



**MELIA OBSERVATORY – Media Literacy Observatory for
Active Citizenship and Sustainable Democracy**

**Data Collection on Media Literacy and the
Relationship of Media Literacy to Democratic
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MELIA OBSERVATORY – Media Literacy Observatory for Active Citizenship and Sustainable Democracy

Analysis of Media Messaging in Germany with Special Focus on Manifestation of Disinformation and Spread of Hatred

SoWiBeFo e.V.

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1. Introductory remarks

In Germany, the spread of conspiracy theories, fake news and hate speech by individuals, campaigners, groups and “movements” via Social Media is very common.

Also biased, traditional media (radio, print media) are involved in the dissemination of conspiracy theories and fake news. In this context, there are also frequent incidents of hate speech and spreading of ideologies of inequality such as racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and sexism. It can be observed that anti-Semitism in particular constitutes a basic pattern of conspiracy theories (see Lamberty/Nocun 2020, p. 106).

In addition, the Corona pandemic as a global crisis caused an increased belief in conspiracy theories because in a situation of crisis, people are more susceptible to conspiracy theories as they offer supposedly simple explanations and therefore orientation (see Lamberty /Nocun 2020, pp. 53/54).

A recent representative survey conducted by the opinion research institute “infratest dimap” for the Vodafone Foundation showed that, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more adolescents and young adults in Germany have been confronted with fake news.

According to the survey, 76 % of the 14 to 24-year-olds have been facing fake news at least once a week since the COVID-19 pandemic. This corresponds to an increase of 50 % within two years (see Infratest dimap on behalf of Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2020, quoted after <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/fakenews-jugendliche-101.html>, p. 4).

Especially when it comes to news on COVID-19, 64 % of the respondents have problems to distinguish credible from untrustworthy information (see Infratest dimap on behalf of Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2020, p. 6). Probably because of this uncertainty, a large majority of young respondents (85 %) would like the subject of disinformation to be embedded in the curriculum for schools and to be treated as mandatory content in individual subjects (e.g. politics or social studies) (see Infratest dimap on behalf of Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2020, p. 13).

It can be concluded that there is indeed a level of uncertainty among the respondents about the trustworthiness of information. The fact that the large majority of young respondents would appreciate an embedding of the subject of disinformation in the curriculum for schools, indicates however that there must be a certain level of trust in institutions. These conclusions

can be supported by findings from the Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2017 which indicate that 53% of the German respondents tend not to trust the media (EU-average: 56%) while 64% of the German respondents tend to trust the national government (EU-average: 61%) whereby especially young respondents (aged 15-24) are the most likely to tend to trust their national governments EU-wide (see European Commission 2017, pp. 5-9, 14-17).

2. Analysis of Media Messaging in Germany with Special Focus on Manifestation of Disinformation and Spread of Hatred

In the following, three cases of media messaging, which reflect the manifestation of disinformation campaigns, fake news and hate speech in Germany, will be analysed. Before analysing the three cases however, it is crucial to define the terms hate speech, conspiracy theory, disinformation and fake news. Furthermore, it is important to understand the psychological reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories and fake news and which strategies are used by the initiators to manipulate information and to incite people to believe and spread their disinformation campaigns.

The UN defines hate speech in its “Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech” as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” (United Nations 2019, p. 2) This wide definition covers a large variety of discriminatory communication (offline and online) whereby clearly stating that the discrimination is targeted on a person’s identity factor which goes beyond a simple insult.

As conspiracy theories often incite people to commit hate speech and spread fake news, these phenomena are closely linked. The German psychologist and expert on the subject Roland Imhoff defines conspiracy theories as “the assumption that an event of some magnitude is causally linked to the secret plan of a few individuals who seek to benefit at the expense of the public” (<https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-how-do-i-recognize-a-conspiracy-theory/a-53492563>).

Pia Lamberty and Katherina Nocun, as other experts in the field, share a similar understanding of conspiracy theories whereby pleading for the use of the term “conspiracy narrative” instead of “theory” as the latter suggests scientificity which automatically results in a higher valuation of the conspiratorial story (see Lamberty/Nocun 2020, p. 21). Following this logic and to reflect

the scholarly discussion in Germany, this analysis also uses the term “conspiracy narrative” although the term “conspiracy theory” is mostly used in English-speaking research.

The Australian psychologist Stephan Lewandowsky identifies four factors that may contribute to the psychological susceptibility to believe in conspiracy narratives and to share them (see Lewandowsky/Cook 2020, p. 4):

1) Feeling of powerlessness

An evaluation of online forums revealed that people’s perceived level of threat increases the likelihood of proposing conspiracy narratives. People who feel powerless and vulnerable are therefore especially susceptible for conspiracy narratives.

