmful-conspiracy-theories-youtube.

b. The deplatforming discourse as a topic of far-right mobilization

Far-right actors have traditionally had difficulties disseminating their views with a broad audience. In their battle against liberal democracy and in their blatant attacks on open society, these actors operate at the fringes of the political spectrum. It has only been with the precipitous rise of social media and the networked spread of alternative media channels that far-right actors have been able to instantly communicate with a larger number of people than ever before, spreading their narrative far beyond the bounds of their own milieu. When their social media accounts are deleted, this not only closes off channels for shaping public opinion but also generates economic disadvantages for groups and individuals who are reliant on the revenues of their reporting. It therefore comes as no surprise that, among hate actors, restrictions to social media have developed into a topic that promotes solidarity and strengthens cohesion within the far right that stands opposed to a common adversary.

Far-right opposition to deplatforming dovetails with a broader discourse about free speech, 'political correctness' and the rejection of the mainstream media (Sparrow 2018) while at the same time claiming that the decisions of platforms are dictated by a political elite (Hope not Hate 2020). In this context, decisions about deplatforming often become politicized and elevated to cross-spectrum campaign issues, with their protagonists posing as defenders of free speech standing in opposition to current reign of a "dictatorship of opinion" (*Meinungsdiktatur*).

Mounting such antagonistic scenarios is certainly nothing new: for years, far-right extremists have operated based on the assumption that their political views are constantly being banned, suppressed or persecuted in order to conceal deeper truths from the general populace. Moreover, stylizing themselves as victims has essentially become a hallmark of the far right, used to portray acts of exclusion as undemocratic and presenting themselves as the true democrats (Botsch 2017). Similar mentalities and reasoning can be identified in relation to deplatforming, which often serves as an occasion for reactivating tried-and-tested patterns of argumentation for how to deal with repression.

Far-right actors know that accusations of arbitrary deletion touch on a sore spot for platform operators and liberal democracies alike. As social media platforms and democratic governments feel obliged to respect the freedom of speech and expression, far-right actors revel in testing their limits. Stretching the boundaries of democratic discourse, far-right actors provoke conflictive debates about how a militant democracy ought to treat its adversaries. The tenet underlying the idea of militant democracies is that those hostile to democracy cannot enjoy the same degree of tolerance as political opponents who uphold the values of an open society. The imposition of repressive measures is, however, controversial and must be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Ambivalent communication formats and those that rely on irony render this process more difficult, especially as they need to be understood in the context of the digital strategies employed by the far right (Fielitz 2020).

The act of banning or deleting an actor either in the absence of or based on poor justification can backfire in the short term as far-right narratives bemoaning the supposedly arbitrary behavior of social media platforms and even the rule of law find swift resonance; the affected actors receive increased publicity during such episodes and flaunt the ban in question like a trophy they have received (see Donovan 2020b). In inwards communication, deplatforming can become a "medal of honor", turning a public stigma into an asset. Steve Bannon, the far-right figure from the United States, uses these words to praise anyone who has been denounced as a racist in public for standing by their ideas (Stanley 2018). In this process, public stigma is turned into an act of self-affirmation: the deletion of ideas, propaganda and hate is used as testament to the relevance and validity of the deleted content and its creator. In this sense, far-right influencers such as Martin Sellner, as well as British activist Tommy Robinson, boast about being some of the most-deleted people on the Internet.

Deleted content ends up generating buzz within the actors' respective scenes and being lauded for challenging the current *zeitgeist*. For some hate actors, the experience of having one's content deleted seems to have turned into a sort of rite of passage. In a number of cases, it appears that actors would even welcome the deletion of their content so that they can gain relevance. "There's a 99.9% chance this documentary will be censored by YouTube" is one boastful assertion made by far-right youtuber Nikolai Nerling, one of many far-right critics of an alleged "deletion craze". Such forms of extolling are meant to highlight the volatile nature of certain content, in the best case leading to its broader dissemination. When people consume what is portrayed as "stigmatized knowledge", they more quickly feel that they are part of a tight-knit community, believing themselves to be privy to advanced knowledge offered by content that is being concealed from the general public (Barkun 2017). In this manner, people are more strongly caught under the spell of far-right ideologies and conspiracy theories, a sensibility that also disconnects them from fact-based styles of argumentation (Amadeu-Antonio Foundation 2020).

As this example has pointed out, far-right actors use interpretive means to strategically reframe setbacks on social media. This discursive form of collective guidance, known as strategic framing in the social sciences, distinguishes among three different dimensions: diagnostic framing, which describes certain problems and identifies their causes; prognostic framing, which proposes solutions for how to overcome a certain problem; and motivational framing, which is meant to motivate followers to take action (Snow/Benford 1988). Using speech acts carried out by eight of our selected hate actors, we investigated recurrent patterns of argumentation across these three levels.[32] Based on the methodology of qualitative content analysis, we inductively coded 976 identified discourse fragments that address the issue of deplatforming in order to approach the material as openly as possible. Using the software MaxQDA, we analyzed our data corpus and created categories for the three dimensions.

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[32] We paid attention to a variation that included actors and different platforms from among the various subfields, as well as those who have not (yet) been affected by deplatforming.

At the diagnostic level, the most evident complaint was lodged against alleged censorship that runs through the entire political system in Germany and systematically bars patriotic sentiments (Image 7). Ostensible limitations placed on accessing social media platforms are associated, *pars pro toto*, with the current status of people's freedom of expression in Germany, ascribing totalitarian tendencies to the government. Today, identitarians fervently make a false connection between their experienced exclusion from platforms and the violent repression of dissidents during the Third Reich and the GDR; some use the label "digital gulag" while youtuber Hagen Grell refers to deplatforming as a "digital pogrom" (Stegemann/Musyal 2020: 82). It is therefore not surprising that identitarian Martin Sellner utilizes his Telegram channel to collect cases of deplatforming while attempting to create communities of fate. "[Far-right conspiracist] Heiko [Schrang] suffers the same fate as Tommy Robinson, Alex Jones and I – uncomfortable voices are being blocked!" In this context, hate actors also include rumors of impending account deletions to paint a picture of systemic persecution. Prevented from generating income from donations and advertisements, these actors are particularly hard-hit by the loss of monetization, indicating that hate actors have come to see these earnings as an important source of livelihood. Finally, these actors bemoan the public stigmatization that accompanies acts of deplatforming, which strips them and their ideas of a façade of normality.
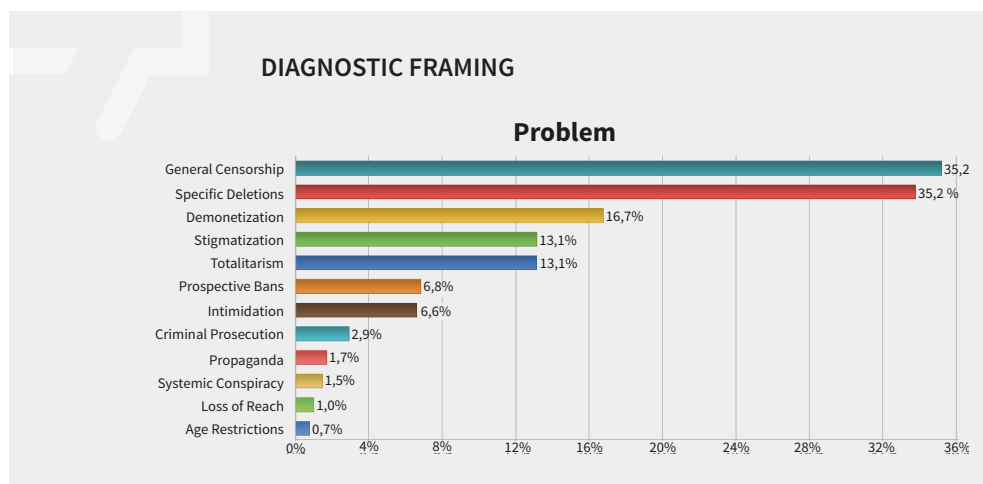
At the prognostic level, there is a clear intent among hate actors to migrate to alternative platforms so they may continue operating after being subject to a ban or deletion. Over one quarter of all responses discuss this option as a reaction to the deplatforming of one's own account or that of another user (Image 8). Further options range from the creation of back-up channels to calls for boycotting mainstream platforms – though these are seldom followed up by action. One exception here was a week-long YouTube strike in December 2019 called in response to repeated account bans. During this week, numerous right-wing video makers committed themselves to only posting their videos on the alternative platform BitChute for seven days.[33] They stressed the importance of standing by one's opinions despite any headwinds one may face. Hate actors believe that openly expressing their views is a subversive act under the prevailing political circumstances. One contribution shared by the musician Chris Ares on his Telegram channel following his ban from Spotify illustrates this point: "My conclusion? I'm still unfazed and I'll keep fighting for the freedom of expression, for my country and for everyone who believes in me! You won't be able to bring me down. Lock me up in a dark dungeon and I'll still see the light coming in through the iron bars." The alleged fight for one's freedom of expression also includes legal means aimed at reversing account bans. Though many hate actors announce such intentions, few actually pursue legal channels.
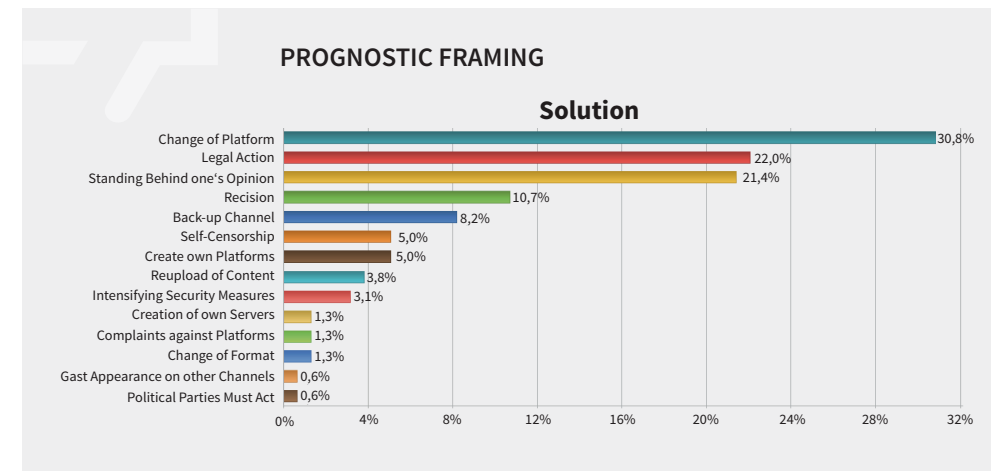

