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The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right

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About this Paper

This report presents the findings of a research project of ISD's Digital Analysis Unit about the alternative online-ecosystem of the far-right, including alternative social media platforms and alternative media outlets. While these platforms draw in a global audience this report focuses specifically on the German-speaking and Germany-focused communities and outlets within this ecosystem.

Drawing together ISD's digital ethnographic work across dozens of forums and channels with the latest in machine learning and natural language processing, this report provides an overview over the size and nature of the far-right communities on these platforms, the motivations for participating in these communities and assesses whether banning far-right groups from mainstream platforms leads to the displacement of their followers to 'alternative' platforms.

We also analyse the role of alternative 'news' outlets in disseminating far right concepts, drawing on the 'Hate Observatory', a joint initiative of ISD and the MIT Media Lab , based on their Media Cloud software, and compare the frequency and types of coverage of far-right themes in mainstream and alternative media. This report also recommends steps to be taken by tech companies, government, civil society and researchers to counter the far-right online.

Authors' Bio

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Jakob Guhl is a Coordinator at the ISD, where he mainly works with the digital research team. Jakob has co-authored research reports on reciprocal radicalisation between far-right extremists and Islamists, coordinated trolling campaigns, hate speech and disinformation campaigns targeting elections. He has published articles in *Journal for Deradicalisation and Demokratie gegen Menschenfeindlichkeit,* and co-authored an essay for an edited volume of the Munich Residence Theatre about the origins of contemporary political anger.

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Jan Rau is an Associate in ISD's Digital Research and Policy team. His work interrogates how the internet shapes the media sphere, including analysis on the nature and effect of echo chambers, counter-publics, public opinion manipulation and far-right movements. Jan is the first author of an academic article about echo chambers online and has contributed to several research reports. Before joining ISD he worked with GESIS – Leibniz Institute for Social Science (Germany), Princeton University (USA) and the Oxford Internet Institute (UK).

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Glossary

Alternative Platforms
We define 'alternative platforms' as platforms that are used by groups and individuals who believe major social media platforms have become inhospitable to them because of their political views. Alternative platforms may include platforms built to advance specific political purposes, platforms that tolerate a wide range of political positions, including hateful and extremist ones, because of their broad understanding of freedom of speech, and platforms which were built for entirely different, non-political purposes such as gaming. While the focus of this report is on alternative platforms used by the far-right, other radical or extreme movements also use alternative platforms they perceive as less hostile to their views.

Alternative Media Outlets (Alt-media)
We define alt-media in line with Heft et al. (2019) as outlets who self-identify as an "alternative" and "corrective to a perceived political and media mainstream". While the focus of this report is on right-wing alternative media, alternative media outlets may express other political stances as well.[1]

Anti-Muslim
We define anti-Muslim as groups or individuals who have a negative perception of Islam and/ or Muslims which is used to justify discrimination against and/or the exclusion of Muslims.

Antisemitism
We use the definition of antisemitism from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: 'Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.'[2]

Ecosystems and Networks
In this report we refer to the increasingly complex and multi-pronged web of platforms and applications used by the far-right as an online ecosystem. We distinguish between 'networks' of users, which could operate within one or multiple platforms, and 'ecosystems', which consist of multiple inter-connected platforms with different purposes.

Far-right
In line with academic and far-right expert Cas Mudde, we define the far-right as groups and individuals exhibiting at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy.[3]

Far-right is an umbrella term, which encapsulates both the 'radical right' and the 'extreme right'. According to Mudde, the radical right and the extreme right both 'believe that inequalities between people are natural and positive', but they hold different positions on democracy.[4] While the radical right is opposed to certain aspects of liberal democracy (e.g. minority rights, independent institutions) it is not in principle against democracy, but favours a majoritarian democracy led by the in-group it identifies with. Extreme-right actors on the other hand are in principle opposed to democracy as a form of governance, instead favouring authoritarian rule.[5] For this report, we investigated both the radical right and the extreme right. Thus, the research does not just cover neo-Nazi groups opposed to democracy, but the entire spectrum of the far-right, including right-wing populist actors such as Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (PEGIDA) or the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; Alternative for Germany). Although the AfD does not openly oppose democracy in principle, it has voiced opposition to aspects of liberal democracy such as minority rights, attacked independent institutions, failed to exclude extremists from the party and pushed nationalist, racist and xenophobic positions.

Identitarianism
Pan-European ethno-nationalist movement, which focuses on the preservation of European ethno-cultural identity and is inspired by the French intellectual right movement the Nouvelle Droite (New Right).

4chan
4chan was originally founded to share anime images, but has become an important gathering point for far-right users from the early 2010s onwards, especially on the /pol/ board.

8chan
Forum founded after 4chan had banned discussions of 'Gamergate'', during which the harassment of female video-game journalist was coordinated on 4chan, to provide a platform on which discuss such controversial issues could still be discussed.

BitChute
Video-sharing site founded to host the contents of creators whose videos were being blocked on larger video-sharing sites such as YouTube.

Discord
Gaming app which has been used by far-right groups to coordinate malign influence operations.

Gab
Social media platform established as a "free speech" alternative to Facebook and Twitter, which has attracted far-right users.

Minds
Social network created to integrate crowdfunding, cryptocurrency and rewards into a decentralized social network that emphasizes privacy rights of users. Due to its lack of restrictions on content and speech, it has become used by the far-right.

Reddit
Reddit is a news aggregation, web content rating and discussion thread website. Certain subreddits such as the 'r/The_Donald', which has now been quarantined for inciting violence, became gathering points for alt-right users not only to promote the candidacy of Donald Trump, but also to harass his political opponents.

Telegram
Messaging service funded by VK founder Pavel Durov to provide people with secure communication and avoid government observation. It has been used by both Islamist extremists and the far-right.

VK
Russian social media platform by Pavel Durov, who was pressured into selling his shares of the company to corporations and business-people loyal to the Kremlin after he refused to shut down activist pages during a protest critical of the Russian government in 2011.

Voat
A messaging forum, which aggregates news and provides a platform for community members to submit multimedia content without limitations.

Executive Summary

On the 8th October 2019, a 28-year old man with self-made guns and body armour attacked a synagogue and a kebab shop in Halle, killing two people. He livestreamed the attack and published a 'manifesto' online. His intention was to kill Jews, whom he blamed for feminism and mass migration. He introduced himself as "Anon" (anonymous), a reference to 'imageboard' websites such as 4chan and 8chan. Shortly after, users on 4chan cynically joked about whether the attack had lived up to similar attacks in Pittsburgh, San Diego, and El Paso in the US and Christchurch in New Zealand. In each of these attacks, the perpetrators were found to be have been immersed in far-right online sub-cultures.

The presence of extremist and terrorist groups on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube has been the focus of much attention in recent years, but the attacks cited above have raised concerns about the far-right subcultures that have emerged on alternative platforms like 4chan and Telegram, chat forums like Gab, and gaming applications like Discord.

With mainstream social media companies forced to make greater efforts to remove extremists and hate speech from their platforms in Germany with the NetzDG law, these alternative social platforms have become increasingly important to an international far-right community that includes anti-Muslim movements like PEGIDA, 'Identitarian' ethnonationalist groups like Generation Identity, and militant Neo-Nazis like the Atomwaffen Division.

In addition to being places where far-right terrorists are glorified, they have also become sites for activists to strategise and spread disinformation campaigns, coordinate harassment against female politicians and create meme campaigns to influence elections and political discourse.[6] ISD research in the German national, Bavarian and European Parliamentary elections showed how these groups were coordinating in particular to support the right-wing populist party Alternative for Deutchland (AfD).[7]

Complementing these alternative social media platforms is an ecosystem of online alternative media outlets that masquerade as 'news' sources. Presenting themselves as alternatives to mainstream media, many of these outlets amplify far-right, anti-migrant and anti-progressive talking points through sensationalist 'click-bait' stories.

Taken together, this toxic far-right ecosystem is potentially contributing to a rise in far-right motivated terrorism, which has increased 320% in the past five years, whilst also giving safe spaces and providing contents for those who want to undermine democracy. Policymakers are increasingly asking what can be done, but at present too little is known about these communities.

To address these issues, ISD's Digital Analysis Unit undertook one of the most comprehensive mappings of this alternative ecosystem in Germany to date. While these platforms draw in a global audience, which we are consistently mapping and analysing to understand the international connectivity of the far-right, this report focuses specifically on the German-speaking communities within this ecosystem.

The German government has been at the forefront of devising legislation to force the mainstream social media companies to remove illegal hate speech from their platforms. With the NetzDG bill, passed in 2017, social media companies face large fines if they do not remove illegal content within 24 hours. While many have criticised the NetzDG bill as infringing on free speech or being ineffective by focusing on content removal, there is also the risk that it is driving extremist groups into more closed, alternative platforms which are currently not subject to the legislation.

These alternative platforms present significant challenges for regulation. They may lack the resources to effectively monitor or remove extremist communities, or they may be ideologically committed to libertarian values and free speech and thus unwilling to moderate these communities.

Drawing together ISD's digital ethnographic work across dozens of closed forums and chat groups with the latest in machine learning and natural language processing, in this report we provide an initial glimpse into the size and nature of the far-right communities on these platforms.

We present data gathered from user-generated surveys on these platforms, revealing the motivations for joining and the ideological views of those drawn to these groups. Using Method 52, a proprietary software tool for the analysis and classification of unstructured text, we trained an algorithm to identify antisemitic narratives.[8] We also analyse the role of alternative 'news' outlets in disseminating far-right concepts, drawing on ISD's partnership with the MIT Media Lab to create the 'Hate Observatory', based on its Media Cloud software, the world's largest online database of online media, containing 1,4 billion stories from 60,000 sources, to compare the frequency and types of coverage of far-right themes in mainstream and alternative media.

Based on our research findings, we make a series of recommendations for tech companies, government, civil society and researchers about how to prevent these alternative platforms from being used to further radicalise or undermine democracy.

