

Extremists use all social media channels for recruiting

Communities, messengers et al. – this is how right-wing extremists target young people

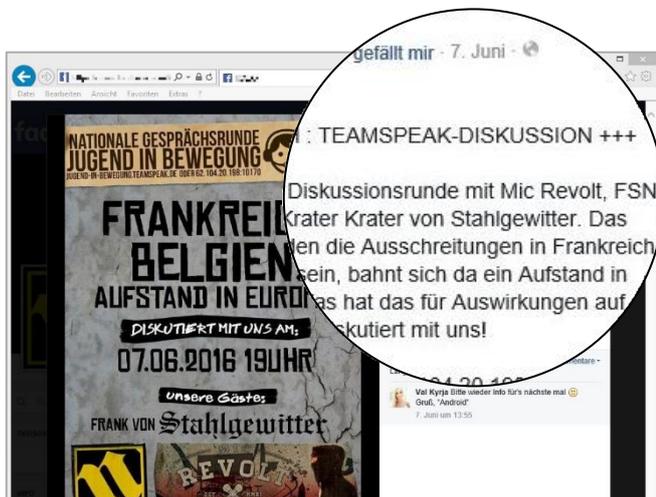
February 2017

Ever-present, helpful and drawn from life: Right-wing extremists use all social media platforms and a perfidious mixture of strategies to intrigue teenagers and influence them with their inhuman ideology. This is how their propaganda reaches many young people and finds its way into online debates far from the extremist scene.

Right-wing extremists rely on online trends

DIVERSIFIED APPROACH THROUGH CROSS-LINKING

Right-wing extremists use all popular platforms and communication services at the same time to spread their propaganda and get in the middle of as many discourses as possible to reach a wide audience. They have current online communication trends in mind, try to be up-to-date and increase their influence specifically on young people. Their online presence is well connected and creates a high level of awareness.



Chatting with the favorite rocker: Via Teamspeak, right-wing extremist artists move closer to their fans. (Source: Facebook, FSN.tv)

Young users' exposure to this negative influence specifically takes place through communication services like WhatsApp and Teamspeak; all communication here is beyond any external control.

This particularly runs the risk of young people being radicalized, largely unnoticed. The services are also exploited for creating hidden extremist networks. Invitation links are made available on public profiles in popular social media networks.

Mixture of social media as a propaganda strategy

Facebook is used by right-wing extremists as an instrument for socializing, Twitter as a channel to send short and up-to-date information to their followers, and YouTube to disseminate campaign, mobilization and music videos. New music of right-wing extremist bands is available on services like Bandcamp and Soundcloud, Instagram is used for sharing personal impressions, Tumblr for spreading ideological photo collages and hip memes. With WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram and the conference software Teamspeak, right-wing extremists focus on communication trends and establishing and maintaining contacts. Additionally, they use alternative platforms like the Russian social network VK to disseminate specifically graphic content and content that is illegal under German criminal law.

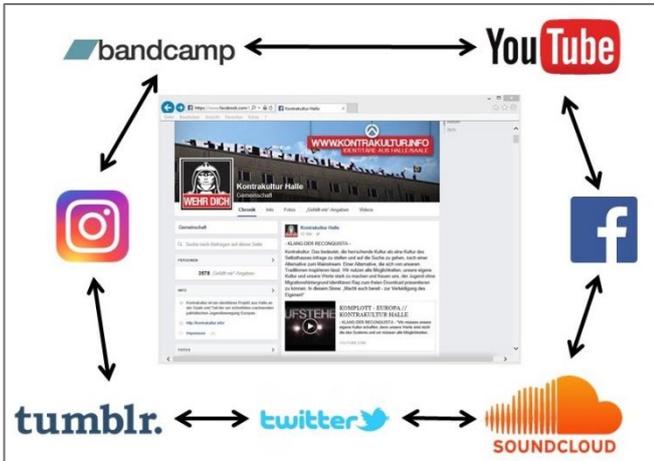
Music, subculture and lifestyle as a lure

THOUSANDS OF CLICKS FOR 'EVERYDAY LIFE' CONTENT

It is a common strategy to lure young people with content innocuously worded and designed. The 'Identitarian movement', a pan-European socio-political movement does this very professionally. Since the German branch was founded in 2012, the communication strategy has become even more professional. This is how they received great media attention in 2016 and recruited a huge number of new followers.

The activists staged their actions with a wide media coverage and used social media to connect them to 'everyday life' of young people. In June 2016, for instance, a group from the German city of Halle published a music video described as 'Identitarian rap'.

The artist ties in with the 'refugee crisis' debate and an alleged 'Islamization' of Europe and uses hip-hop as a stylistic element specifically appealing to young people. The music video and the song were integrated into all kinds of web presences of the group and certain associated persons at the same time.



'Identitarian rap': Links to music aimed at young people with right-wing extremist messages in the social web. (Source: Facebook)

With this strategy, the 'Identitarian movement' receives a high amount of clicks: Following an anti-AfD song (AfD is a right-wing populist political party in Germany) of the well-known German rock band Jennifer Rostock, an activist of the 'Identitarian movement' created a 'counter song' that was slickly integrated into the on-going debate. Within 10 days, users clicked on this pro-AfD video on YouTube more than 330,000 times.