Image 7: The diagnostic framing of deplatforming within hate actors

Image 8: The prognostic framing of deplatforming within hate actors

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[33] https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/171/1917162.pdf, p. 15.

When asked what specifically can be done following an account ban, the appeal for financial support through donations or crowdfunding platforms is the most common thread we identify running across communication channels (Image 9). Over one-third of posts raises the issue of the financial costs associated with account bans and make a call for donations. Non-material forms of support are expressed in calls for solidarity to individuals and collectives affected by deplatforming. Hate actors raise awareness about deplatforming actions so as to be prepared for any further actions taken by platform operators. Referencing experienced solidarity invokes a special form of community and connectedness – as in the case of Martin Sellner: "What pleases me the most: the number of people [in this group] has increased enormously! I'd like to thank everyone who's here!" In this post, the members of a Telegram group are construed as and equated with the creation of a countervailing power. This sentiment is further fueled by calls to share, follow and like quarantined content in order to bring censored posts back into circulation and keep the accounts alive.
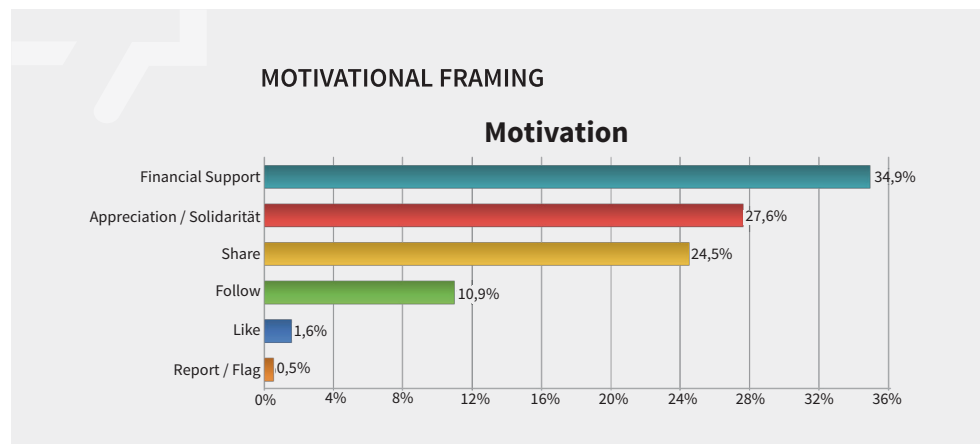

Image 9: The motivational framing of deplatforming within hate actors

It is notable that qualitative differences exist in approaches to deplatforming. Neo-Nazi actors such as the neo-Nazi party *Die Rechte*, whose members have repeatedly been confronted with repression by the state, take a more routine approach to deletions and are often able to make use of legal recourse. Identitarian actors are more interested in condemning deplatforming for their own publicity strategies. Right-wing populist actors, on the other hand, more often express outrage with unjustly being hit by deplatforming measures. One common feature among all of these actors, however, is that they portray themselves as victims of an arbitrary action – by the state and by platform operators in equal measure. What has emerged out of the discourse surrounding deplatforming are specific and practices aimed at avoiding, circumventing or compensating for account bans.

AS REPRESSION GIVES RISE TO INNOVATION, THE FAR RIGHT HAS DEVELOPED A REPERTOIRE OF STRATEGIES TO PREEMPTIVELY PROTECT ITSELF FROM DEPLATFORMING MEASURES.

Six innovative approaches in response to deplatforming

Social movements and political opposition figures tend to come into conflict with state institutions and counter-movements by default, exposing themselves to repression and attack. This compels such actors to constantly adapt their positions to the given political conditions and find ways to deal with "tactical freezes". By tactical freeze, Zeynep Tufekci (2017: xvi) describes failure on the part of such movements to forge new paths and break with the fixed routines that can lead them into obscurity. As we have shown above, the far right effectively positions itself within the world of political competition by using multifaceted media strategies. In so doing, far-right actors have had to employ an especially high degree of innovation in order to keep their outdated ideologies relevant in today's world (Kollmorgen/Quent 2014). It is therefore not surprising that they are able to evade new forms of digital repression quickly. As repression gives rise to innovation, the far right has developed a repertoire of strategies to preemptively protect itself from deplatforming measures, to remain on digital platforms despite account deletions, and to migrate and swiftly establish a presence on other platforms. As Joan Donovan, Rebecca Lewis and Brian Friedberg write, "having a presence on all available platforms ensures stability when counter-movements tactically adapt and create obstacles, like in the event of 'no platforming'" (Donovan et al. 2019: 62).

a. Deplatforming prevention

Our analysis indicates that deletion by platform operators does not always catch the affected actors off guard: many of them secure back-up channels in advance in preparation for this contingency and to avoid losing contact with their followers. The number of available alternative platforms has grown markedly in recent years and the use of alternative channels has become commonplace for hate actors. They often advertise their accounts on Telegram or video sharing platforms such as BitChute. *Wochenblick*, a right-wing weekly newspaper from Austria, published an ad on its website in September 2020 to promote its own Telegram channel and to issue a shrouded warning about impending censorship (Image 10). Accounts on so-called alt-tech platforms are often advertised on mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Video content, in particular, is frequently shared across various platforms, especially Telegram and BitChute. This preemptive multi-platform strategy is just one of the many ways that actors seek out preventative measures against deplatforming.