Key Findings

— **We identified 379 far-right and right-wing populist channels across ten alternative platforms investigated for this report.**
Alternative platforms with notable far-right presence included: the messaging application Telegram (129 channels), the Russian social network website VK (115 groups), video-sharing website Bitchute (79), and social networking sites Gab (38 channels), Reddit (8 groups), Minds (5 communities) and Voat (5 communities). Analysis of the community standards of these platforms shows that they can be divided into two groups. Firstly, those designed for non-political purposes, such as gaming, which have been hijacked by far-right communities.

Secondly, those that are based on libertarian ideals and defend the presence of far-right communities on the basis of freedom of speech. While membership numbers in these groups were not always identifiable, our analysis suggests that there are between 15,000 and 50,000 German-speaking individuals with far-right beliefs using these platforms, with varying levels of activity. The channel with the most followers had more than 40,000 followers. Although we identified a few platforms that were created by right-wing populist influencers, such as video-sharing sites FreiHoch3 and Prometheus, the number of users was too small to merit inclusion in the analysis.

— **A spectrum of far-right groups are active on alternative platforms: while there are a greater number of anti-Muslim and neo-Nazi affiliated channels, 'Identitarian' groups appear to have the largest reach.**
Of the 379 groups and channels that we identified, 104 were focused on opposition to Islam and Muslims, immigration and refugees and 92 channels expressed overt support for National Socialism. We identified 35 channels and groups associated with Identitarian and ethnonationalist groups. 117 communities and groups did not fall neatly into any specific category but instead contained a mix of content from the categories described above. It is important to note that a larger number of channels does not necessarily equate to a larger number of people reached. For example, the largest Identitarian channel has more than 35,000 followers, which is significantly greater than the largest anti-Muslim channel (18,000) or the largest neo-Nazi channel (around 10,000).

— **The right-wing populist party Alternative for Deutchland (AfD) has a small, but largely inactive presence on alternative social media platforms.** In addition to far-right extremist groups, we also sought to identify channels and groups associated with the right-wing populist party AfD. As noted above, previous ISD research identified significant mobilisation for the AfD emerging from far-right associated channels on alternative platforms in the context of German elections.[9] In total, we identified 31 communities and groups belonging to the AfD, with almost all of them (29) being on the Russian social networking site, VK. However, the AfD's main page on the platform has not been active since 2015, and the AfD's biggest recently active group has only 414 followers.

— **There were clear differences in user motivations for joining across different platforms, ranging from political and social change to the desire to 'have fun'.** Based on user-generated surveys, with a combined sample of over 800 responses, it appears that Gab users are strongly driven by freedom of speech grievances and anti-left resentment (54%), which could be due to the platform's strong emphasis on being the free speech alternative to major social media platforms accused of having a liberal or left-wing political bias. Anti-minority hatred and desire for fun and entertainment (46% and 22% respectively) played a much bigger role among the 4chan's /pol board members, reflecting the platform's anarchic culture and humour. Users embedded in the Discord group Reconquista Germanica, on the other hand, were motivated by a desire for political change and their search for community and belonging (39% and 41% respectively), which could be due to the group's ideological leaning, but could also be due to Discord's platform architecture, which enables establishing tight communities.

— **Immigration, alleged illegal behaviour by migrants and attacking political opponents, especially from the left, were the most common themes on most platforms within our sample.** Immigration was the most commonly discussed topic across all platforms, particularly among the groups on Voat, Reddit and Gab. Moreover, the majority of the posts about immigration (60%) focused on the illegal behaviour of refugees or migrants, while 12% reference conspiracy theories about the demographic replacement of 'native Europeans' by non-European immigrants. The second most discussed topic was attacks on political opponents, which ranged from 13% to 20% on all platforms, and was more common on Telegram and Reddit. On Telegram, contents about the supposed repression of the far-right were more frequent than on other platforms.

Telegram seems to have become the most important space for far-right influencers and groups that have been hit by, or fear to be faced with, de-platforming measures from the major social media platforms. Interestingly, far-right content on Gab mentions the role of Islam and Muslims more frequently than content found on other platforms (12%). Conspiracy theories were more common on the video-sharing platform Bitchute.

— **Most of the content on alternative platforms that we analysed was non-violent and not obviously illegal.** While we identified seven posts that advocated violence or expressed support for terrorist groups (within our sample of almost 1,000 posts coded for the thematic analysis) and dozens of neo-Nazi channels, most of the content we found is likely legal under German law.

Although most of the content that we analysed is non-violent, the disproportionate amount of content focusing only on the negative aspects of immigration, which frames entire parts of the population as a threat, creates a sense of urgency to act in order to defend one's in-group.[10] As we saw in the manifestos of the recent far-right attackers in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle, nominally non-violent ideas such as the 'great replacement' myth can inspire violent extremism and terrorism.

— **ISD's algorithm to identify antisemitic content at speed and scale revealed that over half of mentions relating to Jewish people on the Kraut/ pol/ threads on 4chan (56.9%) contained clearly antisemitic narratives.**
We used Method 52, a proprietary software tool developed by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) for the analysis and classification of unstructured text, to train an algorithm to identify antisemitic narratives within posts mentioning Jews under Kraut/pol/ threads on 4chan. While derogatory language and slurs are common on 4chan, we were specifically looking for antisemitic narratives that would fall under the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, independently of whether these posts used antisemitic slurs or not.

The high proportion of such narratives demonstrates that conversations about Jews on the /pol board are often fundamentally antisemitic, and not just a reflection of a toxic discussion culture. Since we did not classify contents as antisemitic based solely on the use of antisemitic slur terms, or include content that was open to multiple interpretations, 56.9% is a conservative estimate of the true extent of antisemitic conversations.

— **Our research suggests that banning far-right groups from mainstream platforms reduces their reach and does not appear to result in the direct displacement of users to alternative platforms.**
One of the key questions debated by policymakers and researchers is whether banning extreme groups from mainstream platforms leads to their displacement onto 'alternative' or encrypted platforms. Our research suggests that it does not have this effect in aggregate. For example, we found that a sample of 25 groups had little more than 10% of the total number of followers on alternative sites than they did on mainstream platforms. Furthermore, those groups that still had a presence on mainstream platforms had higher numbers of followers on alternative platforms than groups that had been banned from the mainstream. This suggests that having a presence on mainstream platforms may, in fact, drive higher numbers of people to alternative platforms. Although not conclusive, this finding provides some evidence against the argument that banning extremist groups from mainstream platforms will simply cause them to migrate en masse to alternative sites.

— **Data from our 'Hate Observatory', built with MIT's Media Cloud tool suggests that far-right themes are disproportionally overrepresented on alternative media. The volume of stories using these concepts is much lower in mainstream media, which cover these concepts mainly in relation to specific events.**
To assess whether far-right concepts cross from alternative to mainstream media, we sought to explore the prominence of far-right narratives within alt-media and how it differs from mainstream news outlets. Our comparison of 17 alternative and 13 mainstream media outlets demonstrates that fringe far-right concepts such as the "great replacement" and "Islamisation" are mentioned much more frequently in alt-media outlets (about 0.5-6.0% of all stories); they are nowhere near as prominent in mainstream media.

In contrast to the consistent coverage of far-right concepts by alternative media, mainstream media coverage of these concepts, is driven by specific newsworthy events such as the Christchurch attack. An explorative analysis of the coverage did not indicate that that mainstream media is covering these concepts uncritically, or in a way that was inspired or influenced by the way they are used in alternative media. It should be noted that as alternative media typically focuses exclusively on political issues and the mainstream media will also have sections on sports and culture, direct comparisons between the two remain imperfect.

Recommendations

The findings of our research highlight a number of critical challenges for policymakers and tech companies. Progress has been made in recent years in removing illegal terrorist content, from more mainstream platforms, not least as a result of mounting pressure from governments around the world, but our current approaches are not fit for purpose to tackle a diffuse, 'post-organisational' far-right online community. Moreover, alternative platforms, whether through a lack of resources or ideological opposition, are less amenable to content moderation. However, perhaps the biggest challenge is what can be done to tackle the huge amount of online content that is non-violent and legal, but nonetheless may be contributing to an atmosphere conducive to radicalisation.

The limited but genuine risks of potential radicalisation towards violence and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas created by the online far-right ecosystem raise a number of challenging questions. What would success look like in limiting the far-right's ability to reach broad audiences online? How far down the digital rabbit-hole should pressure be applied on platforms and far-right communities? How can a balance be achieved between protecting fundamental and legitimate rights to freedom of speech, and protecting the rights of those who are targeted, abused or attacked by online far-right users and communities? Do we have to accept that extremism and hate will likely continue to operate in fringe, private or encrypted corners of the internet as long as we also seek to protect rights to privacy?

To deal with these challenges, we propose a series of recommendations for government, law enforcement, platforms and the wider technology sector, civil society and the research community. Each recommendation is covered in detail in the final chapter of this report. Below we provide a summary of our recommendations.

Responding to illegal online content and activities

- **Mainstream platforms, international initiatives, and research organisations should strengthen partnerships with smaller alternative platforms to improve their ability to counter illegal terrorist or violent extremist content.**
  The moderation of illegal content needs to be improved on alternative platforms. The wider tech and research sectors can play an important role in addressing genuine capacity and resource gaps that smaller platforms may have. Different strategies will be needed for libertarian platforms, especially those based in and only adhering to US law, as well as platforms created by those with ideological sympathies with the far-right.

- **Given the increasingly decentralised, post-organisational and 'crowdsourced' nature of far-right terrorism, enabled through the online far-right ecosystem, governments and policymakers must develop policy and legal frameworks that are not overly reliant on the proscription of terrorist or violent extremist *groups*.**
  Policymakers need to recognise and respond to the changing landscape and evolving organisational dynamics of far-right terrorism, and collaborate internationally with civil society and academia to develop shared definitions of the threat emanating from post-organisational forms of far-right terrorism. Given that many platforms rely on official government or UN proscription lists as the basis for enforcement (which predominantly feature Islamist terrorist groups), the onus should be on democratic governments rather than private companies, in consultation with researchers and civil society, to determine which far-right online influencers or communities meet the required legal thresholds for content or account removal.

This would enable efforts such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) 'hashing' database, that ensures previously identified terrorist content cannot be re-uploaded, to include a more comprehensive and consistent list of content by, or supportive of, far-right terrorism and far-right terrorist groups or perpetrators, and provide added legitimacy and accountability.