First contact through personal approach POSTS ABOUT DAY-TO-DAY TOPICS SHALL RAISE INTEREST

In their social media strategy, the 'Identitarian movement' also relies on their members' private accounts which they integrate into their main channels. At first sight, the profiles seem innocuous, e.g. they give self-defense tips or present 'food porn'. A pleasant layout, day-to-day topics and addressing users personally shall make them feel more at ease to get in contact.

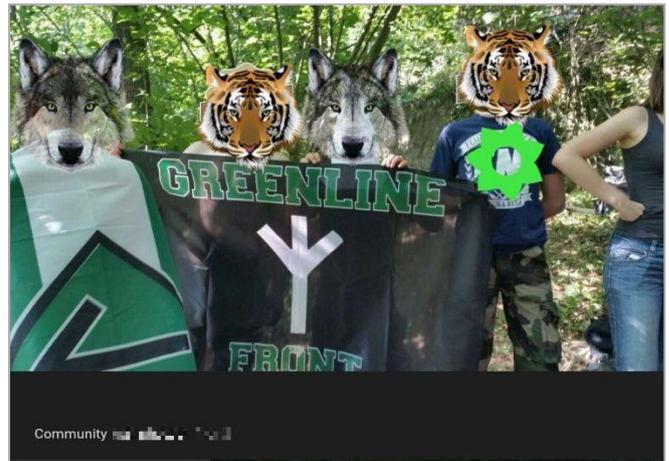


'Identitarian food blog': Activists disguise their propaganda as hip content, close to reality (Source: Instagram)

Only a closer look at the content reveals the right-wing extremist messages suitably packed for young people, mostly in the form of memes and images. Other right-wing extremists also take a similar approach, e.g. Frank Franz, the chairman of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) who stages himself as a fashion blogger on his Instagram profile.

Misanthropy disguised as nature conservation GROUPS FOCUS ON PROTEST POTENTIAL OF YOUNG USERS

Disguising themselves as conservationists or animal rights activists is one strategy of right-wing extremist groups. In order to approach young people, neo-Nazis of the Misanthropic Division act as 'Block Widar' or 'Greenlinefront Deutschland' and give the impression of being environmentally conscious. Instead of weapons and munitions they show images of cleanup activities in German forests, instructions to build bird boxes or outraged users talking about cruelty to animals.



'Greenlinefront Deutschland': Neo-Nazis lure with nature conservation and animal protection (Source: vk.com; original not pixelated)

With this seemingly harmless propaganda the militant group manages to fly under the radar and go unrecognized when using popular services. Since the organization's militant background is not apparent young users can easily be taken in by this. Once interest has been aroused, direct contact via messaging services shall draw young people closer to the group. Here, mostly encrypted instant messaging applications like Threema are used where the communication is not revealed.

Militant neo-Nazis use alternative services VK OFFERS 'SAFE HAVEN' FOR HATE SPEECH

Since major platforms like Facebook have repeatedly taken action and deleted right-wing extremist groups in the past, the Russian Facebook equivalent VK becomes more and more important for these activists. Here, right-wing extremists get away with inciting racial hatred and posting photos of their weapons along with statements like 'Armed and ready. Project 'wogs out' is running'. The operator makes almost no effort to delete illegal content.

The Russian neo-Nazi movement 'Misanthropic Division' disseminates its militant and inhuman propaganda on this platform. They post photos of visits to concentration camp memorials along with mocking comments or post anti-Semitic memes and make the corresponding links available to a wide user group through social media.



Misanthropic Division: Supporters of the group present their weapons on VK. (Source: vk.com; Original not pixelated)

The well-known racist group 'Anonymous.Kollektiv' follows the same strategy. Since its Facebook account was deleted the head of the group posted alleged product videos of alarm guns on vid.me – shootings at pictures of politicians like Heiko Maas 'for demonstration purposes only'. The operator of vid.me took quick action and deleted the complete profile once jugendschutz.net put him on notice.

Operators must delete and cooperate

PREVENT NEW OFFENSES AND SAFE HAVENS

Again and again, jugendschutz.net documented illegal content like symbols of unconstitutional organizations, inciting statements and depictions of extreme violence on all platforms. Whereas the 'Identitarian movement' mostly stays one step away from breaching the laws in order to appear innocuous, groups like the 'Misanthropic Division' also present themselves more aggressive to specifically approach young people looking for violence.

Major players like Facebook and Google usually delete illegal content as soon as jugendschutz.net reports it. New platforms, however, often have no terms of service prohibiting hate speech or no sufficient reporting mechanisms. Some operators only take action in exceptional cases and quickly become well-known 'safe havens' for right-wing extremist propaganda. On top of that: As soon as right-wing extremist content is removed on one platform, it can easily be uploaded somewhere else and widely distributed.

In order to curb this trend, operators of platforms specifically approaching young people are challenged to not only take consistent and quick action against illegal content, but also to join efforts to prevent right-wing extremist groups from exploiting their services. In parallel, pressure on services like VK must be stepped up to get in the way of safe platforms for hate speech.

Background information

Within a project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looks closely at right-wing extremist content on the internet and develops counter activities. This work is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the program 'Demokratie leben!' i.e. 'Live Democracy!'.

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