Image 10: Ad on Wochenblick.at ("When censorship is coming… stay informed with the Wochenblick info channel on Telegram – sign up here")

Semantic mimicry

Far-right actors have learned to tailor their communication strategies to different target groups and make use of rhetorical euphemisms (Feldman/Jackson 2014). These actors are attuned to the vernacular limits of what can be openly spoken and, in their roles as influencers, 'alternative media' and instigators, they adapt to the demands of their digital audience. To avoid account bans, they rely on ambiguous formulations, overtones and neologisms. In the German context, this includes expressions such as "*Goldstücke*" (literally, "pieces of gold"), a term that this spectrum adopted from a speech made by social democrat politician Martin Schulz. On this particular occasion, Schulz was referring to the point of view of refugees fleeing to the shores of Europe, stating that the situation in 2015 held the potential to revive a belief in the humanitarian idea of Europe. Far-right extremists ignored the context and instead chose to repeatedly cite a single sentence that Schulz uttered just prior to this: "What these refugees bring to us is more valuable than gold". The term "*Goldstücke*" has since been used as a derogatory synonym for refugees (see Image 11). In July 2019, the regional court of Bremen ruled that this term can be interpreted as a form of incitement. One Facebook user from Bremen filed a lawsuit against the company after being banned from the site for 30 days for using the term; he had referred to refugees in general as "*Goldstücke*" and accused this group as a whole as being murderous. The court deemed his post to constitute an attack on a group of individuals, noting the following in its ruling: "It is known to the courts that members of the far-right extremist scene refer to refugees as "*Goldstücke*".[34] As rhetorical mimicry works subtly, it demands a great deal of knowledge about speech codes and methods of communication in far-right circles.

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[34] https://www.lvz.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Landgericht-Bremen-Begriff-Goldstueck-kann-Hetze-sein.

Jedes dritte Goldstück ist kriminell – Die Welt ist ein Irrenhaus

€0,99 – €15,99 inkl. MwSt. zzgl. Versandkosten

Image 11: A sticker from the product range of the far-right online retailer Sven Liebich. "Every piece of gold is criminal – the world is a nuthouse and Germany is its headquarters!"

QAnon supporters also adjusted their codes and symbols following bans and restrictions imposed by Facebook and Twitter. Many Facebook groups have renamed themselves and no longer include the name *QAnon* or the letter Q in their names, instead replacing the Q with "Cue". This behavior is reminiscent of the creative tactics adopted by the *Ku Klux Klan*, which managed to return to Facebook after a ban by using Cyrillic letters when referring to the group (Miller-Idriss 2020). Far-right podcasters have also adapted this tactic to ensure that their podcasts are represented on as many platforms as possible. *Die Schwarze Fahne* (The Black Flag), a far-right podcast, has addressed possible avoidance strategies on several occasions and put together a list of words that one "may not" use on a recording. However, the presenters do not always abide by these agreements, and when racist slurs are used, the discriminatory words are taped over with a beep on the recordings. The *Schwarze Fahne* podcast maintains various accounts on Instagram with the clear aim of connecting to a younger, more international audience through the use of widely recognizable memes. Likewise, these actors attempt to appeal to younger far-right subcultures through certain slang derived from imageboards and similar platforms.

(Audio-)Visualization

Another important finding is that many actors respond to deplatforming measures by switching from text-based to audio and visual formats. By so doing, they are strategically circumventing the explicitness inherent to texts. In contrast, visual narratives are semiotically more open and thus more ambiguous, because they work via associations rather than through arguments (Bogerts/ Fielitz 2019). The shift towards visual propaganda reflects an overall tendency in private and political communication towards expressing oneself in photos and videos, as reflected in the rise of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Particularly among hate actors working as influencers, video messages and aesthetic elements are becoming more commonplace as a means of conveying political ideas. This includes the increased use of sharepics, memes, emojis and other visual elements (which communicate political positions in a more concise manner), as well as voice messages, reels[35] and livestreams capable of establishing a sense of immediacy in interactions

[35] Reels are short videos no longer than one minute in length. This feature, rolled out on Instagram in 2020, bears strong resemblance to TikTok.

with broader audiences. As the content itself often recedes behind the form, it is difficult to identify coherent positions in a multitude of image and video productions, and everyday images are frequently connected to messages with hardly any apparent relation. This allows such images to draw people's attention to political content behind them. One example here is the image below of a well-known far-right influencer posing in a rose garden as an expression of grievances about censorship on social media (Image 12).
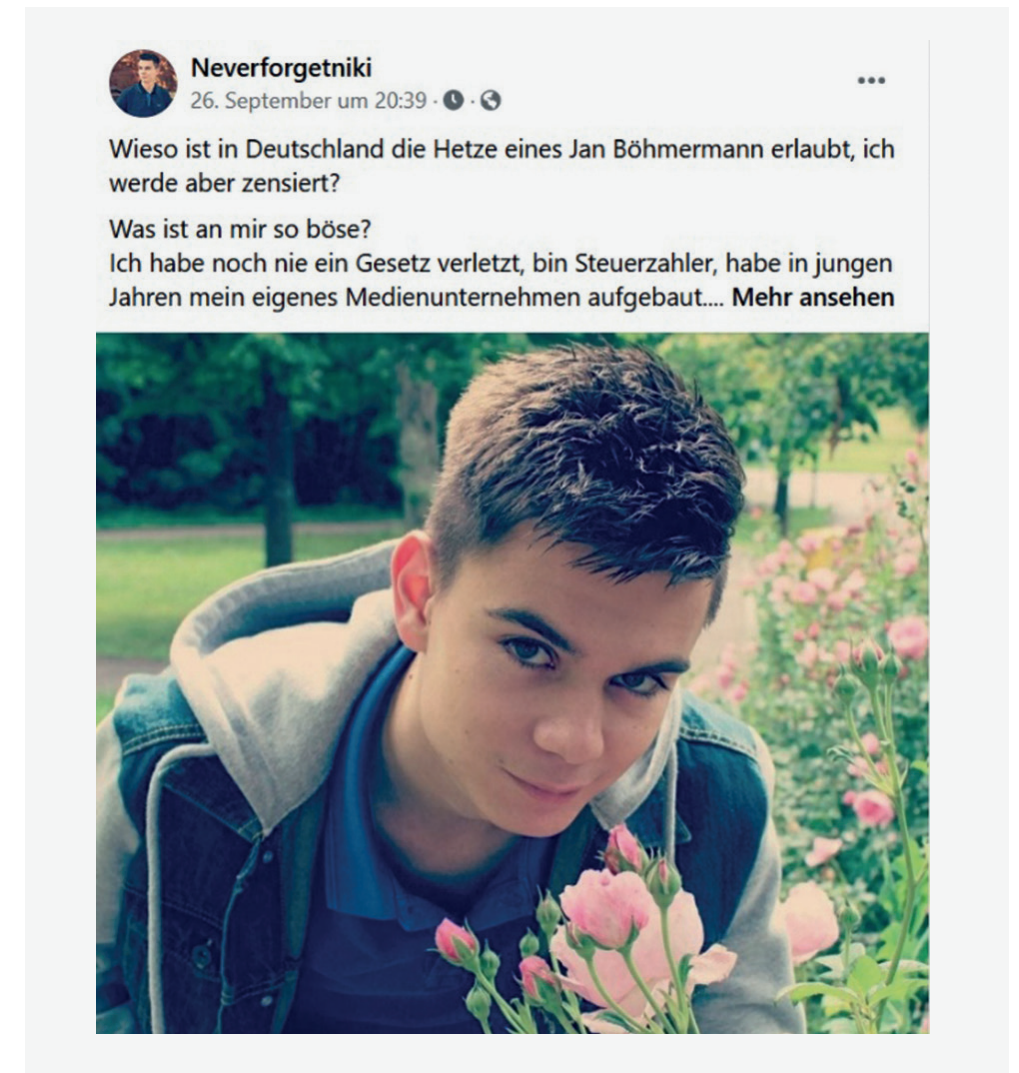

Image 12: Facebook posts by the right-wing populist social media activist Niklas Lotz (*Neverforgetniki*)