— **It is of central importance to increase victim support for public and private figures and ensure the proper application and enforcement of laws in relation to harassment, hate speech and libel online.**
Digital activities or campaigns designed to harass, intimidate, and silence public and private figures have become an increasingly important tactic of the international far-right's playbook. Typically planned and coordinated by far-right communities on alternative platforms, these tactics often disproportionately target women and minorities, and can have a significant 'chilling effect' on political participation and legitimate speech. In order to deter these attempts to drive political opponents out of online discourse, existing laws in relation to harassment, hate speech, and libel must be properly enforced online. Governments should make it a priority to audit the application of such laws online and ensure there are fewer impediments to their enforcement. In the context of the increasing abuse and attacks on public and private figures, legal and psycho-social support for victims of online harassment, hate speech or libel is crucial.

Responding to legal but potentially harmful online content and activities

— **Alongside existing legislation tackling illegal** *content,* **the German government should explore a proportional, risk-based duty of care approach to regulating platform operators to encourage a greater focus on user safety.**
To complement legislation tackling illegal content such as NetzDG, the technological *architecture* and *design* of certain products must also be addressed. Features across a wide range of platforms that are intended to maximise attention and create dense networks of similar content or likeminded users can inadvertently serve amplify legal but harmful content, connect users across the far-right spectrum, and enable coordinated harassment and abuse. Therefore, more structural approaches are needed, such as the duty of care model for online regulation proposed in the UK's Online Harms White Paper.[11] A duty of care would place a proportionate responsibility on platform operators for the safety of their users and their protection against anticipated or potential risks, for example by not prioritising legal far-right content in content or channel recommendations. This would create incentives for companies to design their platforms and products with a greater focus on user safety and the reduction of online harms, including the abuse of existing and emerging technologies by the far-right.

— **Although our research highlights the potential of de-platforming measures to limit the reach of far-right influencers and groups, and thereby their ability to mainstream their ideas, more research is needed on the potential unintended consequences of such actions.**
Further research is needed on the potential unintended consequences of de-platforming measures. There remains a lack of evidence demonstrating whether or how such repressive measures reduce the likelihood of radicalisation of influencers and their followers. Additionally, the impact of de-platforming on wider audiences beyond the far-right also merits further investigation. Lastly, it would need to be empirically tested whether de-platforming measures have the desired impact of limiting the exposure of mainstream audiences to online far-right communities. In any case, such repressive measures designed to limit the ability of the far-right to spread their ideas must be carefully balanced with fundamental rights of freedom of expression, within the law.

— **Where de-platforming measures are used, platforms need to communicate their decision-making processes in a consistent, justifiable and understandable manner, and provide greater transparency around opportunities for redress.**
Decisions taken by platforms to de-platform far-right influencers, which our research suggests have the potential to significantly limit their reach, need to be made in a consistent, justifiable and understandable manner, especially given the increasing importance of social media for public debate. Additionally, greater transparency needs to be provided for those who believe they have been unjustly de-platformed to be able to make an informed appeal against the decision. ISD has proposed a framework and specific technological transparency requirements for complaints and redress that could help build accountability and enhance the public's understanding of content moderation decisions.[12]

Civil Society and Frontline Practitioner Responses

— **Different types of proactive, non-regulatory interventions should be trialled and tested on alternative platforms. These must be tailored specifically to each platform, including consideration of the thematic interests, platform subculture, technical functionality and level of potential risks and unintended consequences.**
It is vital to compete with, challenge, and dissuade far-right ideologies and behaviours through different forms of online interventions. Approaches such as one-to-one online messaging between radicalised individuals and qualified intervention providers, one-to-many communications and disruption techniques, should be tested and trialled on alternative platforms. These efforts will need to be tailored towards specific audiences on particular platforms on a case-by-case basis, taking the architecture and functions of platforms, and the culture and types of discussions that feature within certain communities into account.

— **Researchers should explore the potential of early warning systems for civil groups and 'soft targets' that combine ethnographic monitoring with technology to identify specific threats posted on alternative platforms.**
In combination with ethnographic monitoring, machine learning technologies such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) can help identify specific threats, especially against targeted individuals or 'soft targets' such as community centeres, religious institutions or activist groups coming from alternative platforms. Although partly automated analyses of user data pose concerns over privacy, data sharing and surveillance, they could help to identify risks and help vulnerable individuals and groups targeted by the far-right if sensitively managed with appropriate procedures and safeguards in place.

— **Provide updated or additional safeguarding training for intervention providers, youth workers, parents, teachers and staff of other public institutions to ensure they are aware that participation in far-right communities on these online platforms may constitute an increased risk of radicalisation.**
Users in the groups analysed are confronted with a constant stream of dehumanising and aggressive content about migrant crime, conspiracy theories and narratives that seek to dehumanise and serve to create an atmosphere that is conducive to radicalisation. Therefore, it is vital to provide training and up-to-date information to those working with at-risk individuals to help them to identify the types of platforms and online communities that may pose a safeguarding risk as sources of harmful content, behaviour and community dynamics.

Further Research

— **Further cross-platform research of the uses, networks, audiences and cultures that exist not just within, but between platforms, is required to build the evidence base required to design effective responses.**
Given the increasing decentralization of users across alternative platforms, and the constant evolution of the online far-right ecosystem, continued cross-platform research into the uses, networks, audiences and cultures of these platforms is vital. For example, mapping the shortlinks shared on the bigger hubs within the far-right's ecosystem such as Telegram, VK and 4chan's /pol/ board could increase our understanding of where users are being directed to. Only with a fuller understanding of these online spaces, and the far-right communities they host, will policymakers be in a position to respond proportionately and effectively.

Introduction

Since late 2018, a series of attacks committed by extreme-right terrorists has been carried out in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle. In all of these cases, the attackers cited grievances around immigration, feminism, birth rates and the 'great replacement', the conspiracy theory which claims that immigration is a political weapon designed to exchange white majority populations with non-white immigrants.[13]

These attacks are part of a larger trend. Far-right terrorism is becoming an increasing threat. According to the latest numbers from the Global Terrorism Index, the global number of far-right terrorist incidents has risen by 320% between 2014 and 2019.[14] One factor united the specific series of attacks mentioned above: all the attackers used alternative platforms such as 8chan or the video-gaming service Twitch to upload their manifestos and, in the case of Christchurch and Halle, post links to the live streams of their attacks. The rise of these violent attacks has led to questions from policymakers about the role these alternative platforms play in facilitating radicalisation.

For years, a number of scholars have argued that while the internet and social media matter, they usually are not the sole factor in radicalisation processes but are in almost all cases complemented by personal interactions with other extremists. For example, a 2013 study assessing the role of the internet in the radicalisation of 15 prisoners incarcerated for Islamist-related terrorism offences in the UK concluded that while the internet increased the number of opportunities for radicalisation by providing echo chambers for extremist beliefs, it did not speed up these processes and did not replace the role of personal interactions in radicalisation processes.[15]

However, data on radicalisation profiles in the US by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism[16] reveals that even though cases in which social media was the prime driver of radicalisation are the minority, the importance of social media has increased. While social media played a primary or secondary role in the radicalisation processes in 27% of all cases in the START dataset between 2005 and 2010, this number rose to 73% between 2011 and 2016. In 17% of the cases in the latter period, it played the primary role.

This increasing importance of social media coincides with there being a shorter duration of radicalisation processes of foreign fighters, which suggests that social media can accelerate radicalisation.[17]

Over the past few years, the ideas of new tech-savvy movements have inspired a number of instances of far-right terrorism and violence. Therefore, the need to better understand online radicalisation in the context of far-right movements has become more pressing. Following the attack in Christchurch, in particular, before which the gunman uploaded a 74-page 'manifesto' titled 'The Great Replacement' on the fringe messaging board 8chan justifying his actions, far-right radicalisation on such alternative platforms has gained more public and media attention beyond policy and research circles.

Terrorist attacks and violent radicalisation are however only one of the challenges in connection with the ecosystem of alternative online platforms used by the far-right. From 2015 onwards, far-right groups used alternative platforms such as 4chan, Discord and Telegram to recruit supporters, ideologically radicalise them and mobilise them to carry out online campaigns in order to influence the political discourse on social media and beyond. In the run-up to the federal elections in 2017, a network called Reconquista Germanica with almost 8,000 members tried systematically to promote content by the German right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and attacked its political opponents.[18] Meanwhile, the harassment of predominantly female journalists, activists and politicians by far-right trolls online has become a key tactic to intimidate political opponents in an attempt to silence their voices and drive them out of the digital conversation.[19]

At a time in which social media has become ever more important for public debate and democratic culture, these campaigns are aimed at monopolising debate online, and shifting the 'Overton window', the spectrum of acceptable political positions, to mainstream extremist ideas.

With increased extremist use of mainstream and alternative platforms and concerns about online radicalisation, the calls on governments and tech platforms to push back against these developments have grown. The German Network Enforcement Act[20] the regulatory body against online harms planned by the UK government[21] are examples of attempts to counter the impact of illegal, extremist and harmful content online (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2019). In France, the National Assembly passed a bill against online hate in July 2019. In line with the German NetzDG, the law requires platforms to remove content that is 'manifestly illegal' within 24 hours of being notified by users or face fines of up to 4% of their global turnover.[22]

At the same time, responding to the pressure from governments and the public, the major tech companies have started to implement a variety of different counter-measures against disinformation and extremist use of their platforms. During the last years they have enforced new policies on hate speech, excluded extremists from their platforms, taken down hundreds of thousands of extremist or false accounts, implemented ad libraries for political advertising and started initiatives for media literacy.[23] For example, the GIFCT was created by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube to limit terrorists' ability to use their platforms. The GIFCT has built a database of 'hashed' files that have been identified as terrorist content. If users try to re-upload this content, they can be automatically identified through their digital footprint and deleted.[24] The United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate's Tech Against Terrorism initiative facilitates capacity sharing, knowledge sharing and best-practice sharing within the tech sector, and supports smaller platforms that lack the capacity to respond effectively to violent extremist content on their platforms.