2) Coping with threats

Although conspiracy narratives typically contain scenarios of existential threat, they allow people at the same time to cope with these threats by assigning the responsibility and blame on a small number of conspirators. Also, people tend to rather accept “big” explanations” like conspiracy narratives for “big” events which explains the increased emergence of conspiracy narratives in situations of crisis.

3) Explaining unlikely events

In the case of unlikely events, people rather believe in conspiracy narratives than in coincidences for the same reasons. Conspiracy narratives are therefore used as coping mechanisms to manage uncertainty.

4) Disputing mainstream politics

According to Lewandowsky, conspiracy narratives are also used to dispute mainstream political discourses. This allows initiators of conspiracy narratives to claim minority positions and a highly effective anti-establishment status.

The underlying psychological principle of these factors and motivations to believe in conspiracy narratives is the avoidance of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance, first proposed by US-American social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957, can be described as the condition when ideal and reality stand in fundamental contradiction to each other. Conditions of cognitive dissonance cause stress and discomfort (see Nocun/Lamberty 2020, pp. 48/49). To avoid cognitive dissonance, people believe in conspiracy narratives to adjust reality to an ideal or aspiration. This also explains why people still believe in conspiracy narratives even if all (scientific) facts speak against them. In conclusion, it can be stated that the veritable belief in conspiracy narratives eases the discomfort of cognitive dissonance and furthermore offers meaning and also an identity-forming function.

As already stated above, fake news and conspiracy narratives often go hand in hand. Even if the term fake news is excessively used in the public discourse, scholars largely agree that the term is not suitable to correctly describe the phenomenon. First, it is relatively vague and second the use of the term in a scientific context is misleading as the term is (mis-)used to discredit inconvenient media reporting, as the example of Donald Trump convincingly demonstrates (see Brodnig 2017, pp. 29/30). The leading expert on Social Media and fake news Claire Wardle states that the phenomenon of fake news not only influences news, but “the entire information ecosystem.” (Wardle 2017) She therefore proposes to analyse the phenomenon regarding three elements:

- 1) The different types of content that are being produced and disseminated
- 2) The motivations of the content producers
- 3) The ways how the content is being disseminated

Regarding the first element Wardle initially distinguishes between mis- and disinformation. According to her, “disinformation is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.” (Wardle 2018, quoted after DETECT-Consortium, not dated, p. 10). Correspondingly, misinformation “describes false information that is unintentionally created, disinformation is made and disseminated intentionally.” (DETECT-Consortium, not dated, p. 10) Wardle therefore suggests a typology of different forms of mis- and disinformation, which “[...] sit on a scale, one that loosely measures the intent to deceive.” (Wardle 2017)

Satire or parody	Content that is produced without the intention to cause harm but which has the potential to deceive.
Misleading content	Information is used in a misleading way to frame an individual or issue.
Imposter content	Impersonating of genuine sources
Fabricated content	When new created content is completely false with the intention to deceive and do

	harm.
False connection	When headlines, visuals or captions do not match with the corresponding content.
False context	Sharing of genuine content with the false context
Manipulated context	Manipulation of genuine content with the intention to deceive

Table 1 See Wardle 2017

Regarding the second element, thus the motivation of the ones creating the content, Wardle identifies eight motivations: poor journalism, parody, provocation, passion, partisanship, profit, political influence and propaganda. When combining the first element of the different types of content and the second element regarding the motivations of the content creators, the following matrix results.








FIRSTDRAFT		MISINFORMATION MATRIX						
	 SATIRE OR PARODY	 FALSE CONNECTION	 MISLEADING CONTENT	 FALSE CONTEXT	 IMPOSTER CONTENT	 MANIPULATED CONTENT	 FABRICATED CONTENT	
POOR JOURNALISM		✓	✓	✓				
TO PARODY	✓				✓		✓	
TO PROVOKE OR TO 'PUNK'					✓	✓	✓	
PASSION				✓				
PARTISANSHIP			✓	✓				
PROFIT		✓			✓		✓	
POLITICAL INFLUENCE			✓	✓		✓	✓	
PROPAGANDA			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 2 Wardle 2017

Lastly, regarding the third element, thus the mechanisms of dissemination, Wardle loosely distinguishes between four types that also include the aspect of intention:

“Some of it is being shared unwittingly by people on social media, clicking retweet without checking. Some of it is being amplified by journalists who are now under more pressure than ever to try and make sense and accurately report information emerging on the social web in real time. Some of it is being pushed out by loosely connected groups who are deliberately attempting to influence public opinion, and some of it is being disseminated as part of sophisticated disinformation campaigns, through bot networks and troll factories.” (Wardle 2017)

With this theoretical background in mind, the following three cases of media messaging, which reflect the manifestation of disinformation and hate speech in Germany, will be analysed.