Another consideration is that hate actors express more explicit views via video sequences than via written statements. This is based on the assumption that their content is less likely to be flagged by security authorities or platform operators since videos messages are more difficult to decode

and algorithms work more accurately with written text. When, for example, the far-right conspiracy theorist Oliver Janich published one of his first video messages on his Telegram channel, he turned to his 73 subscribers and said: "I can express myself here a bit more – I'm just realizing. No one can censor me here. So, now I can go ahead and say the following: Many of the people in power today should actually be hanged. You can't say that anywhere else. You can say it here.[36] When written out, his words appear to be more camouflaged – even while conveying the same hostile content (Image 13).
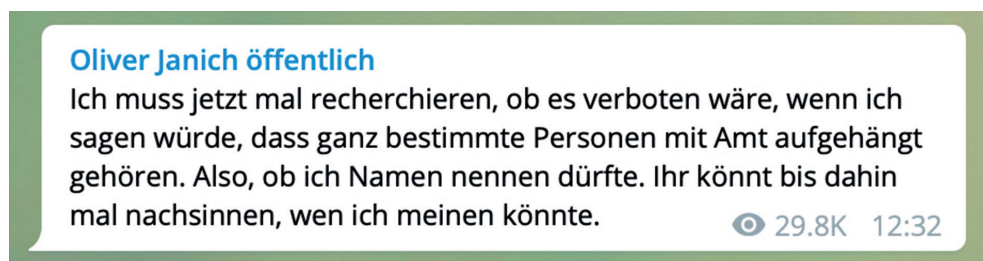

Image 13: Telegram message by Oliver Janich from October 1, 2020. "I have to investigate whether I would be prohibited from saying that certain people in office should be hanged. I mean, if I would be allowed to name names. You can probably guess who I mean."

b. Infiltration

When certain hate actors are first confronted with deplatforming, they are forced to adapt their tactics in order to remain operational. As many activists cannot afford to completely disappear from mainstream platforms, neither politically nor financially, they have to search for different ways to continue sharing content on mainstream platforms.

The activation of "proxies"

"The front line in the information war is on Facebook!" With this pithy quote, Sven Lieblich, a far-right influencer from Halle, used his Telegram channel to prompt his followers to share his content on Facebook (see Image 14). Liebich, whose own profile has been deleted by the platform on numerous occasions, spent years on social media spreading false information, vulgar racism and the crass insults lash out at his political adversaries. As a full-time activist with his own online shop, he is very visible on the street and online, and has built up a significant following. After his Facebook page was blocked for a period of time, Liebich mainly made use of swarm tactics to demonstrate that his content was continuing to be disseminated by a decentralized mass of people. These loyal supporters, which we term as "proxies", carry on the task of transmitting content in the wake of restrictions on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

They coordinate their activities using alternative platforms and share representative content, such as links to videos, that the banned actors provide them, allowing the latter to spread content on platforms to which they no longer have access.

Image 14: Far-right influencer Sven Liebich calls on his supporters to share his content. "The front line in the information war is on Facebook! So please go on FB and share this video. Do not use my channel since it does not have enough reach due to the shadow ban."

In a similar case, after the Holocaust denier Nikolai Nerling was repeatedly banned by YouTube for posting videos under his pseudonym, *Der Volkslehrer*, he turned to his supporters to spread his propaganda – whom he thanked on a regular basis. Actors impacted by deplatforming also have the option of sharing content through the channels offered by befriended accounts. Shortly after being banned by Twitter, Martin Sellner disseminated a video message via the Twitter account belonging to *Ein Prozent*. The video went on to receive over 12,000 views. Since being banned, Sellner has appeared as a guest on the channels of various YouTube influencers. In the case of deletion, the strategy of using proxies does not necessarily work across all platforms, as Facebook, for example, removes all content originating from Sellner or promoting him.

New accounts and fake accounts

Once the accounts of a hate actor have been deleted, this does not necessarily mean that they disappear from the respective platform. Most far-right extremists are aware that having their accounts banned on large-scale platforms makes it largely impossible for them to recruit new followers. In response, these actors take great efforts to reestablish a presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Many of them do not even make a point of concealing new profiles that they create. In the past, far-right activists Lutz Bachmann and Sven Liebich created multiple new Facebook accounts after their previous ones had been banned by the platform. In other cases, these actors create new accounts for different purposes, such as to promote a project or a campaign. *Ein Prozent* and the *Identitäre Bewegung*, for example, created accounts under different names to promote projects such as the video game *Heimat Defender*, the podcast *GibMaKaffee* and the YouTube channel *Kulturlabor*. All of the protagonists involved were connected with these two organizations either through sponsoring or the provision of digital infrastructure.

During an episode of the podcast series *Lagebesprechung* (another recent project initiated by *Ein Prozent*), the identitarian Alexander "*Malenki*" Kleine from Leipzig pointed out that the passive use of platforms likewise assumes an important role for the far right along with disseminating one's own content. After being banned from Facebook and Instagram, he admitted to being active on these platforms under fake accounts. He also revamped his existing account for a new purpose: "So you also start sharing personal pictures on Twitter now and then, which is not what you would normally do, but you end up doing those kinds of things." Here, the identitarian is suggesting that political messages can be shared, and without much need to fear reprisal, by using a camouflaged identity. Nevertheless, resorting to these sorts of tactics makes it more difficult for supporters to grasp the actual message.

c. Platform migration

A certain degree of stability is required to ensure that hate actors are able to regularly communicate with as large of a community as possible. The game of cat and mouse that hate actors and platforms engage in prevents the former from maintaining a steady following. It is evident that, with each new Facebook account that *Pegida* leader Lutz Bachmann registers and with each new YouTube channel that Nikolai Nerling has to set up, these two actors lose more and more of their reach. Many hate actors ineevitably move over to digital infrastructure that promises them a minimum amount of stability, allowing them to permanently archive their material and gain access to their content. Migrating to platforms with less moderation, or none at all, is therefore a self-evident option. Two tendencies can be identified in this regard: the hijacking of alternative platforms and the creation of far-right digital infrastructure.

The hijacking of alternative platforms

In the wake of varied deplatforming measures in recent years, alternative platforms have gradually become more important for hate actors, who generally switch over to platforms that resemble those from which they were banned: VK and Minds[37] are alternatives to Facebook, Gab is supposed to be used instead of Twitter, and Bitchute is a platform that can be utilized in the place of YouTube (see Guhl et al. 2020: 21). One of the first migrations of this sort in Germany occurred after Twitter banned the misogynistic "pick-up artist' Kolja Bonke in May 2017, an act that unleashed a wave of solidarity. Twitter users with varying degrees of reach and influence registered on Gab, Bonke's new digital home, and changed their profile pictures to an image of Bonke. Though Bonke still remains active on Gab, a new Twitter account has since been created that bears the name of one of his books and is apparently managed by Bonke himself. Along with Gab, Parler is another platform that has been created as an alternative to Twitter on the alt-tech market.

Figures such as far-right British commentator Katie Hopkins as well as Martin Sellner have posted on this platform after their Twitter accounts were shut down.

In 2020, BitChute established itself as an alternative to YouTube among hate actors (Davis 2020). Yet, the reach is hardly comparable to YouTube. Taking Martin Sellner as an example, it is evident that actors hit by deplatforming measures generally never recover anywhere near the number of followers they previous commanded. This can also be seen when we consider Sellner's initiative *DigiGer – Digitale Guerillas gegen die Zensur*, which he uses to communicate the aims and objectives of his alternative channels on VK (Image 15): neither the channel nor the initiative itself have enjoyed much resonance. As of October 2020, Sellner has been unable to meet any of his targets and lags far behind on some platforms, and he lost nearly 600 of his Telegram subscribers after September 1, 2020. Even when adding together all five of the channels that Sellner is active on – VK, DLive, Telegram, Parler and Bitchute – his total number of supporters is far smaller than the 151, 157 subscribers he had amassed on his YouTube channel shortly before it was banned.[38]

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[37] Minds is a social media platform launched in 2015. According to the platform, it had around 30,000 active monthly users in May 2020. Besides being popular among the extreme right, most Mind users are from Thailand, who migrated over from Twitter in fear of repression from the Thai government.

[38] https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCZ8uFo1RKSgEg-od3Yu10Pw.

Image 15: Number of subscribers and targets for Sellner's alternative channels in July 2020 "The first new set of figures is here! Thank you to everyone who helped with this increase. :) I'm very pleased!"

Source: screenshot of Martin Sellner's profile on VK

The small political party Britain First in the U.K. found itself in a very similar situation. By the time it was banned in 2018, the party had accumulated some 1.8 million followers on Facebook, after which point its activists sought to establish a presence on alternative channels (Nouri et al. 2019). Until today, the party has been unable to regain anything near the reach it had achieved just two years prior: it has just over 11,200 followers of Gab, around 15,000 on VK and 20,000 on Telegram. Insights such as these draw our attention to the transmedial interplay between different digital formats, which must be understood beyond the platforms themselves. More recently, far-right actors have been imploring their supporters to follow them on Telegram. A large part of the migration movement has now relocated there along with supplementary platforms such as Bitchute and DLive for broadcasting video content.