And after the Christchurch attack, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron led the Christchurch Call, a non-binding pledge by governments and eight tech firms to take 'specific and transparent steps' to prevent the upload and dissemination of terrorist content online.[25] In this context, it is interesting that infrastructure providers have started to act as well, for example when Cloudflare ceased to provide further technical support for 8chan after the far-right terrorist attacks in Christchurch, Poway and El Paso (Ohlheiser 2019).[26]

In response to the increasing pressure, extremists have migrated further away from the major to more fringe platforms, whose administrators are often less able to moderate content and crack down on extremist groups if they lack capacity and resources, or are less willing if they are sympathetic to extremist views or have libertarian attitudes on free speech. After the Identitarian movement had been declared a hate organisation by Facebook and Instagram, leading to the ban of the Identitarian movement from these platforms in summer 2018, the group shifted more and more towards Telegram, and to a lesser extent VK.[27]

Designed as a secure messaging application, it is almost impossible to moderate or ban content on Telegram, even though Telegram has increasingly been co-operating with authorities to takedown ISIS channels.[28] This platform migration mirrored a larger development mainly in the US where far-right groups have been excluded from major platforms like Facebook and Twitter and, to a certain extent, from more niche platforms like Reddit and 4chan. As result, alternatives like Gab, Minds, Telegram and until recently 8chan became more popular within the far-right.[29]

In this report we refer to the increasingly complex and multi-pronged web of platforms and applications the far-right use as an online ecosystem, within which different platforms serve different purposes and function as alternatives to enhance the resilience of the network in the face of platform, infrastructural (e.g. Cloudflare) or government moderation or enforcement actions.

While this might be a relatively novel way of looking at these challenges, other studies about the decentralised networks system of platforms used by jihadists online, the Program on Extremism's 2019 study 'Islamic State ecosystem on Telegram'[30], Berger's *The Alt-Right Twitter Census*[31] and Lewis' 2018 report on the 'alt-media ecosystem'[32] have been framing extremism online in environmental terms as well. While all of these studies use the term 'ecosystem', they all focus on only one specific platform. In this report we distinguish between extremist 'networks' within one platform, and 'ecosystems' across different platforms. We argue that it is crucial to look beyond individual platforms and understand the range of functions different platforms play for extremists to recruit, mobilise and spread their ideology.

A connected phenomenon is the growth of alternative media outlets (alt-media). In the age of social media, the importance of media outlets beyond the traditional players has increased. While the trust in mainstream media differs between countries, over the past years we have witnessed the emergence of an entire ecosystem of online newspapers, alternative media and blogs which are attempting to compete with more established media outlets for attention, especially on social media. According to a cross-country study by the Oxford Research Institute, 'junk news stories' often outperformed mainstream media content in the run-up to the 2019 European parliamentary elections.[33] These outlets often amplify far-right, anti-migrant and anti-progressive talking points and provide the content that can be shared on mainstream and alternative platforms. During the run-up to the European parliamentary elections in May 2019, AfD invited key alt-media outlets to the Bundestag to discuss how the party could co-operate and align its messaging with these outlets more effectively. These efforts, similar to promoting alternative platforms, aim to establish an alternative to the traditional gatekeepers in the media to undermine the credibility of what they view as the 'liberal-left' establishment media and shift public discourse towards the (far) right.

Despite the potential of the far-right's ecosystem of alternative platforms to further the radicalisation of violent extremists and poison civic debate online, political responses to the far-right online are often limited to the larger platforms. For example, NetzDG only covers platform providers with more than 2 million users. Through this report we hope to contribute to filling this gap and help researchers, those working in civil society organisations and policymakers to better understand the complex and rapidly developing ecosystem of platforms currently used by the far-right in Germany and help them think more clearly about how to make a targeted, proportionate and effective response to the far-right online.

To the best of our knowledge, this report is the first of its kind, taking both an exploratory and, within ethical and technological constraints, comparative approach to understanding ten platforms German far-right groups and individuals use. As we entered at least relatively unchartered territory, we were interested in finding answers to some very basic, but fundamental, questions:

— Which platforms are widely used by the German far-right? How do they work?

— What (if any) rules and guidelines exist to moderate harmful content and behaviour on these platforms?

— How big are the communities of far-right users on each of these platforms?

— What are the motivations for (far-right) users to join these platforms?

— What themes are being discussed within the far-right's ecosystem of platforms online, and how do they differ between platforms, for example between 4chan, Discord and Telegram?

— How do these platforms contribute to radicalisation,
  for example by using dehumanising language,
  presenting other groups as threats and
  glorifying or inciting violence?

— What is the impact of takedowns and de-platforming
  measures levelled against far-right influencers
  and groups by the big social media firms on their
  number of followers on alternative platforms —
  do supporters just join them on the new platforms?

— How does the coverage of far-right concepts
  differ between mainstream and alternative
  media in volume and framing?

1. Findings

With this research we set out to identify which alternative social media platforms the German far-right use, the size of the far-right communities on those platforms in comparison with their presence on mainstream platforms, the themes discussed and whether the platforms appeared to be fostering radicalisation. We also set out to determine the role of alternative media websites in disseminating far-right content and concepts.

To do this, we undertook a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, which are covered briefly at the beginning of each of the following sections, and more fully in the appendices of this report.

In this section we present the findings of our analysis, which are broken down into five key areas:

— **Platform Selection:**
the alternative platforms that we selected for the research, differentiating between different types of platforms, and analysing their community guidelines, looking particularly at whether their core purpose was ideological in nature;

— **Size of Far-Right Online Communities:**
an overview of the scale of the far-right communities, channels and groups across these platforms; though these groups and channels often bring together a diverse mix of far-right actors, we analyse how these groups are distributed across a spectrum of the far-right: from neo-Nazi, to Identitarian groups, to xenophobic populist parties like the AfD;

— **Motivations for Joining Platforms:**
an investigation into motivations of those individuals who join these groups, based on qualitative analysis of a series of internal polls conducted on Gab, 4chan and Discord as examples;

— **Themes Within Far-right Communities:**
an explorative overview of the themes discussed on these platforms and across these groups, based on a qualitative content analysis of the biggest communities; we also present a case study of antisemitic content on 4chan, using machine learning and NLP software;

— **Reach on Mainstream and Alternative Platforms:**
a comparison between the reach of influencers and groups on mainstream and alternative platforms, and an assessment of whether or not being blocked on mainstream platforms appeared to have an impact on the size of their groups on alternative platforms.

— **Far-Right Concepts in Alternative Media Outlets:**
the growing ecosystem of alternative media outlets to explore the extent to which far-right concepts are being discussed in comparison with mainstream media.

1.1   Platform Selection

The first step in our research was to identify relevant alternative platforms on which far-right communities are present. To do this, we created a list of potential platforms based on ISD's and others' previous research on the far-right. This list aimed to be as broad as possible, covering types of platforms like discussion forums, messaging applications, video-sharing sites, gaming apps and social networks. We excluded a number of platforms that either seemed to have an extremely small user base such as Meisterbook, were paid subscribers sites such as pr0gramm, or on which we did not identify a large enough user base from the German far-right, such PewTube or Hatreon. Additionally, we did not include far-right 'encyclopedias' such as Metapedia. Using this method, we identified ten platforms to include in our research, which are listed in Table 1.

While creating this list, it became clear that there seem to be broadly speaking three different types of platforms, created:

— by libertarians or commercially driven developers, which tend to operate in the name of free speech and tolerate extremist contents

— for entirely different purposes, such as gaming, video-sharing or Japanese anime, which are being used by extremists

— by far-right individuals specifically for far-right groups.

White nationalist discussion boards like Stormfront or the Daily Stormer's 'BBS The Goyim Know', crowd-sourcing sites like Hatreon and encyclopedias like Metapedia or Infogalactic are clear international examples of the third category. It is worth mentioning that while there are efforts to create and populate such a platform also within the German far-right, as the examples of Patriot Peer, FreiHoch3 show. While the video-sharing sites FreiHoch3 and Prometheus were created by right-wing populist influencers, the number of users was too small to merit inclusion in the analysis. Moreover, these sites were publicly justified by their support of freedom of expression rather than the explicit promotion of a xenophobic, nationalist ideology. Patriot Peer, a project by the Identitarian Movement, remains in development. However, following the inclusion criteria as outlined above, no extremist in-house creation was selected for the final list of platforms of this research project.

We see that six platforms in our final selection can be classified as libertarian platforms highlighting the value of free speech, while four platforms have a more general purpose (for example, gaming or social networking) but are being used by the far-right. These platforms explicitly welcome what they call a wide range of diverging opinion and at least tolerate extremist content, often up to what is classified as illegal under US law (most of them are based in the US).

Examples for such platforms are Gab, which describes the first amendment of the U.S. constitution as its guideline for content moderation or Telegram which highlights that it will not comply with so called "local restrictions on freedom of speech". The misused platforms, of which we have four in our final selection, have stricter content policies and show increased efforts in removing extremist content. Platforms like Discord or Reddit on the other hand have stricter content rules and started publishing transparency reports about their moderation processes. A detailed overview about all selected platforms, their background and usage, their community guidelines and examples for far-right content on these platforms can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1 **The online platforms included in this research**

Platform	Type	Founded	Purpose
4chan	Image board	2003	Hijacked
Reddit	Image board	2005	Hijacked
VK	Social network	2006	Hijacked
8chan	Image board	2013	Libertarian
Telegram	Messaging app	2013	Libertarian
Discord	Gaming app	2015	Hijacked
Minds	Social network	2015	Libertarian
Voat	Social network	2015	Libertarian
Gab	Social network	2016	Libertarian
BitChute	Video-sharing platform	2017	Libertarian

1.2 The Size of Far-right Online Communities

While the varying design and dynamics of the different alternative platforms studied make exact comparisons difficult, we followed a series of standard steps to identify German language or Germany-focused far-right communities, groups and channels.

ISD researchers selected communities, channels, groups and influencers in our sample if they:

— belonged to known far-right organisations

— repeatedly and affirmatively shared the content of known far-right organisations or expressed support for it

— posted content that clearly fell under Cas Mudde's definition of the far-right, exhibiting at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy [34]

— shared content by individuals or organisations that fell under Mudde's definition of the far-right

— posted hate speech according to the definition found in Facebook's community standards, which defines hate speech 'as a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity and serious disease or disability'.[35]

The identification of communities and the subsequent data collection was based on three steps:

1) We relied on previous ISD research on far-right online communities, including election monitoring projects in the contexts of the German federal elections of 2017, the Bavarian state elections of 2018 and the European parliamentary elections of 2019.