2.1 Case Study 1: Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech in response to the Measures of the Federal Government of Germany and the State Governments against the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.1.1 Case Description

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous conspiracy theories and disinformation have been circulating in Germany. In response to the measures taken by the German federal government and the state governments to contain the virus, numerous groups, some of which are interconnected, have been spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation. The formations are very dynamic and therefore the situation is relatively confusing. However, several actors have proved to be constant influences through the repeated registration of demonstrations. The “Querdenken movement” (loosely translated as “Lateral thinking movement”) should serve as an example. The founder of the original group “Initiative Querdenken 711” Michael Ballweg from Stuttgart describes the initiative as a democratic movement. However, many local “Querdenken” groups (“Querdenken 30” in Berlin, “Querdenken 40” in Hamburg, “Querdenken 69” in Frankfurt, etc.) act only supposedly independent, unofficially Michael Ballweg is at the forefront of the “movement”. (see <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/querdenken-der-geschaeftige-herr-ballweg/>). Since the summer of 2020, many demonstrations against the protective measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been registered nationwide by the “Querdenken” local groups and by the original group from Stuttgart. On 18 November 2020 several demonstrations were registered in Berlin. In social networks, via the encrypted messenger service Telegram¹ and at events of the

¹ Telegram offers a channel function which allows organisations or campaigners to easily reach a vast number of subscribers in a more “private” atmosphere. Also, Telegram does not provide the possibility to report inappropriate or illegal content which is why it was increasingly used to spread conspiracy

“Querdenken movement” the meetings had been promoted nationwide (see <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/berlin-dutzend-demos-gegen-infektionsschutzgesetz-direkt-vor-bundestag-verboden-a-844c50f4-8d5f-4769-a71d-31872f69f196>).

The occasion for the demonstrations was the vote on the amendment of the Infection Protection Law in the Bundestag (the German parliament), which was compared by the organisers of the demonstrations and by the demonstrators with the Enabling Act under National Socialism in 1933. In the run-up to the demonstrations, many MPs had already received a flood of e-mails also comparing the new Infection Protection Law with the Enabling Act. A Member of Parliament reported on 37,000 e-mails with almost the same content (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/corona-ns-vergleich-101.html>).

On 18 November 2020 more than 10,000 people participated in the demonstrations in the immediate vicinity of the Reichstag, the German parliament building. The police arrested 365 people during the demonstration and initiated 257 investigations. Observers spoke of an “extremely aggressive ambience”. As many participants did not leave the demonstration despite the police’s request and the official dissolution of the event, the police also used water cannons, which only lightly sprayed the demonstrators, as there were also children in the crowd. On the same day, four visitors invited to the Bundestag by members of the AfD (the leading right-wing populist party in Germany, which received about 13% of the vote in the parliamentary elections in 2017) harassed and insulted the minister for economic affairs Peter Altmaier (CDU – liberal-conservative Christian Democratic Union, currently ruling party), FDP (liberal Free Democratic Party) politician Konstantin Kuhle, Green politician Anton Hofreiter, and SPD (Social Democratic party, currently ruling party in coalition with CDU) politician Martin Schulz. Among the disturbers were the author and management consultant Thorsten Schulte, who disseminates far-right conspiracy narratives and historical revisionism, and the new-right media activist Rebecca Sommer as well as the AfD-affiliated YouTuber Daniela Scheible and “Elijah Tee” (see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proteste_gegen_Schutzmaßnahmen_wegen_der_COVID-19-Pandemie_in_Deutschland).

narratives whereas more public and moderated Social Media like Twitter and Facebook, while still used, began to be regarded as parts of the mainstream media. The German competence centre for youth protection describes Telegram as “playground for right-wing extremists” (see https://www.weser-kurier.de/deutschland-welt/deutschland-welt-politik_artikel,-warum-querdenker-und-kriminelle-bevorzugt-telegram-benutzen-_arid,1950212.html).

During the demonstration, more disinformation was circulated, which could have fuelled the protests and might have led to a radicalisation of the demonstrators. In addition to the comparison of the Infection Protection Law with the Nazi Enabling Act, fake tweets of the Berlin police were circulated, according to which they allegedly received a firing order in order to be able to take action against the demonstrators. This example demonstrates how disinformation and rumours arouse hysteria which contributes to a radicalisation of the protests (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/fake-tweets-polizei-berlin-101.html>).

2.1.2 Case Analysis

Topic: The topic of this case was the comparison of the new Infection Protection Law with the Nazi Enabling Act of 1933, which is why several demonstrations were registered in Berlin on 18 November 2020, the day the law was passed in the Bundestag. It can be stated that there is indeed justified criticism regarding the amended Infection Protection Law as for example the opposition parties and experts on constitutional law suggest. For example, the legislative change is criticised for being too vague and for having been introduced on too short notice to the parliament (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/corona-ns-vergleich-101.html>).