As highlighted in the previous section that mapped out the actor landscape (pp. 14–27), relatively few German-speaking hate actors have taken advantage of alternative platforms to any large extent. Only 13 of the hate actors in our investigation have a profile on Gab, of which more than

half are inactive. While VK has operated as a back-up platform for some years now, it hardly enjoys any dynamism in terms of actors and their follower numbers. The diminishing significance of such platforms has also been due to the integrative impact and rising popularity of Telegram. Hate actors have found the fusion of the private messenger and public media functions particularly appealing as users can easily forward content to recipients as either public or private messages with just a few swipes, allowing them to reach a broad audience in a very short period of time. The rising prominence of Telegram as a tool for everyday communication is playing right into the hands of many hate actors.

Creating one's own digital infrastructure

Hate actors have come to realize that dependence on commercial platforms can have a negative impact on their power for mobilizing followers. As such, the matter of who holds sovereignty over digital infrastructure has assumed a new degree of significance. At the second "Conference of the Free Media" hosted by the AfD at the German Bundestag, youtuber Hagen Grell made a plea for others to work on creating independent structures that are not controlled by commercial platform operators.[39] This has materialized in the creation of independent platforms on which far-right operators have sovereignty over the publication of content. However, creating one's own social networks demands an extraordinary amount of technical and social expertise related to platform design as well as financial resources that cannot be covered by advertising revenue nearly as easily as on the commercial platforms.

Despite this, various influencers from Germany have made attempts to set up their own platforms, especially for sharing video content, with examples including Grell's *frei3* and Timm Kellner's *Profortis*. These platforms are used to disseminate videos from the far-right YouTube scene, which are generally shared on other commercial and non-commercial platforms in parallel. However, these platforms appear abandoned, their design lacks professionalism and their reach rarely extends beyond a few hundred clicks. As such, they merely serve to mirror content from elsewhere. On *frei3*, only six of the videos that Grell uploaded between January and October 2020 amassed more than 1,000 views, and the official channel of the platform founder has just 1,807 subscribers.

While other small-scale platforms have also popped in the field of conspiracy theorists, to date, it is evident that hate actors have been unable to generate large-scale social media dynamics on their own capable of garnering a critical mass of online attention. They remain reliant on the amplifying effects of the large social media platforms and the chains of interaction they offer. A considerable amount of skepticism among older users towards English-language platforms also means that international alt-tech options remain marginal.

The limits of deplatforming

Deplatforming can be an effective measure for depriving hate actors of two key resources: reach and attention. The wave of far-right extremism that has swept across the globe would be unthinkable without these digitally-generated assets. The possibility of consistently utilizing commercial platforms to spread one's ideology has allowed the far right to reach beyond its own milieu and communicate with a mass audience. Restricting these actors' access to such platforms is the first, albeit controversial, step towards limiting the damage they can cause. Deplatforming is, however, merely an initial step in containing digitally mediated forms of far-right extremism. This section explores the limits of deplatforming, which we also discuss within the broader dilemmas of moderating platforms.

a. The challenge of decentralization

Digitalization has permanently altered the face of far-right extremism. Many actors today operate beyond fixed, local structures and find like-minded supporters on social media, whose promise of an uninhibited exchange of ideas has been captured by the far right. The formats offered by social media platforms have given birth to distinct sorts of far-right activism. Some of the most influential hate actors, such as Oliver Janich and Tim Kellner, have built a reputation and base of support through their excessive use of social media. They do not align themselves with any particular organizations and act in the role of influencers, generating attention as well as financial flows using racist clickbait. These digital activists deliberately conflate the private and the political to make themselves less prone to critique and to propagate racist worldviews under the label of alternative news reporting (Schwarz 2020).

By using social media accounts that speak to up to tens of thousands of followers, these actors enjoy impressive reach that often exceeds the resonance achieved by movements or even political parties. In this regard, Joe Mulhall speaks of the formation of a post-organizational far right, whose members come together on social media rather than via organized structures (Mulhall 2018). In other words: "The far right today forms a movement, without really organizing itself" (Fielitz/Marchs 2020: 183).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify organizational focal points or determine the nature of digital campaigning. The blurry pathways of social media messaging pose a challenge in terms of pinpointing the origins of far-right dynamics, especially considering that individual actors can only be understood in the context of an overall digital far-right alternative universe. By constantly recreating and reactivating themselves, these actors create ad-hoc networks to present themselves as a counter-public based on Facebook pages, YouTube and Telegram channels – without relying

on hierarchical means of communication. Our results show that this does not necessarily constitute a weakness. On the contrary, as long as far-right extremism adapts to the horizontality of social media, their campaigns and key actors become harder to pinpoint and their dynamics harder to undermine (such as through deplatforming specific profiles).

b. Takedowns as form of daily platform governance

When tech companies take down posts or accounts, this act is often seen as an imposition on the freedom of expression. In fact, it holds public and political significance and demands, in turn, social responsibility. Nevertheless, this imposition has necessarily turned into a daily practice given the streams of hate that are published on platforms. Between April and June 2020, YouTube alone deleted nearly 11.4 million videos, 2.1 billion comments and almost 2 million accounts.[40] With most offenses falling within the category of spam or copyright violations, a smaller portion of this can be labeled as "content that glorifies violence or violent extremism". Nevertheless, considering that a total of 921,783 videos were categorized as such, it is evident that we are not merely dealing with a marginal phenomenon. Considered in relative terms, only 3,308 accounts were banned globally for the same offense, indicating that the deletion of accounts is rather exceptional. This discrepancy is only slightly different on Facebook: in the same time period, the online platform deleted 22.5 million pieces of content due to hate speech, while 12.7 million posts by terrorist or organized hate groups were flagged.[41]

Interventions by moderators are a daily occurrence on social media platforms, whereas account bans or deletions tend to be an exception. Temporary account blocks are imposed from time to time as a warning for a user to reconsider their behavior. Concurrently, groups that have come into the crosshairs of security authorities or intelligence agencies outside of these platforms can also be subject to digital repression. In some cases of deletion on Facebook, such as in relation to the Identitäre Bewegung, the publicized posts themselves are not the only criterion used: ultimately, the fact that the anti-democratic principles of such actors stand in general opposition to the platform's community standards influence Facebook's decision to deplatform them (Beirich/Via 2020). On the other hand, platforms such as YouTube exclusively take into consideration the content that is shared and commented on by specific profiles. Nonetheless, decisions to delete the accounts of high-profile hate actors are not necessarily linked to specific occurrences nor do they always follow a transparent process.

Another dilemma has to do with applying the same standards to all users on a given platform. There is a fundamental difference between whether an influential or a more marginal account is the one sharing messages with its followers. In general, actors tend to become the targets of repressive measures in relation to how many followers they have and how much damage they are capable of inflicting through their posts (Rogers 2020). At the same time, interventions are deemed to be

[40] https://transparencyreport.google.com/youtube-policy/removals.

[41] https://transparency.facebook.com/community-standards-enforcement#terrorist-propaganda.

more drastic when hate groups or influencers succeed in portraying themselves or their content as socially relevant. This sense of relevance can also be initiated by third parties; for instance, when the president of the United States shares a tweet posted by a hate actor, he ascribes legitimacy to them and creates hurdles for potential deletion.[42]

The freedom to publish raises the costs for information controls on a permanently excitable segment of the general populace – meaning that communication processes can quickly get out of hand and take on a life of their own. Due to resource constraints in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the task of content moderation was, in part, given over exclusively over to algorithms that were programmed to identify and flag objectionable content – a practice that permanently seconds human discretion and judgment (Gillespie 2020). For its part, YouTube opted to abandon this strategy as of September 2020. According to a report published by the Financial Times, a much greater portion of content flagged by the algorithms had to be subsequently unblocked than would otherwise have been the case if the decision had been left to human judgment.[43] Not only was the number of automatically flagged videos (11 million) higher, there was also a greater incidence of appeals from users: while around 25% of content flagged by human moderators is contested, 50% of the content flagged by automated moderation is ultimately contested.