2) We used a keyword lists of vocabulary associated with the far-right online using platform search functions.

3) Using the first two steps we conducted a manual 'snowball' search on each platform.[36]

Following these steps, we found that overall Telegram and VK had the largest number of far-right groups, channels and influencers, with 129 and 115 respectively, followed by 79 on BitChute, 38 on Gab, 8 on Reddit and 5 far-right communities on Minds and Voat. Over a third of the channels on Telegram (44) overtly expressed support for National Socialism. The largest channel on any of these platforms is a Telegram channel with over 40,000 followers; 21 far-right Telegram channels or groups have more than 5,000 followers. On VK, which based on our assessment is the second-biggest platform with the ecosystem of alternative platforms used by the far-right, the biggest community we identified has approximately 10,000 members, 4 communities have more than 5,000 members, and 31 have more than 1,000.

Among these groups, the entire spectrum of the far-right — from right-wing populists and anti-Muslim groups over Identitarians to Neo-Nazis — has a presence on these platforms: 35 were channels and groups associated with the Identitarian and ethnonationalist groups, 92 expressed overt support for National Socialism, and 104 were channels mainly focused around opposition to immigration, refugees and Islam. There were 117 communities and groups which did not clearly fall into any of the categories, either because their precise ideological leanings were not clear, their posts mixed content from the above categories, or because users who posted in them frequently contradicted each other.

The number of channels and communities might possibly be misleading in terms of demonstrating the actual presence of these movements on alternative platforms: while the biggest Identitarian channel has more than 35,000 followers, a reach not matched by the biggest anti-Muslim channel (18,000) and the biggest neo-Nazi channel (around 10,000). It should be emphasised that these numbers of course do not necessarily mean that all of the followers of these channels necessarily support the political positions of the groups or influencers that operate them.

In addition to far-right extremist groups, we also sought to identify whether or not the right-wing populist party AfD has a presence on alternative platforms, as previous ISD research had identified significant mobilisation for the AfD emerging from far-right associated channels on alternative platforms in the context of the German Federal and the Bavarian State Elections. We identified a small, but largely inactive presence of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Deutchland (AfD). We identified 31 communities and groups belonging to the AfD, almost all of them (29) on VK. However, their main page on the platform has not been active since 2015, and their biggest recently active group has 414 followers. This suggests that while the AfD may have once considered building up a presence on VK, it has not prioritised the platform lately, presumably because its focus is on getting its messaging out on mainstream social media.

As most of the communication on 4chan and 8chan occurs in English, and users post anonymously, we do not feel confident in providing an estimate of the number of German users sympathetic to far-right ideas on 4chan or even 8chan, which has been offline almost without interruption after the El Paso shooting. Additionally, it is impossible to obtain any reliable data about the share of followers who are actual supporters, and how much the audiences between communities and influencers overlap. We also cannot assess how many researchers, journalists or political opponents of the far-right are among the followers, and how many users have multiple accounts.

With those caveats in mind, overall, we would estimate that between 15,000 and 50,000 German-speaking individuals with far-right beliefs use these platforms, with varying levels of activity. While the maximum number is bigger than the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution's[37] estimate of 24,100 (which includes 13,240 individuals who are not part of organised structures, including online activists), it is much smaller than the 2% of Germans who the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung considers to have a 'closed right-wing extremist world-view.'[38]

1.3 Motivations for Joining Platforms: Findings from Gab, 4chan and Discord
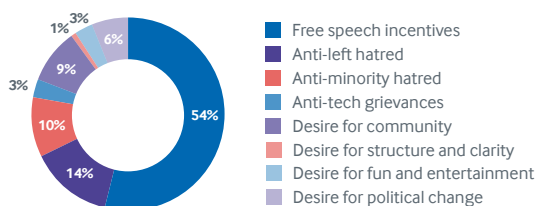
The following analysis aims to provide insights into the motivations that drive far-right users to alternative platforms. It uses a series of internal polls conducted on Gab, 4chan and Discord in February 2018, whereby users in far-right communities were asked to share their motivations for using these platforms. Unfortunately, similar polls were not available for other platforms. Using initial qualitative manual assessments of respondents' open-text responses, we created keyword lists and coded them into different motivation categories. In addition to the text-based analysis, we give some example quotes for the polls on each platform. The poll results suggest that motivations of users across different alternative platforms vary widely.

The Gab users were strongly driven by freedom of speech grievances and anti-left resentment, which could be due to the platform's strong emphasis on being the free speech alternative to major social media platforms accused of having a liberal or left-wing political bias. Anti-minority hatred and desire for fun and entertainment played a much bigger role among the 4chan's /pol/ board members, reflecting the platform's anarchic culture and unique humour. Users embedded in the Discord group Reconquista Germanica, on the other hand, were motivated by a desire for political change and a search for community and belonging, which could be due to the group's ideological leaning or Discord's platform architecture, which makes it possible to establish tight communities. More surveys and ethnographic studies need to be conducted to fully understand the nuances of the push and pull factors that lead internet users to join, inhabit and leave alternative platforms.

Gab

To better understand the motivations of Gab users, we analysed the results of an internal poll asking respondents 'Why are you on Gab?'. In total, 635 replies were posted by users in response to the poll. Figure 1 sets out the responses.

Figure 1 Reasons respondents gave for joining Gab

Legend:
- Free speech incentives
- Anti-left hatred
- Anti-minority hatred
- Anti-tech grievances
- Desire for community
- Desire for structure and clarity
- Desire for fun and entertainment
- Desire for political change

Chart values: 54%, 14%, 10%, 3%, 9%, 1%, 3%, 6%

Source: ISD analysis of open-text user-generated survey of Gab users in far-right communities

The majority of responses related to freedom of speech. Over half of the shared motivations of Gab users used keywords such as 'free speech', 'censor', 'thought police', 'ban', 'suspend' or 'first amendment'.[39] Other motivation categories that received significant shares were anti-left sentiment (14%) and anti-minority sentiment (10%). These categories were followed by desire for community (9%) and desire for political change (6%).

Anti-tech grievances, the desire for fun and entertainment or the desire for structure and clarity played a role in the motivation to use Gab of a small minority of poll participants.

Example quotes on why respondents use Gab

"*I came to Gab to take a stand against Big Social. I stay because there are likeminded patriots who believe the First Amendment is a powerful gift worth exercising.*"

"*Because I am tired of Jack and Zuck's social conditioning/social surveillance/freedom suppressing/narrative generator.*"

"*Google & FB have become the very monsters they warned us about when they were upstarts. Too much greed & too much power have made them drunk with oppression.*"

"*i am one of the 1st 10k on Gab and have enjoyed watching it grow (Qa has done a great job at creating a new way for the world to communicate. here i can say i love you or i can say go fuck yourself, if you so desire you can call a n***** a n*****, jew a jew, asshole an asshole. smile and enjoy.*"

"*We dont use or control Social Media, but it does to us. Just a group of people decide everything we do, we see even what we LOVE…*"
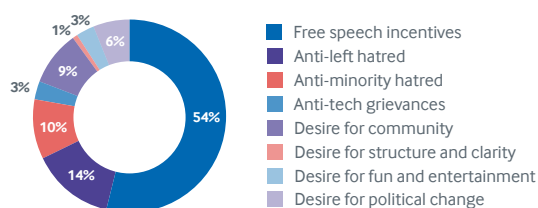
"*I'm up, its 3:33 AM. Get ready in your homes & lives. The time is close at hand where this nation is going to descend into chaos.*"

"*I'm on Gab because every time I saw a white person use a 'Le sassy black woman goes MMM HMMMM gif' as an argument on Twitter I legitimately wanted the nukes to drop.*"

4chan

A poll published on 4chan's /pol/ board framed the question differently as 'How did you end up on /pol?'. In total, 187 replies were posted by users in response to the poll. Figure 2 sets out the responses.

Figure 2 Reasons respondents gave for joining 4chan

- Free speech incentives
- Anti-left hatred
- Anti-minority hatred
- Anti-tech grievances
- Desire for community
- Desire for structure and clarity
- Desire for fun and entertainment
- Desire for political change

Source: ISD analysis of open-text user-generated survey of 4chan users in far-right communities

The 4chan /pol/ poll results show that anti-minority hatred is a key motivator on the imageboard. With 46% of keywords using keywords such as 'k***', 'n*****', 'jew', 'black' or 'race', a significant percentage of poll responses were characterised by explicitly racist statements, slurs and conspiracy theories. To better understand the types of hatred, we conducted a sub-analysis of responses (see below). Furthermore, the desire for fun and entertainment is more widespread on 4chan's /pol/ board than among users on Gab. Desire for political change and anti-left hatred were also significant motivations identified in the text-based analysis. A sub-analysis of the types of hate users expressed as part of their poll replies shows that antisemitic and anti-Black hatred largely dominate the conversations. Misogynist and anti-left rhetoric is equally widespread, with terms such as 'whore' and 'bitch' used for women and 'libtard' and 'SWJ' (social justice warrior) applied to the left in a hateful context (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Types of hate expressed by 4chan users
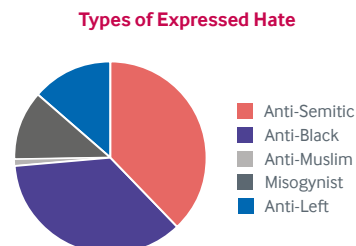
Types of Expressed Hate

- Anti-Semitic
- Anti-Black
- Anti-Muslim
- Misogynist
- Anti-Left

Source: ISD analysis of open-text user-generated survey of 4chan users in far-right communities

Example quotes on why respondents use 4chan

> "*came to 4chan when i was 12. im still here 6 years later. why can i leave?*"

> "*Got interested in politics and was always interested in dark humor, so I typed political incorrect on google and found this place.*"

> "*from the_donald during the elections and no I'm not going back fuck you.*"

> "*This is a collective demonstration of shifting world view.*"

> "*Actually its memetic influence draws in new soldiers who constantly slowly process over time into harder core nat-socs [National Socialists] or variants of. Its [sic] a breeding ground for our return.*"

"I was an anarchist coming here to troll. Started in December 2016. Things started to change when I saw a NatSoc General thread. I watched many of the videos, including The Greatest Story Never Told on YouTube. My old comments dismissing it as propaganda are still around."