Also, scholars support objective criticism of the amended Infection Protection Law on the basis of which fundamental rights are indeed being restricted while opposing the comparison with the Enabling Act from 1933. According to Andreas Wirsching, the director of the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History in Munich the comparison is “nonsense” because the Enabling Act served Hitler to dissolve the separation of powers and the parliament was literally forced to dissolve itself while being threatened with violence by the paramilitary fighting unit SA (Sturmabteilung, literally translated as “Storm Detachment”). MPs of the communist party (KPD) were not even able to “vote” because they were already detained (see <https://www.dw.com/de/corona-erm%C3%A4chtigungsgesetz-warum-der-vergleich-mit-1933-t%C3%A4uscht/a-55650692>). Considering the typology of fake news by Claire Wardle (see p. 8) the comparison of the new Infection Protection Law with the Enabling Act in 1933 can be classified as “misleading content” because information on the passing of the law in the Bundestag is used in a misleading way to frame the vote as paving the way to a “Corona-dictatorship” and to delegitimise the government.

Regarding the disinformation about an alleged firing order by the Berlin police against demonstrators that has been launched in Social Media, it can be stated that this can be classified as fabricated content as the claim of the firing order was completely false and was deliberately made to deceive and radicalise the targets. Also, this disinformation can be identified as imposter content because the source of the Berlin police was impersonated.

Timespan: The timespan covers the weeks before the demonstration on 18 November 2020, when the spreading of the comparison with National Socialism on Social Media and above all via the encrypted messenger service Telegram was used to mobilise people (see footnote 1 on p. 10). However, the begin of the timespan could also be scheduled earlier, because the protests on 18 November 2020 in Berlin must not be understood as an isolated event but in the context of the protests and demonstrations against the COVID-19 protective measures that have taken place since April 2020.

Initiators: The initiators are a confusing combination of “movements”, “initiatives” and individual campaigners. It is clear that the registration of the initial central demonstration, which eventually was not authorised, came from the spectrum of anti-vaxxers (vaccine opponents). Other groups, such as the “Querdenken movement”, have also mobilised for the demonstration. In addition, far-right groups also called for participation in the demonstrations (see <https://berlin-gegen-nazis.de/verschwoerungsideologische-kundgebung-im-regierungsviertel-und-aufrufe-von-rechtsextremen/>).

Targets: As the tendency to move the campaigns to closed media like messenger services shows, the primary targets of the disseminated disinformation are, on the one hand, certainly those who share the general concerns of the campaign, as a discomfort with some of the measures taken and scepticism in respect of vaccination. Attracting this audience to a more closed and secretive media and creating a media bubble allows exposing the targets to ever increasing radical information which supposedly is believed because of the connection to the common cause.

On the other hand, the targets are also generally people who are insecure due to the COVID-19 pandemic and whose political attitudes are not as consolidated, which is why these people can easily be influenced by conspiracy narratives and disinformation campaigns. Basically, the total population of Germany could be seen as a target.

The resulting radicalisation of the targets can be explained by several psychological effects. First, the so-called *confirmation bias* leads people to rather believe information that confirms

their opinion. This is especially the case regarding highly emotional issues (Lamberty/Nocun 2020, p. 61) which restrictions of fundamental rights in the situation of a global pandemic certainly are. Also, the so-called *mere-exposure effect* explains the further radicalisation of the targets, According to US-American psychologist Robert Zajonc the repeated confrontation with certain information alone already leads to an increase in positive association and therefore belief in this certain information (see DETECT-Consortium, not dated, p. 23). Furthermore, the already mentioned avoidance of cognitive dissonance is clearly a reason to further believe and disseminate conspiracy narratives and (see p. 7). Because the experience of restriction of fundamental rights exposes the targets to a substantial cognitive dissonance, it is more “convenient” to deny the existence of COVID-19 even if paradoxically this goes hand in hand with the perceived threat of “Corona-dictatorship”.

Labelling/defamation – key words: As labelling/defamation keywords, “Enabling Act”, “National Socialism” and “firing order” can be noted.

Ideological connotations: The ideological connotations can be situated in the far-right and right-wing extremist/populist spectrum despite the appeal of the demonstrators to freedom of expression and the Basic Law because of proofs of continual networking with right-wing extremist groups and the spreading of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/antisemitismus-querdenken-101.html>). Paradoxically, events connected to National Socialism, which has been widely accepted as a fundamental cultural consensus about what constitutes the “absolute evil” in Germany after 1945 (e.g. see Adorno 1966) are used by right-wing groups to further an anti-democratic agenda and even use this narrative to foster an anti-Semitic narrative in line with National Socialist propaganda.