The heightened proclivity on the part of platform operators to delete content is also a result of pressure from political regulations. In the German context, the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) obliges platform operators to delete criminal content within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. This law has received a great deal of attention around the globe. It allows platform operators to decide on their own which content breaks the bounds of legality and breeches community standards. This has received harsh criticism from civil society groups, who argue that, besides passing on responsibility, the law limits itself to penal cases. As a result, many posts fall below the radar despite having concrete consequences for stigmatized individuals and groups. Previously, platform operators were only obliged to remove the content in question. According to an expert report, a large portion of the planned amendments aimed at tightening this law would be unconstitutional.[44] Among other considerations, this has to do with platform operators needing to share data with the German police authorities and for the latter to request the associated personal data. While the German parliaments have approved the proposed amendments to the NetzDG, German Federal President Steinmeier has not yet signed it into law on account of reservations related to its constitutionality.[45]

Despite the legal constraints, platform operators have a vital interest in remaining open to as many people as possible. This is one reason why they place a share of responsibility on users themselves and beseech them to report rule violations – allowing for more resilient communities to form.

c. Deplatforming in the context of public debates

In recent years, deplatforming has become a socially controversial issue in the context of debates surrounding "cancel culture"[46]. The arguments put forward by critics can be divided into three lines of thought. First, the deletion of extremist accounts or individual posts is said to constitute a fundamental infringement on the freedom of expression, as not everyone is granted equal access to open discourse (Reynolds 2018). As a result, free speech becomes superfluous as a consequence of restrictive interferences, thereby placing constraints on permissible opinions. Moreover, one's fundamental right to free speech can only be restricted in relevant cases involving criminal actions. Second, critics argue that those impacted by deplatforming are prone to placing themselves in the position of victims, which can strengthen their positions (Selk 2017). This argument is based on the idea that politically unethered masses tend to side with those seen to by weak and marginalized, leading sympathies to arise from feelings of injustice. The third line of argument asserts that account deletions pave the way for radicalization as the deleted actors are forced to retreat to echo chambers in which extremist worldviews may solidify and ultimately lead to violence (McDermott 2019).

The first argument has credence insofar as deleting an account may comprise an incursion into one's freedom of expression, being that, ultimately, the user in question is no longer able to use the digital market or opinion squares. At the same time, however, passive behavior on the part of platform operators can likewise impact the free exchange of ideas when boundaries are not placed on manipulative and aggressive users. If safeguards are not created to ensure that everyone has the right to express their opinion without being attacked for doing so, free discourse can no longer be said to exist. Moreover, opinions in themselves and expression in general are not being restricted universally, rather only in the framework of platforms operated by private companies. A more differentiated debate is needed that addresses how vulnerable groups can be protected and to what extent anti-democratic tendencies proliferate under the guise of the freedom of expression. Assuming a laisser-faire approach is, as such, not a guarantee for the free exchange of opinions.

The second argument raises a valid point, as social exchange, political competition and the business promotion are no longer conceivable without the use of social media. Banning people from communicating with friends and business partners can burn one's bridges for conducting daily routines. The feelings of injustice associated with being subject to repression on account of one's political views should not, however, turn the relation of cause and effect on its head. Hate actors are not banned because they are expressing their opinions; rather, they are the target of restrictive measures because their statements incite others through the targeted use of harassment and the dissemination of hate and manipulative materials. The hate actors who are subject to deletion are anything but blank slates: their aim is to undermine interactions between people so that meaningful discourse no longer exists on the social media platforms.

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[42] This happened in December 2017 when Donald Trump shared a tweet by the extreme-right party Britain first, which made the decision to delete the party's account shortly thereafter must more controversial.

[43] https://www.ft.com/content/e54737c5-8488-4e66-b087-d1ad426ac9fa.

[44] https://cdn.netzpolitik.org/wp-upload/2020/09/WD-10-030-20-Gesetz-Hasskriminalitaet.pdf.

[45] https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/hate-speech-hasskriminalitaet-gesetz-steinmeier-1.5034929.

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[46] Cancel Culture refers to the accusation that the systematic boycotting of people and organizations can render political debate impossible. This reading is highly controversial.

The third argument is based on the assumption that banning hate actors will push them further to the political fringes or even towards radicalization. However, this clausal connection contains several fallacies. First, as we have demonstrated, most actors set up back-out accounts on other channels to ensure that they can maintain their lines of communication in the event of deletion – very few actors start from zero after being banned from the digital mainstream. At the same time, the actual impact of deplatforming is overblown. Creating a connection between account bans on social media and a heightened proclivity for violence is a narrow perspective that lacks an empirical basis. Hate actors are acutely aware of the possibility of being banned and no far-right terrorist has radicalized as a result of deplatforming.

Without a doubt, the decision to delete an account relies on maintaining a sense of appropriateness and providing a well-founded justification. At the same time, however, every act of deletion is also a signal directed at broader hate communities. In the end, progressive communities become stronger when influential hate actors are deprived of the oxygen needed to carry out their agendas. Studies into the deletion of hate communities on the social network Reddit have also shown that hate posts on other parts of the platform diminished when normative boundaries were set and toxic content was barred (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017). With impacts extending far beyond the one account itself, the deletion of individual actors also generates effects on the platform culture in general.

HATE ACTORS ARE ACUTELY AWARE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING BANNED AND NO FAR-RIGHT TERRORIST HAS RADICALIZED AS A RESULT OF DEPLATFORMING.

Concluding remarks

In the fight against hate on social media, maintaining a high level of determination combined with a good sense of what is appropriate proves to be a difficult task. While the deletion of specific content, accounts or groups may quantitively be a drop in the bucket, this study has shown that the digital ecosystem of hate actors faces significant challenges when their hubs for online communication are lost. This measure also undercuts the networked power of hate dynamics and the interactions that are otherwise capable of bringing together thousands of people. Moreover, once they disappear from the digital mainstream, the ability of far-right actors to portray themselves as a normal political force crumbles.

Many hate actors have clearly come to rely on the services offered by large tech companies. As such, it is hardly surprising that the discourse surrounding deplatforming measures has turned into a mobilizing issue among the far right. As we have argued, restrictions are used as motivators for articulating even harsher criticisms towards the political system while, at the same time, serving as an overarching issue under which the far right bundles together a range of sub-issues such as alleged censorship, political repression, national sovereignty and democratic delegitimization. By arguing that their ideas are subject to persecution, hate actors portray themselves as victims, an interpretation that is quickly used as a validation for their own actions in line with the motto: "If they delete us, we've done everything right."

When the accounts of hate actors are no longer available on mainstream platforms, potential followers are forced to actively search for far-right content and actors. At the same time, however, our study has also revealed that apps such as Telegram are increasingly being used for political communication – especially by the far right and conspiracy theorists. With this, new communication channels with unknown consequences are being established that allow for content from deleted accounts to flow into the hate ecosystem unimpeded. Yet, the more popular such apps become, the more they will be forced to adopt regulatory measures. In the long term, even Telegram itself will not be able to escape this trend – and after deleting jihadist content, the company has already carried out the first wave of measures in this regard targeting far-right terrorists (Katz 2020).

The low barriers to access social media also ensure that many deleted actors can return to these platforms using pseudonyms. Beyond creating fake accounts, we also presented different approaches and bypass strategies that far-right actors take advantage of to ensure that their content continues being posted on larger platforms in spite of deletion. These actors are very cognizant of the fact that the place where the largest number of people gather is the place where their own views must remain visible to all – even if they may face repression. Based on our findings, we close this study by providing the relevant stakeholders with a series of recommendations.

a. Recommendations for stakeholders

As we have repeatedly stated in this study, deplatforming brings with it a series of dilemmas and unintended consequences for which there are no simple solutions. The question of limits on free speech has always been a weak spot for open societies, assuming a previously unimaginable degree of complexity with the pervasiveness of social media. Not only are far-right constellations becoming more complex than ever, so too are the enforcement mechanisms to contain them and the actors who are directly or indirectly involved in decision-making process. Community managers, platform operators, oversight committees, policy-makers, fact-checkers, courts, criminal prosecutors, civil society and the academic community constantly debate and take widely differing views on the matter of which sorts of content are acceptable on social media as well as which actors pose a threat to social cohesion and how they are treated by the platforms.