"I never had sex and I wanted to know why."
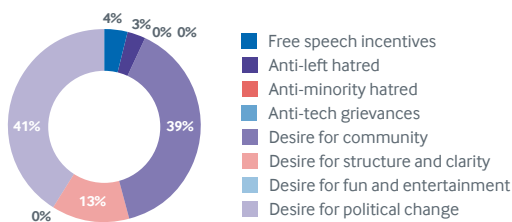
"Gamergate and the refugee crisis."

"Terrorist attack in my country. These people browsing the same website are talking about it."

"started working from home. Hours of time to fuck around on internet > Anti-SJW [social justice warrior] youtube [sic] videos > Donald Trump announces presidency > POL."

Discord

In the closed Discord group Reconquista Germanica a poll asking 'Why are you part of the Reconquista Germanica Discord server?' received 69 replies. Figure 4 sets out the responses.

Example quotes on why respondents use Discord

"What I like about the server is being with like-minded people in a mature and serious way."

"The community and the exchange of experiences, as well as the networking and coordination of actions."

"I like that we can finally become active through various campaigns and leave our footprint in the public discourse:)"

"I like that everyone can get organized here, on the Internet and in real life."

"I like the tight organization and the impression of having many capable people on board."

"The best thing about the server is that we can network and are no longer completely isolated from each other. A huge strategic advantage!"

Figure 4 **Reasons respondents gave for joining Discord**

- Free speech incentives
- Anti-left hatred
- Anti-minority hatred
- Anti-tech grievances
- Desire for community
- Desire for structure and clarity
- Desire for fun and entertainment
- Desire for political change

4% 3% 0% 0%
39%
13%
0%
41%

Source: ISD analysis of open-text user-generated survey of 4chan users in far-right communities.

1.4   Themes Within Far-right Communities Using Alternative Platforms

One of our key areas of interest during this research was an explorative mapping of the themes and narratives that are being discussed across the German far-right alternative platforms. As this report was the first research project attempting to scope out these largely unknown areas of the internet systematically, this type of analysis would offer crucial insights into the dynamics of these spaces. However, as a result of the nature of the research subject, we were confronted with a range of serious methodological, ethical and technological challenges which we needed to address. Certain platforms such as Minds are specifically designed not to be scraped, and scraping would likely be against the terms of service of others (VK, Discord, Telegram). Some platforms had a poorly documented API with few guidelines, so there was little clarity about the overall feasibility of scraping the platform (Voat) or they did not appear to be worth scraping because of their small size and the low level of activity by few far-right communities (Reddit). Thus gaining comparable levels of scraped data across platforms did not appear to be possible or ethical.

We therefore decided to proceed by coding ten posts into themes manually for each of the communities, groups and channels we had included for further analysis, in order to get a general overview of common themes covered within these communities. To keep the amount of content to be coded feasible for manual coding, we coded all of the channels, groups and influencers on Reddit (9), Minds and Voat, but decided to limit ourselves to 20 channels, groups and influencers for Telegram, VK, Gab and BitChute. Overall, we coded almost 1,000 posts across the different platforms. Acknowledging the limitations of this approach, we want to highlight that the results outlined below need to be interpreted carefully, as the underlying databases might differ substantially because of the challenges explained above. Nonetheless, we think that this kind of explorative analysis is of great value as it can serve as an indicator of what issues were most spoken about within the selected far-right communities and channels. A detailed methodological description can be found in Appendix B.

Instead of attempting to create predefined categories before coding that we expected would be widely discussed, we instead drew on an initial coding of some 250 posts to create the categories for the analysis of the whole body of content:

– **Attacking political opponents:** all forms of criticism of political opponents, which we further divided into attacks on the left, on centrists and conservatives, and on others on the far-right

– **Climate change:** all discussions about climate change, including climate change denial, and attacks on activists, groups, researchers and public intellectuals mostly associated with climate change (e.g. Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion)

– **Conspiracy theories:** all suggestions of secret arrangements being made to achieve a particular purpose, including all mentions of the QAnon movement

– **Fascist:** we only classified content as fascist if it explicitly expressed support for fascism or National Socialism, or engaged shared historically revisionist messages about these movements without explicitly endorsing them

– **Gender:** all discussions of particular social roles associated sex, gender and gender identity, in particular by actors presenting themselves as the defenders 'our women' or 'European women', but also when formulating specific expectations of what is to be expected of men

– **Islam:** all discussions relating to Islam and Muslims in which Islam is specifically mentioned as a relevant factor, including descriptive and negative uses

— **Immigration:** all mentions of migrants, refugees and the impact of immigration on the demographic composition of the country or region in question; we further classified all mentions of real or invented criminal acts committed by refugees or migrants

— **Media:** criticism of individual media outlets or 'the media' as a whole, especially accusations of political bias, selective reporting and lying

— **Pro-populist:** explicit support for populist politicians or parties, such as the AfD, Donald Trump or Lega Party in Italy

— **Repression:** all expressions of grievances around real or perceived instances and patterns of repression by the state or private actors against the far-right, in particular in relation to restrictions on freedom of speech or participation in far-right activities

— **Other:** this included other categories that were much less commonly encountered than those described above, including opposition to democracy in principle, anti-LGBT sentiments, antisemitic sentiments, biological racism, and views on education, the EU, political correctness, paedophilia and the economy that were not political, opposed to the far-right or that we were not able to interpret (coded as 'unclear').

We believe this type of inductive creation of categories has important advantages when trying to map platforms and forums that are under-researched, and whose users have distinctive styles of communicating their ideas. By predefining categories before analysing these alternative platforms, we would have run the risk of missing certain themes that are widely discussed on them, but that we would not have believed to be as crucial as they in fact are.

Figure 5 shows the thematic breakdown across platforms. Our analysis revealed commonalities and differences between and within the platforms.

Figure 5 Analysis of the themes discussed on different far-right platforms
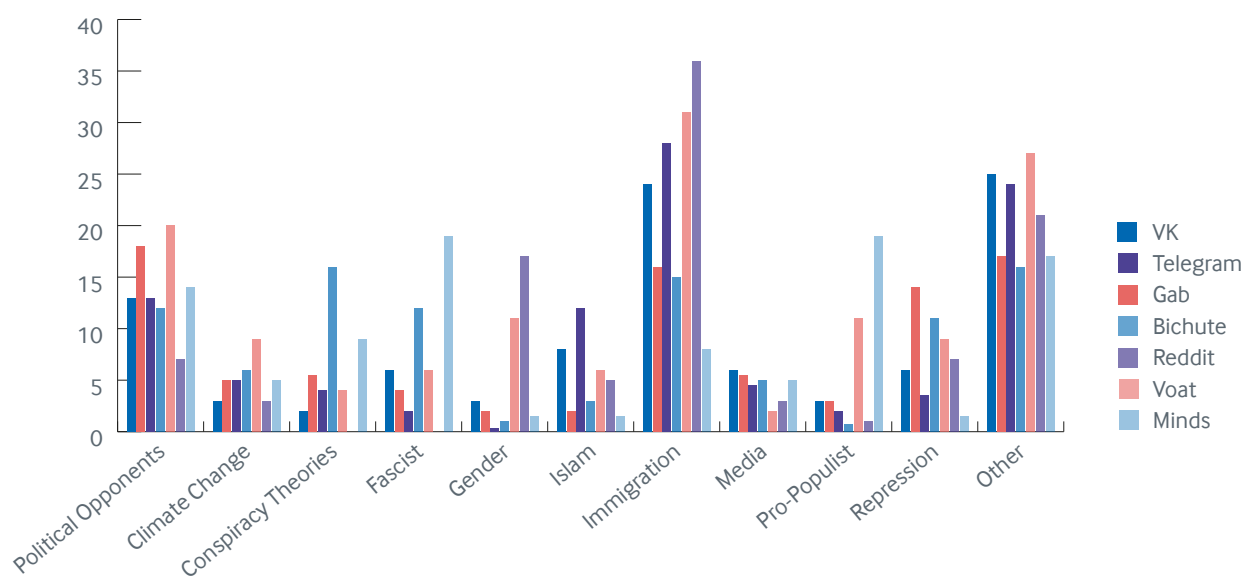
As Figure 5 illustrates, immigration was perhaps unsurprisingly the most commonly discussed topic across all platforms, particularly among the groups on Voat, Reddit and Gab. The second most discussed category was attacking political opponents (13–20% on all platforms, and most common on Telegram and Reddit). The 'other' category, which we analyse below, was overall the third highest thematic category, which is not surprising given the very exploratory nature of this initial analysis.

Looking at the numbers of far-right groups or channels on the two largest platforms, VK and Telegram, we can see some interesting trends emerge. The analysis of VK showed that discussion of immigration, 'other' topics and political opponents were most prominent. However, overall we did not discern any unusual patterns in comparison with other alternative platforms, which may be because it is used by the entire spectrum of far-right actors, therefore reflecting a cross-section of the ideological diversity within the wider movement.

Content about the supposed repression of the far-right was more frequent on Telegram than on other platforms. Telegram seems to have become the most important space for far-right influencers and groups that have been hit by, or fear to be faced with, de-platforming measures from the major social media platforms. As one of the key functions of Telegram is forwarding content and advertising other channels and platforms, 8% of all contents directed users towards other channels, platforms or websites.

Interestingly, far-right content on Gab mentions the role of Islam and Muslims more frequently than content found on other platforms (12%). Even though there can clearly be an overlap between narratives about migrants and refugees, Islam was not explicitly mentioned as a factor as often as we had expected. Instead we more often found generic hostility towards migrants and refugees as the 'others'.