Since the beginning of December 2020, the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution of Baden-Wuerttemberg has been observing the “Querdenken 711” original group from Stuttgart around Michael Ballweg because according to the Ministry of the Interior there are indications for extremist aspirations. In addition, the group is increasingly characterised by radical views and is being infiltrated by extremists (see <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/verfassungsschutz-baden-wuerttemberg-beobachtet-querdenken-bewegung-100.html>). It can also be noted that in the context of the protests, in particular anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives and trivialisations of National Socialism are deliberately spread (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/antisemitismus-querdenken-101.html>).

According to Claire Wardle, the motivations of the initiators (see pp. 8/9) can be, on the one hand, identified as profit because it was recently revealed by a journalistic platform that the initiator of the original “Querdenken” group Ballweg receives donations from supporters on his private banking account and has filed patent applications for 19 “Querdenken” local group names at the German Patent and Trademark Office (see <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/querdenken-der-geschaeftige-herr-ballweg/>). It is thus clear, that at least the initiator of the so-called movement gains personal financial profits. Furthermore, the motivations of the initiators can be classified as gaining political influence and to spread propaganda.

Sources of information: The sources of information are faked tweets by the Berlin police and the dissemination of disinformation about the new Infection Protection Law via messenger services like Telegram.

Impact/outcome: The impact/outcome of the campaign can be described as successful. As a result of the campaign, tens of thousands of e-mails had been sent to parliamentarians prior to the demonstration. For the participation in the demonstration more than 10,000 people from all over Germany were mobilised. In addition, four visitors invited by the AfD entered the Bundestag on 18 November 2020 despite the visiting ban on that day and harassed parliamentarians.

Outreach/impact: The outreach and impact of this disinformation campaign are far-reaching and very alarming. Ultimately, the initiators of the disinformation campaign use the specific topic of COVID-19 regulations to delegitimise the democratic system and to shift the debate culture. The public discourse and the societal and cultural consensus of what constitutes the room of legitimate democratic debate, including the rules of debate (obligation to base this debate on facts, good will and transparency), limits of what can be said are systematically shifted to the introduction of (far-)right narratives and terminologies, along with a claim to “alternative facts”, i.e. a delegitimization of the rules of debate.

The constitution of an alternative public space circumvents established checks and balances of traditional media, like the representation of all societal groups in the boards of the public media and professional self-control organisations like the press council and therefore rules of journalistic conduct. like correct referencing, fact-based reporting, separation of reporting and commenting etc.)

Constructive criticism of the measures taken by the federal government and state governments against the COVID-19 pandemic are of course justified and absolutely necessary for a lively democratic culture. If anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are disseminated, a trivialisation of National Socialism is carried out and when parliamentarians are deliberately intimidated however, there can be no talk of legitimate criticism based on freedom of expression.

Summary: The main remarkable point for which this example stands is that rules of legitimate debate, like fact basing, transparency etc. are identified with censorship and dictatorship, which legitimises a counter public sphere which does not work along such rules.

While in fact the freedom of expression and information in Germany is a very basic fundamental law and cannot and is not in fact limited in any way beyond the limit of individual insult², a public of individuals faced with complex scientific facts and unpleasant regulations is encouraged to trust individual feelings and opinions more than “official” facts and as a consequence lured to identifying with alternative narratives and joining alternative information bubbles.

2.2 Case Study 2: Dissemination of Disinformation and Hate Speech via the Website Anonymousnews.ru

2.2.1 Case Description

The website “Anonymousnews.ru”, which falsely claims to be a part of the hacker collective “Anonymous”, is regarded as the successor to the internet presence of the Facebook profile “Anonymous.Kollektiv”, which was deleted in May 2016 and which was allegedly operated by right-wing extremist Mario R. who was also regarded as the operator of the fake news website “Anonymousnews.ru” by many observers. At the end of 2018, R. was sentenced to two years and ten months in prison for illicit trade in firearms via another website with the cynical name “Migrantenschreck” (loosely translated as “migrant shocker”). But even after R.'s imprisonment, the site “Anonymousnews.ru” continued to publish articles spreading disinformation and hate speech especially against Muslims and refugees. The German federal government therefore classifies the site as “one of the most active and wide-ranging presences

² Which is generally interpreted by courts in favour of free expression and none of alternative media have ever been restricted, outlawed or otherwise harassed (see <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/306444/meinungsfreiheit-und-ihre-grenzen>).

of the right-wing scene”, as stated in a reply to a request from the parliamentary group of “The Left” party. At the moment, there are no findings about the current operators of the site, the authors, contributors or even the server location. The top-level domain ‚.ru‘ could be an indication of a close connection with Russian providers. However, the site uses the US service ‘Cloudflare’, which enables an anonymisation of the website operator (see <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/703150-703150>, quoted after <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/anonymousnews-103.html>).