Recommendations for tech companies: the virtues of deplatforming

Every platform has its own community standards created for specific purposes, as well as its own set of procedures to implement them. While smaller platforms are easier to moderate, larger ones, with their huge mass of (potential) deplatforming cases, have trouble developing procedures effective enough to tackle all hate content. The principle of "publish, then filter" (Gillespie 2018: 75; Shirky 2009) means that anyone can initially post anything before it is subject to review. Even the best algorithms have problems coping with the hate and incitement that flow through social media platforms. Moreover, growing dependence on technological procedures is generating its own set of problems, as programming is not without its prejudices. This is evident when, for example, a simple Google search for "black girls" displays sexualized content rife with racist stereotypes (Noble 2018), or when Instagram algorithms give preference to naked skin.[47] As such, the matter of deletion is not a technical issue but an imminently social one – and should be treated as such.

Ongoing academic analysis

Tech companies must be conscientious of the fact that their decisions have tangible consequences – as can a lack of intervention on their part. In order to adequately evaluate hate actors, there is a need for academic analysis that not only takes actor behavior on social media platforms as a point of departure, but also considers offline activities and networking capacities. The first step in evaluating a threat is understanding the role that independently run platforms assume within the far-right online ecosystem.

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[47] https://algorithmwatch.org/story/haut-zeigen-auf-instagram/.

Coordinated behavior across platforms

In recent years, social media platforms have increasingly become the object of criticism. Their decisions to execute deplatforming measures are said to lack transparency, be poorly timed or suffer from inconsistent implementation. Moreover, contradictory assessments about specific cases of hate actors among different platforms have spread an impression of arbitrariness. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to communicate to the general public why some organized inciters of hate have been banned from one platform while others are still free to use their services. Coordinated measures are needed in this regard, together with a common framework for achieving understanding and shared concepts. This would allow decisions about bans to be made in a coherent manner and with credible justification. The large social networks should come together and support independent research institutes in investigating dangerous developments and finding adequate solutions for containing hate dynamics.

Early action and transparent justifications

In many cases, account deletions are carried out when actors have become established on a certain platform. For identitarian activists, these digital spaces served as the primary stage for their politics – before being deleted. The later that the decision to carry out a deletion or a ban is made, the more difficult it is to justify. Why should hate actors all of the sudden be banned when the content of their messages has hardly changed? And it is often after instances such as these that platforms are accused of being politically biased. To avoid the impression of arbitrary action, platform operators should uphold the Santa Clara Principles.[48] Developed by a group of civil rights organizations and academic experts in 2018, these principles promote freedom of expression on the Internet and call on platform operators to exercise transparency and accountability when moderating user-generated content. This includes providing information about how many accounts have been banned, transparent explanations as to why accounts and content have been banned, and the possibility of challenging such decisions.

Documenting deleted hate actors and their content

Another problem that arises in the aftermath of deplatforming relates to the lack of documentation provided by platform operators. Data from deleted accounts is generally not kept nor made available to courts, security agencies or researchers. Human Rights Watch has lamented that a great deal of evidence about human rights abuses becomes inaccessible once certain accounts are deleted (Human Rights Watch 2020). This also applies to the area of far-right extremism: many far-right online networks could be much better analyzed if researchers were granted access to the

corresponding data. Research on extremist patterns that existed before deletion would likewise help platforms to detect hate campaigns at an earlier point in time. For this, ongoing cooperation between researchers and tech companies is needed in combination with technological infrastructure to consistently monitor the archiving of content created by relevant far-right actors for analytical purposes.

Recommendations for civil society: Gaining a voice

Public pressure on social media operators can influence decisions as to which accounts are permissible on platforms. The hashtag #DeplatformingWorks has helped many activists and NGOs document successful cases and it has come to represent a new focus area among civil society actors aimed at holding platforms more accountable. Despite growing cooperation between private sector and civil society, the latter should demand more representation in the decision-making process.

Greater influencer over tech companies

Digital civil society has its finger on the pulse of the digital world, making it best suited to anticipate and address far-right dynamics. Hence, these stakeholders need to have a stronger voice in order to call attention to malevolent developments. An established forum of trusted partners should be set up to influence long-term decisions with regard to deplatforming hate actors.

Continuously monitoring the online activities of hate actors

Continuous monitoring would allow stakeholders to more easily identify the ever-changing communication strategies of far-right actors on social media. This is a task for which civil society actors as well as the media could assume a supervisory role.

Avoid overblocking and arbitrary actions

Despite the fact that deplatforming is an effective strategy for banning hate actors, overly permissive use of this measure should also be avoided. Moreover, we must question the power wielded by platforms which make decisions without democratic legitimation and at the boundaries of public discourse. Their tools they possess could very well end up being used against other forms of dissidence, as well.

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[48] The Santa Clara Principles are transparently formulated demands that some of the most important actors from US-American civil society have created to provide companies that deal with content moderation with logical procedures and to ensure that the implementation of content guidelines is fair, impartial and commensurate while also respecting the rights of users: https://santaclaraprinciples.org/.

Recommendations for policy-makers and the judicial authorities: take control

Regularly updating the Network Enforcement Act

The importance of messenger apps ('dark social') for hate actors has been rising steadily over the years, reaching a peak in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of users consume hate, fantasies of violence and conspiracy theories around the clock, shifting back and forth between open channels and in closed groups. Telegram, as the most prominent example, showcases that this hybrid form of communication is increasingly starting to resemble platforms that offer multimedia and interactive features. Yet, in contrast to the large platforms, these apps do not fall under the legal consideration of the NetzDG, a blind spot that has been exploited by hate actors. The NetzDG is in need of update in regard to monitoring public channels on messaging apps. Considering the amount of dynamism that can be observed here, the list of platforms falling under the umbrella of this law should be reviewed and transparently updated on a regular basis.

Funding for research and civil society

It is important to create permanent structures for researching digitally mediated extremism and to intensify international collaboration. There are several research gaps with regard to the international diffusion of narratives and movements as well as to the question of how online hate spurs violence. Moreover, the year 2020 has revealed the dire need for counselling and information services aimed at people who have succombedw to conspiracy theories. Developing and optimizing these sorts of structures is imperative.

Recommendations for German security authorities: anticipate trends towards decentralization

One of the major challenges posed by deplatforming from a security point of view is that the activities of hate actors are becoming even more unpredictable. While it used to be easier to monitor certain activities and identify networks on mainstream platforms, the splintering of diverse segments of the public has made it more difficult to maintain an overview. Though this does not immediately constitute a security risk, certain actors who guide their followers across social media platforms can simply disappear from view. At the same time, security agencies must bear in mind that the far right realigns its appearance in the response to mounting restrictions that are almost exclusively placed on groups and collective actors. This implies that more and more individual actors have started to set the tone – having undergone a relatively rapid process of radicalization and coming into contact with far-right ideas via channels that promote conspiracy theories. Analyses must therefore also consider the manipulatory power of individual demagogues who enjoy immediate reach via social media and chat groups. Beyond this general pattern, our study has likewise addressed important trends in far-right activism that need to be tackled accordingly.

Recognizing the significance of Telegram

Since the outbreak of the latest pandemic, hate actors in Germany have turned to Telegram as their platform of choice. Virtually all relevant actors now actively operate a channel or a group on this app. Moreover, networks are being established among conspiracy theorists, far-right influencers and loose groupings of users through this app. The low barriers to access on Telegram are particularly striking in this regard. Repeated demands for more oversight of private communication by the police and intelligence services often overlook the fact that a great deal of far-right agitation on this platform takes place in the open and outside of encrypted messaging

Anticipating international trends

Some of the most critical developments related to far-right extremism in Germany could be identified further in advance if international trends were regularly analyzed. This pertains to the rise of new movements and influencers as well as the handling of actors who have been affected by deplatforming. In the United States and Great Britain, for instance, one can observe that important movement actors who have been banned from the digital mainstream for some years now have gone on to establish their own digital infrastructure through which they are able to communicate uninterrupted. It is crucial for security authorities to act early and take notice of this trend, among the German-speaking far right, towards creating separate forums from which one can operate and incite hate.