The analysis of videos from BitChute, the main alternative to YouTube as a video-sharing platform with the far-right's ecosystem of online platforms, also led to very interesting results. More than on any other platform we encountered conspiracy theories, often elaborated in lengthy videos, alleging that evil, hidden actors were conspiring against what the far-right perceives to be the interests of their in-group. More often than on all other platforms but Minds, these conspiracy theories crossed over into antisemitism, including revisionist interpretations of Germany's history, Holocaust denial and open support for fascism (12%).

The results for Reddit, Minds and Voat, the alternative platforms with a smaller number of far-right users than the others, should be interpreted with some caution, as individual outliers of communities can more easily sway the overall distribution of themes.
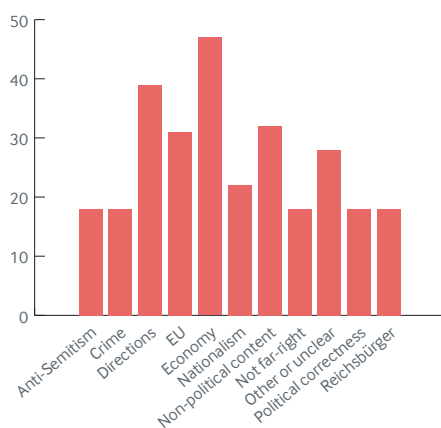
On Voat, conspiracy theories and fascist content were absent; more than on other platforms discussions were about gender, mostly in the context of migrants or refugees being accused of committing sexual crimes against 'our women' or 'European women'.

Interestingly, we found the two most common types of content on Minds supported either populist actors at one end of the far-right spectrum or fascist ideologies at the other, showing that even within platforms there may be ideological disagreements. Reddit, on the other hand, featured most discussions about climate change and more support for populist actors than all other platforms except Minds.

Posts that did not fall into any of our main categories and which we classified as 'other' accounted for between 16% (BitChute) and 27% (Reddit) of all content analysed. Therefore, we decided to break down the categories within these posts, summarised for all seven platforms we coded manually.

Figure 6 shows a few themes that kept re-appearing in different communities, such as antisemitism that was not related to support for fascism or historical revisionism, crime that did not mention the identity of the perpetrator, posts about the EU or the economy, and posts that were not political, did not come from the far-right or whose message remained unclear to our researchers.

Figure 6 **Key themes in the 'other' category of posts across all platforms**

Additionally, 12% of all posts about immigration reference conspiracy theories about the demographic replacement of 'native Europeans' by non-European immigrants, or the cultural takeover through the supposed 'Islamisation' of European societies. Migrants and refugees are almost without exception portrayed as increasing the risk of rising crime rates, or even as an existential threat to the maintenance or the established ethnic or cultural order. This constant stream of posts zooming in on only the negative aspects of immigration and the construction of parts of the population as a threat seems to us to be one of the key dangers emanating from the discourse on alternative platforms online.

Figure 7 **The main concerns of respondents relating to immigration**

Immigration
A particularly fascinating picture emerged as we further subdivided the way immigration was discussed by these groups on alternative platforms. Our analysis revealed that the majority of the posts about immigration (60%) focused on the illegal behaviour of refugees or migrants, rather than comprising a general discussion about immigration. Only 6% of the posts about migrants and 22% of the posts about refugees discuss them outside the contexts of illegal or criminal acts. These numbers, if anything, likely underestimate the amount of negative and hostile framing of migrants and refugees, as even the posts that were not about illegal behaviour did not necessarily portray them in a positive or even neutral light.

As a recent study from Macromedia shows, TV and newspapers in Germany have been naming the national identity of suspects and perpetrators in their coverage of violent crime, especially when they are a foreign national. For example, every third TV programme about crime mentioned the nationality of the suspect, with 89% of those cases being non-German suspects.[40] While the samples are not quite comparable, as far-right users on alternative platforms often rely on fringe media outlets instead of the mainstream sources Hestermann was investigating, we found a similar, though even more exaggerated pattern. In almost 92% of all mentions of crime within our sample, the suspects are referred to as migrants or refugees. And even in cases where the identity is not explicitly mentioned, posts are often interpreted in the comment sections to be about migrants or refugees anyway.

Attacking Political Opponents and Other Far-right Groups

Attacking political opponents was one of the most common themes, constituting 13–20% of all posts on most platforms (with the exception of Voat). However, the targets of the attacks and the often vicious criticism is far from equally spread across the political spectrum. The most common target by far was the left, for which we included the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the Greens. The left attracted 75% of the total posts attacking political opponents, followed by attacks on centrist and conservative political actors (18%), many of which were directed at politicians framed as 'globalists' supporting immigration (Figure 8).

Given some of the high profile public disagreements within the German far-right in the summer and fall of 2019 about LGBT rights, Israel and the US, we were particularly curious to see how widely reflected ideological disagreements within the far-right were on alternative platforms. While we found that 6% of all attacks were directed at others on the far-right, these intra-far-right feuds played a smaller role than the critique of common political opponents from the left, centre and conservative parts of the political landscape.

Anti-Muslim Posts

Even though explicit references to Islam and Muslims were not quite as common as one might have expected, these posts were prominent on platforms such as Gab (12% of all posts). We differentiated between descriptive mentions and anti-Muslim mentions of Islam and Muslims. For example, in Figure 9 the post on the left merely mentions the possibility of Islamic studies being introduced as a school subject, without taking a stance on whether or not that is a good or bad development' we coded this as a descriptive post. Similarly, expressions of sympathy with critics of Islam did not in themselves constitute proof of being anti-Muslim. In contrast, the example on the right in Figure 9 homogenises Islam by claiming that there is no difference between Sunni Islam, the Taliban, ISIS and Hamas; we coded this as an anti-Muslim post.

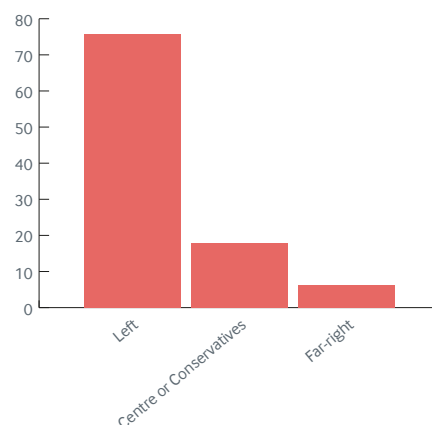**Figure 8 The targets of attacks on political opponents**

Figure 9 Example of a descriptive post on Islamic studies and an anti-Muslim post on Gab

Figure 10 The proportion of descriptive and anti-Muslim posts on all platforms
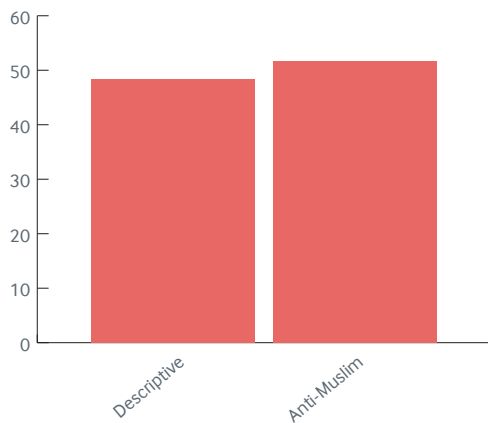
Posts that are Violent in Nature or Support Terrorist Groups

We also coded posts that were violent in nature or supported terrorist groups. We identified seven posts across all platforms that called for violence, or advocated joining terrorist groups. Although this number is very low, our analysis represents a mere snapshot into these groups at a particular point in time. Past ISD and other research suggests that violent language within these groups is event driven; for example, we might hypothesise that there would be a spike of violent language following an Islamist terrorist attack or other high profile terrorist event. Future research should investigate how specific events may drive an increase in violent language, as well as how violent posts are responded to and engaged with. In our research, the seven violent or terrorist supporting posts were met with agreement by other users in the comment section.

1.5 Case Study 1: Ideologies: Findings from an Alt-right Discord Server Survey

As part of our ethnographic monitoring of alt-right communities on Discord, ISD researchers were able to gain access to user-generated polls conducted on the alt-right Discord channel Politics 101 (Figure 11).[41] This chat server counts close to 800 members, with a backup server that has just below 100 members.

Although Politics 101 officially claims to be 'politically neutral', the conversations and literature that dominated the server were of a far-right and extreme-right nature. Shared materials ranged from the writings of Julius Evola and Adolf Hitler to links to the works of Alexander Dugin and Alain de Benoist. Other extreme content that was circulated included interviews with Andrew Anglin, handbooks of National Socialist propaganda and videos on 'The Nazi Economy'. Some of the shared also came from more mainstream conservative sources, such as *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994), which controversially claimed that racial differences in intelligence were likely in part caused by inherited factors.[42]

Figure 11 Video on 'The Nazi Economy' in the alt-right Discord channel Politics 101
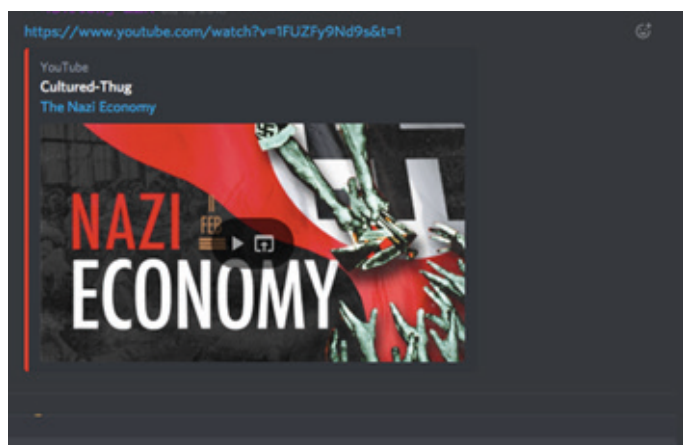
The average sample size for the polls was approximately 100. We only included polls with a sample size n > 85 to ensure each poll included at least 10% of all users of the channel and not just a small number of users. We look at responses to two demographic questions, then show the results of polls on minority rights; Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories; political and economic theory; international relations; and crime, justice and punishment.

It is important to note at the outset that these user-generated surveys cannot be considered to be robust or representative pictures of the individuals in these communities. For example, it is impossible to know who was completing these surveys and the extent to which the answers they provided were serious and not given in jest. With these caveats in mind, they nonetheless provide an interesting snapshot to some of the questions asked within these groups, and the attitudes of some of the individuals within these groups.