The site generally spreads right-wing populism/extremism, conspiracy theories and hate speech against migrants, refugees and Muslims. Most recently, numerous disinformation and conspiracy narratives related to the COVID-19 pandemic have also been spread via the website. Many contents on “Anonymousnews.ru” are legal offences: In addition to violations of copyright law, there are alleged offences such as libel and slander as well as incitement of the people (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/anonymousnews-103.html>). In the following, a concrete example of a disinformation campaign of the website “Anonymousnews.ru” will be analysed.

In May 2020, a text entitled “The Total Dictatorship: Merkel regime threatens Corona sceptics with child deprivation” (<https://www.anonymousnews.ru/2020/05/22/merkel-regime-corona-kindesentzug/#comments>) was published. Ernst Fleischmann, a pseudonym, is listed as the author. The text discusses a letter to parents of primary school children from the Saxon Ministry of Culture dated 16 May 2020 (see http://schule-sachsen.de/20_05_16_Elternbrief_GS_FS.pdf), which points out the regulations regarding the school opening after the first lockdown to the parents.

According to the “Anonymousnews.ru” article, “the state threatens with child deprivation” if parents do not comply with the rules. This is compared to the practice of totalitarian and authoritarian states to deprive oppositionists and dissidents of their children. It is true that the letter points out that in the event of the parents’ lack of cooperation, the school is obliged to involve the public order office and that, in extreme cases, the child may also be “taken into custody”. However, it is not disclosed in the article that parents are free to comply with compulsory schooling by either sending the child to classroom teaching or by home schooling. So, it is factually wrong that there has been a threat of child deprivation by the Saxon Ministry of Culture to “Corona sceptics”.

2.2.2 Case Analysis

Topic: The topic of this disinformation was the comparison of regulations for parents of Saxon primary school children in conjunction with the opening schools after the first lockdown with the practice of child deprivation in dictatorships. Regarding the typology of fake news by Claire Wardle (see p. 8) the type of this disinformation can be classified as “false context” since genuine content (the letter of the Saxon Ministry of Culture) is shared in the false context. A particular information (intervention of the public order office in extreme cases) in a letter for parents of Saxon primary school children regarding the opening of schools after the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic is selectively chosen and deliberately interpreted in the false context (child deprivation in dictatorships) and in flagrant contradiction to the sense of the document in order to delegitimise the measures taken by the federal government and the state government against the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, based on the misinterpretation, an emotional identification is being made to practices of child deprivation in dictatorships (which aims primarily at citizens raised in dictatorships like the GDR or the Soviet Union).

Timespan: The article was published in May 2020; the corresponding parent letter of the Saxon Ministry of Culture was sent on 16 May 2020. The begin of the timespan however, could also be scheduled earlier as the specific context of the protests against the governmental measures against the COVID-19 pandemic which began in April 2020 must also be taken into account.

Initiators: The initiator of this disinformation is the website “Anonymousnews.ru” (see above), which has been circulating hate speech and disinformation since May 2016. As the author used a pseudonym to publish the article, it is not possible to clearly detect the creator of the content.

Targets: The target group of this and other articles are right-wing conspiracy theorists, right-wing extremists, and in general people who are insecure due to the COVID-19 pandemic and whose political attitudes are not consolidated, so that they can easily be influenced by conspiracy narratives and disinformation campaigns. Basically, the total population of Germany is the target of these disinformation campaigns.

Labelling/defamation keywords: As labelling/defamation keywords, “Corona dictatorship”, “Merkel regime” and “child deprivation” can be noted.

Ideological connotations: Ideologically, the disinformation as well as the website “Anonymousnews.ru” can be attributed to the right-wing extremist conspiracy narrative

spectrum. The Constitutional Protection Report however, does not contain any information about “Anonymousnews.ru” (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/anonymousnews-103.html>).

Sources of Information: The source of information is a letter to parents from the Saxon Ministry of Culture, which is linked as a complete document and therefore is correctly referenced, but is cited incompletely and is therefore misquoted.

Impact/outcome: It is difficult to correctly assess the impact/outcome of this disinformation in its entirety. It is certain that the article has been accessed 14,130 times by the end of December 2020 and has been shared more than 2,600 times via Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and other platforms and messenger providers. It can be stated furthermore, that the website has a very large reach. The analysis page “Similar-Web” for example, counted more than 2.5 million visits on the website from August to October 2017, and every month there were almost 275,000 users on “Anonymous News” (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/inland/anonymous-russland-101.html>).

Outreach/impact: The outreach and impact of this disinformation is probably far-reaching. Ultimately, as in the first case study, the initiators want to cause lasting distrust in the democratic system and the culture of democratic debate. NS comparisons are systematically used to identify democratically legitimised regulations with abuse in dictatorships. Highly emotionally sensitive topics like child deprivation are being used to inspire an emotional identification with the narrative. People who have legitimate concerns (e.g. for the well-being of children) are induced to a media bubble and are therefore confronted with the narrative of dictatorship and the delegitimization of institutions and mainstream media. In this way people are being further radicalised.