New concepts for mixed scenes

Our study shows that hate actors strongly guided by conspiracy theories have been particularly effective in taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic, a tendency that has also manifested on the streets. Along with conspiracy theorists such as Oliver Janich and Attila Hildmann, the international conspiracy theory movement *QAnon*, in particular, has fused extreme-right narratives and conspiracy theories in an attempt to delegitimize democratic institutions. Many security authorities were late to recognize just how much potential for violence these mixed scenes hold. Intervening in the countless public chat groups early on in cases of mass instigations, calls for violence and acts of slander would send an important signal.

b. The limitations of the present study

This study presents our findings from the first investigation into the effects of deplatforming on the far right in Germany. During the eight-month investigation period, we were able to generate important findings related to the matter of how restrictions on access to social media impact the mobilization potential of hate actors and which innovative strategies have been developed in response. As with any investigation confined to certain period of time, our study has its limitations and invites for further scrutiny.

One of the biggest challenges for this study was to set up a solid data sample that could be used to identify patterns related to deplatforming. Drawing on diverse preliminary studies, we were able to put together a wide ranging list of actors impacted by deplatforming measures – one that is by no means exhaustive. Information provided by platform operators would have been helpful in this regard, but this option was unavailable to us due to regulations on data privacy protections. Furthermore, our internal project monitoring efforts ran into their own limitations after the profiles of certain actors were banned and we were only able to partially reconstruct the reach they had previously enjoyed. These two experiences made us recognize the need for implementing continuous forms of data collection, which operate beyond specific research projects and digitally chronicle developments in the far-right scene. This would include automated, cross-platform analyses of messages that unleash large-scale chains of interactions, trending hashtags linked to the far-right scene and international exchanges. Using this data, a "heat map" could be created to identify the potential for networked mobilization in advance.

To allow for better comparability, we deliberately limited our study to hate actors who were easy to demarcate, whose media behavior could be traced across various platforms and who were similar in terms of reach. This meant that we had to leave out other phenomena. Excluded from this study were actors who did not have a reach of at least 1,000 people as well as the AfD, which pursues a distinct strategy on account of being represented in the German political party system and does not yet face the risk of deplatforming – despite its extreme positions.[49] A consideration of forums that host anonymous communication was likewise left out of our analysis. As such, there is potential for further research into these sorts of interfaces. How do imageboards and other marginal forums influence the actions of the investigated hate actors? And how exactly are hate actors connected with the AfD?

Finally, future studies must more closely investigate the bases upon which platforms make their decisions. One factor that should be taken into consideration here is that the signals and procedures involved are constantly being adapted, changed and, not least, subject to public pressure. Even though companies can invoke the right to trade secrets to protect themselves, long-term monitoring, interviews and structured observations can allow researchers to draw conclusions about when platforms find themselves obliged to take action and to which extent social and political pressures are decisive in this regard. Moreover, the translational nature of online networks makes conducting comparative studies important, as well.

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[49] Individual party members, such as Dubravko Mandic, have, however, been banned from social media platforms.

c. Prospects: deplatforming extended?

While effective, the practice of deplatforming far-right actors is not in itself a sufficient response to their encroaching strategies on the Internet. Deleting a post or an account will neither change people's opinions nor prevent acts of violence or radicalization from taking place, per se. Despite this, the way that social media platforms deal with far-right actors has an immense influence on their effectiveness in promoting policies and disseminating anti-democratic propaganda. As far-right extremism has gradually been decentralizing itself through social media, and many self-made activists set the tone today, a nebulous grey zone has emerged that transverses the boundaries of politics, commerce and outright hate.

In this context, it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between the commercial interests of an individual and the political interests of a movement. Many actors, especially those who gained fame during the Covid-19 pandemic, have built up a financial and social basis through their social media activities; taking these platforms away from them is therefore inevitably met with fierce resistance. In other words, the act of deplatforming brings to the fore a very specific set of problems: besides underscoring the matter of how account or profile deletions should be justified, it also raises the questions of why far-right actors have become so successful on mainstream platforms and how social media should be designed to avoid such developments.

With far-right actors progressively starting to set up their own self-managed social networks, the analytical perspective is shifting to another level. Now no longer dependent on platform operators, these alternative technologies are turning our attention to the digital infrastructure that provides them with webspace and security, such as webhosts, internet security services and online providers. The behavior of these service providers will influence the chances of success for far-right activism in the future. This development also highlights one of the dilemmas inherent in the current situation: the more that such decisions are made by private companies, the more this matter loses its public dimension. Policy-makers and civil society must act in this regard and demand greater influence over the actions of digital service providers and platform operators alike. For as long as hate actors are able to generate political capital using social media, deplatforming will remain an effective instrument in the battle against far-right extremism and the spread of conspiracy theories.

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Maik Fielitz is a Researcher at the IDZ and Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right. He works on social movements, right-wing extremism and digital cultures. Together with Holger Marcks he wrote the book "Digital Fascism: Social Media as the engine of Right-wing Extremism"(in German).

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Further materials of the research project in German
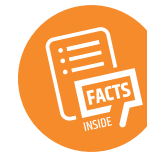
ALT-TECH – DIGITALE PARALLELWELTEN DER EXTREMEN RECHTEN

Immer mehr reichweitenstarke soziale Netzwerke wenden ihre Gemeinschaftsstandards gegen Hassinhalte konsequenter an. Dadurch haben viele rechtsextreme Akteure zentrale Plattformen verloren, über die sie untereinander und mit einer breiten Öffentlichkeit kommunizieren. Um handlungsfähig zu bleiben, weichen Rechtsextreme auf alternative Plattformen aus oder arbeiten an alternativen Technologien: Alt-Tech. Unter dem Vorwand, freie Rede für alle Menschen zu ermöglichen, soll über Alt-Tech die Vernetzung und die freie Verbreitung extremer Ansichten sichergestellt werden. Ziel einiger Alt-Tech-Plattformen ist es, sich von großen Konzernen kommunikativ unabhängig zu machen und eigene Infrastrukturen aufzubauen.

RECHTSEXTREME INFLUENCER – INSZENIERTE MENSCHENFEINDLICHKEIT IM GEWAND VON KOMMERZ UND LIFESTYLE
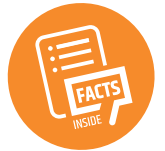
Mit der zunehmenden Bedeutung sozialer Medien passen sich die Propagandamethoden und Organisationsstrukturen der extremen Rechten an. Eine Neuerung stellt die Bedeutung von rechtsextremen Influencern dar, die über professionelle Online-Formate politische Inhalte zielgruppengerecht verbreiten. Die (audio-)visuellen Formate sozialer Medien eignen sich besonders, eine unmittelbare Wirkung auf eine breite Masse auszuüben. Unterhaltung, Kommerz, Lifestyle und Politik vermischen sich, etablieren neue Formen der Vergemeinschaftung und bringen rechtsextremes Denken neuen Zielgruppen nahe. Influencer finden sich auch in den verschwörungsideologischen Mischszenen, deren Schlüsselakteure sich mehr mit eigenen Medienkanälen identifizieren als mit Organisationen.

RECHTSTERRORISMUS

Im Jahr 2019 erschütterte eine Serie rechtsterroristischer Anschläge die Welt. In Neuseeland, den USA und Deutschland kündigten die Terroristen ihre Taten im Internet an. Auf Imageboards stellten sie Propagandamaterial zur Verfügung und riefen zu dessen Verbreitung auf. Die Terroristen von Christchurch und Halle übertrugen ihre Taten live ins Netz. Im Umgang mit den Taten und digitalen Gemeinschaften, die zu Morden aufrufen und die Täter verherrlichen, ergeben sich neue Herausforderungen für die Gesellschaft.

All materials and information on the project are available for download at:

https://www.idz-jena.de/hatenotfound/

Impressum

HATE NOT FOUND?!
DEPLATFORMING THE FAR RIGHT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

This research report presents the results of the first systematic study on deplatforming of the far right in Germany. The study reconstructs the patterns and courses of deplatforming. It investigates the loss of reach that hate actors suffer as a result of deletions, and how they realign their mobilization on social media.

IDZ INSTITUT FÜR DEMOKRATIE UND ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT

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