Finally, incitement to violence against the measures is always inherent in these kind of disinformation campaigns. Therefore, actual violence can be the consequence as it seems legitimate for those who threat a dictatorship or other threat scenarios being imminent. An example for this is the assassination of the conservative politician Walter Lübcke (CDU, currently ruling party), who was also a target of hate speech on “Anonymousnews.ru” (see <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/anonymousnews-103.html>). On the night of 02 June 2019, he was murdered by a right-wing extremist perpetrator, who had most likely radicalised himself via the internet and legitimised his actions through disinformation and hate speech campaigns. Tragic examples such as the murder of Walter Lübcke show that disinformation

and online hate speech have considerable potential for radicalisation and may have fatal effects, as at least implicitly an incitement to violence goes hand in hand (see Nocun/Lamberty 2020, p. 177/178).

Experts also stress the connection between right-wing extremist online radicalisation and an anti-feminist mindset. Violence against women is often preceded by hate speech online. Also, other marginalised groups are affected (e.g., Muslim people, Jewish people, LGBTIQ). By threatening them online, these people are being “silenced”. Especially women with a strong public presence and who are socio-politically active, like politicians, lawyers, artists and currently due to the COVID-19 pandemic also scientists, are affected by hate speech. A recently conducted survey by the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* (“The Mirror”) among female members of the *Bundestag* (German parliament) revealed that 64% of the respondents receive messages containing hate speech online and also offline. Investigations of right-wing extremist terrorist attacks, like the 2011 Norway attacks, the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 (New Zealand) or the Halle synagogue shooting in 2019 (Germany), revealed that alongside with a racist and anti-Semitic worldview, the shooters were also strongly influenced by anti-feminist agendas (see Baumgärtner et al. 2021). These examples illustrate that hate speech online leads to actual hate crimes offline. This connection is however often underestimated by German security authorities, also because there is no separate (penal) recording of misogynist (hate) crimes (see Baumgärtner et al. 2021).

2.3 Case Study 3: The “Lisa Case”

2.3.1 Case Description

The “Lisa case” is about a missing person from January 2016, which caused political discrepancies in German-Russian circles in the context of the so-called refugee crisis in Germany 2015/2016. The case entailed extensive reporting, especially in the Russian media, and diplomatic tensions between Germany and Russia.

When the 13-year-old Lisa F. from Berlin-Marzahn disappeared on 16 January 2016 on her way to school, her German-Russian parents reported her missing. When she reappeared the next day, she reported that she had been kidnapped and raped by “Southerners”. Further interrogations revealed considerable inconsistencies in their testimony. On the basis of mobile network data, it was possible to determine that Lisa F. had been staying with a friend at the time of the crime. Also, no traces of rape could be detected in a forensic examination.

However, after the rape allegation turned out to be a false claim, it was proved during the investigation that Lisa F. had sexual relations with two men aged 20 and 23 years in October 2015, who were consensual but punishable because Lisa F. was not yet 14 years old at the time (legal protection age in Germany). In February 2017, one of the men was charged with child sexual abuse and the production of child pornography because he knew of the girl's minority and had distributed mobile phone videos of the sexual act. In June 2017, he was sentenced to a suspended sentence of 1 year and 9 months.

In Germany and abroad, the authorities and especially the police in Berlin were subjected to considerable criticism for their public relations work. In particular, Russian media (Sputnik News, RT Deutsch, Perwy Kanal) reported uncritically about the alleged rape, that the suspected perpetrators were refugees and that the German investigative authorities would deny the crime and not persecute it. Shortly after the incident in January 2016, several demonstrations took place in Berlin and in other German cities with about 10,000 demonstrators which were organised by the small right-wing extremist party NPD, the Bärgrida (offshoot of the racist organisation PEGIDA, which had been able to organise demonstrations of up to 30.000 participants from all over Germany in the East German city of Dresden from 2015 and received substantial attention) and the "Convent of German-Russians", which had not been publicly active until that. The latter is classified by observers as right-wing extremist, mainly because the founder is quoted in right-wing media (Compact magazine). On 26 January 2016, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov commented on the "Lisa case" and accused the German authorities of cover-up, whereupon the German foreign minister of that time Frank-Walter Steinmeier accused Lavrov of "political propaganda" (see <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/steinmeier-kanzelt-lawrow-ab-aerger-um-angebliche-vergewaltigung-a-1074292.html>). The issue became a point of contention in German-Russian relations. On the German side, the case was regarded as a disinformation campaign and an attempt of Russia to exert influence (see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_Lisa).

While the facts of the case are well documented, unfortunately, there is no independent investigation into the "Lisa case" as a media campaign which could have clarified whether the reporting is a "mere" media phenomenon or an organised action by the Russian government to mobilise and radicalise German-Russian citizens (see Pörzgen 2017). It is clear, however, that the false allegation about rape has been spread and different actors have been able to use the disinformation for their purposes.

2.3.2 Case Analysis

Topic: The topic was the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl by “Southerners” or refugees. Even if it is not clear if this disinformation campaign was deliberately orchestrated or rather “skilfully” used to incite hate against refugees, it can nevertheless be stated that the disinformation can be classified as “misleading content” according to the typology of Claire Wardle (see p. 8). Because even after rape allegations have been proved to be unsubstantiated the information of the alleged rape was used in a misleading way to frame refugees as “rapists” and to instrumentalise the situation to incite antipathy against refugees in general.

Timespan: The timespan covers the time from the alleged incident in January 2016 to the spring of 2016, when the situation slowly eased. To fully understand the “Lisa case” however, the history of the German-Russians (so-called late resettlers), who were specifically settled in East-Berlin, must also be taken into account. Many German-Russians perceived themselves as discriminated against by locals and the authorities, which led to a retreat into a kind of parallel society (see Schaubert 2018), which was supported by Russian-speaking media, among them (paradoxically) Russian state media like the “RT” TV network. Due to the years of influence of Russian media and the perceived general neglect and discrimination of this population group (see Schaubert 2018), the situation finally escalated during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. The “Lisa case” of January 2016 must therefore be interpreted in the context of this background.

Initiators: As mentioned above, it is not clear whether this was an organised disinformation campaign by the Russian government. The actors involved, the far-right “Convent of German-Russians”, right-wing extremist groups from Germany (NPD, Bärigida) and Russian media (Sputniknews, RT Deutsch, Perwy Kanal) can be described as initiators or at least as agitators of the incident. The site “Anonymousnews.ru” (see case study 2) also reported on the “Lisa case” and took it as an occasion to incite hate against refugees (see <https://www.psiram.com/de/index.php/Anonymous.Kollektiv>).

Targets: The target groups of the disinformation were clearly the population group of German-Russians. When understanding the specific situation of German-Russians, it becomes clear why this population group was able to be mobilised in the “Lisa case”. On the one hand, the fact that the alleged victim comes from a German-Russian family obviously creates a high emotional connection to the case which makes the targets susceptible for disinformation (see Lamberty/Nocun 2020, p. 61). On the other hand, again the avoidance of cognitive dissonance clearly can be identified as underlying psychological principle. Because the population of

German-Russians already perceives themselves as discriminated and underprivileged while witnessing the challenges that the so-called refugee crisis poses for the German society in general and for structurally weak regions (like East Berlin) in particular (see Schaubert 2018), the new-arriving refugees are constructed as scapegoats. Disinformation campaigns of refugees being rapists therefore fall on fertile ground. Furthermore, refugees are perceived as a competing migrant group profiting from resources which are already scarce in the region (living space, education, employment) (see Schaubert 2018). The cognitive dissonance lies in the perception of German-Russians of being underprivileged – what is triggered by a perceived more publicly supported and therefore more “privileged” new migrant group. To avoid this state of cognitive dissonance, disinformation of refugees being rapists is readily believed in order to elevate the own societal position.

Labelling/defamation – keywords: As labelling/defamation – keywords “Russian influence”, “rape” and “refugees” can be noted.

Ideological connotations: As in the other two cases, the ideological connotations lay in the far-right or right-wing extremist spectrum. According to Claire Wardle the motivations of the initiators can be identified as gaining political influence and to further right-wing extremist/populist narratives regarding the so-called refugee crisis. If there was proof of an involvement of the Russian government, the motivations could also be classified as propaganda what German foreign minister of that time Frank-Walter Steinmeier indeed accused the Russian foreign minister of.

Sources of information: The sources of information are the statements of Lisa F. and her aunt, who reported about the kidnapping and rape shortly after the incident in the Russian First Channel (Pervy kanal) (see Schaubert 2018).

Impact/outcome: The impact and outcome can be classified as successful. Within a very short time, the agitators succeeded in mobilising 10,000 people in the federal territory for demonstrations. About 1,000 people (see Schaubert 2018) appeared at a demonstration in Berlin in front of the Chancellery. There was also an attack on a refugee center in Berlin-Marzahn (see <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/angebliche-vergewaltigung-einer-13-jaehrigen-aus-marzahn-sie-ist-offenbar-in-falsche-kreise-geraten-li.7155>).

Outreach/impact: The outreach and impact of this disinformation is far-reaching. Ultimately, this disinformation – if deliberately created or not – led to a deterioration in German-Russian

relations and to statements by high-ranking politicians. Also, the already tense situation due to the so-called refugee crisis in the German public was further aggravated.

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