Figure 12 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about whether members were older than 15 and whether they had a Valentine's tomorrow
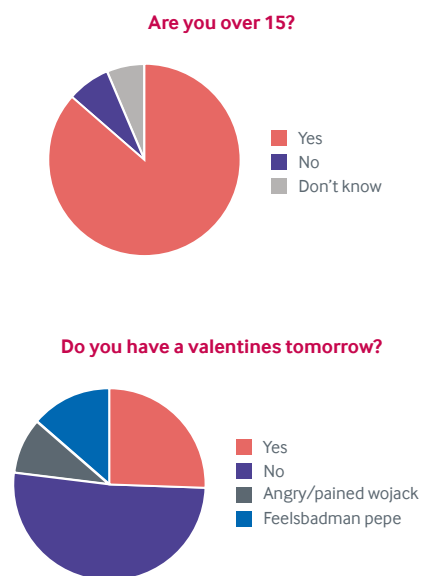
Although most users were over 15 years old, 7.5% (11 of 147) respondents stated that they were younger than 15. 66.7% (76 of 114) unequivocal responses to the question 'Do you have a Valentine's tomorrow?' were 'No', and an additional 29.8% (34 replies) expressed negative emotions by using emojis in response (14 angry/pained wojack and 20 feelsbadman pepe) (Figure 12).

Figure 13 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about members' views on minority rights and hate speech

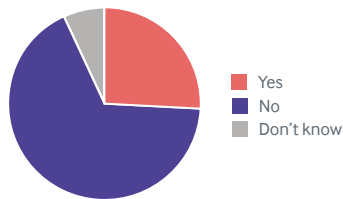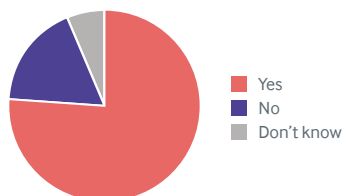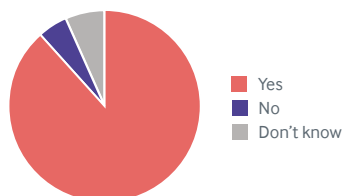**Is homosexuality degenerating Western society?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
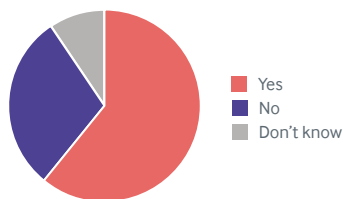
Are transgender people acceptable for state representation?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Is claiming 'racism' becoming an invalidated and outdated argument?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Is hate speech an inherent part of free speech?


- Yes
- No
- Don't know

The majority of respondents expressed strong homophobic views (67.1%, 92 of 137 unequivocal replies) and transphobic views (72.1%, 119 of 165 unequivocal replies) (Figure 13). This is a particularly striking number, given that only 8% of all Germans hold anti-LGBT views, according to a recent study by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.[43]

Over three-quarters of respondents thought that 'racism' was becoming an invalidated and outdated argument. Almost 90% of respondents thought that hate speech is an inherent part of free speech.

Figure 14 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about members' views on Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories

Do you believe in the Holocaust?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
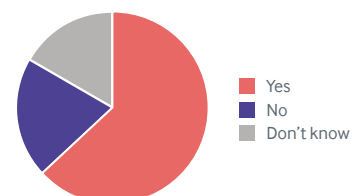
If you believe in it, is it the number that the government claim?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
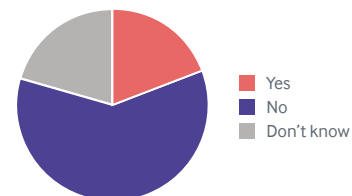
Although most respondents said they believed in the Holocaust (75.8%, 72 of 95 unequivocal replies), a high number of participants (75.7%, 53 of 70 unequivocal replies) stated that they did not trust the government's numbers of the victims.[44] According to Yad Vashem, denying its scope in such a way would also fall under Holocaust denial.[45] This is significantly higher than the 2.5% of Germans who downplay National Socialism according to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, even though that number rises to 7.0% among 16—30 year olds.[46]

Figure 15 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about members' views on political and economic theory

Is there such a thing as ethical capitalism?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
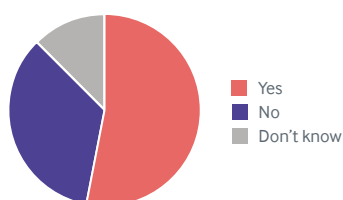
Is class struggle just human nature?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
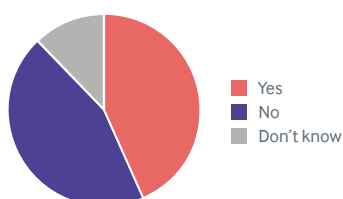
Are Communists worth uniting with to achieve anti-capitalist goals?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
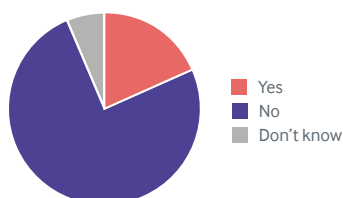
Is Democracy in all its' forms a failure?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
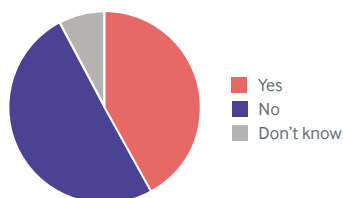
Poll participants had various views on economic and political questions. For example, 53.1% (60 out of 113 respondents) thought that capitalism can be ethical, while 34.5% (39 respondents) claimed they did not believe in ethical capitalism and 12.4% (14 respondents) were unsure (Figure 15). Likewise, the users were split almost 50/50 on the question of whether class struggles were part of human nature.

Only half of the respondents thought that democracy was not a failure in all its forms; 42% stated that democracy was a failure in all its forms and the remaining 8% were not sure. By contrast, 96% of all Germans support the principle of living in a pluralist democracy.[47] Despite there being widespread consensus about the failure of the current economic and political system, close to 80% of unequivocal responses were against teaming up with communists for anti-capitalist goals.

Figure 16 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about members' views on international relations

Do you think the EU is a force for good?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
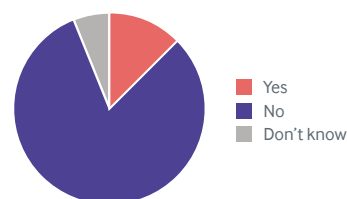
Should NATO be dissolved?
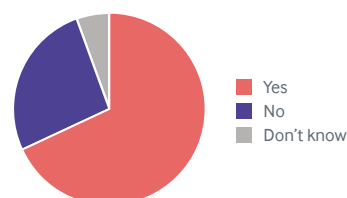
- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Figure 16 Responses to questions to a poll on Politics 101 about members' views on international relations

Does Israel has a real/legal right to exist?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
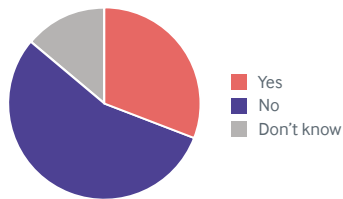
Is the West doomed to collapse?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
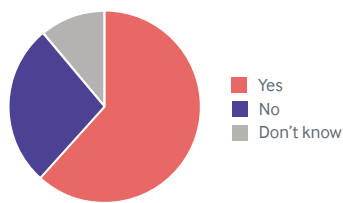
A majority of respondents believed that the West is doomed to collapse (62%), while 27% did not hold this belief and 11% were not certain. Only 12.6% (21 out of 167 of respondents) thought the EU was a force for good, 81.4% (136 replies) were negative and 6.0% (10 replies) unsure (Figure 16). According to a Eurobarometer survey from 2019, 81% of Germans believe that EU membership is beneficial for Germany.[48]

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) also claimed that NATO should be dissolved, a major contrast with overall public opinion: according to the survey institute Infratest dimap, only 13% of Germans think NATO should be dissolved.[49] Asked whether Israel has a right to exist, just over half of respondents replied 'no' (55%), 31% said 'yes' and 14% were not sure.

Figure 17 Responses to Questions about Crime, Justice and Punishment

Do you believe abortion should be a crime?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
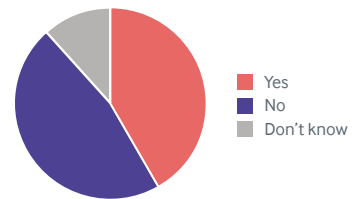
Should rapists face capital punishment?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
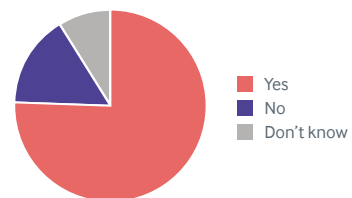
Is terrorism a viable alternative against imperialist power?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
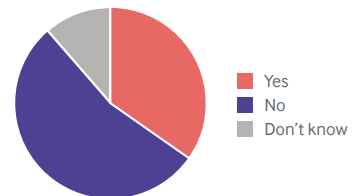
Do popular extremist groups like Atomwaffen Division pose a serious threat in the larger picture?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
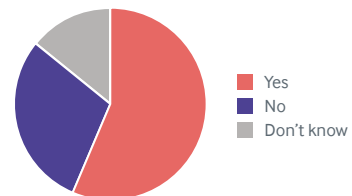
Nearly half of the respondents were in favour of making abortion a crime, compared with only 16% of all Germans.[50] Three-quarters thought rapists should be punished with the death penalty.[51] Views on terrorism varied: 35% viewed terrorism as a viable alternative against imperialist powers, just under 57% considered 'popular extremist groups' such as the international terrorist group Atomwaffen to be a serious threat, while 29% did not and 14% were undecided (Figure 17).

1.6   Case Study 2: Analysis of Anti-minority Content on 4chan

An important insight of our research into motivations for joining different alternative platforms was that users stated that a key motivator behind their becoming active on 4chan was their anti-minority hatred. Following up on this, we wanted to understand the presence and structure of anti-minority hatred on the platform. As some of the most prominent and harmful extreme-right attacks over the last year in Germany, which have also been connected to alternative platforms, had especially targeted Jews, we decided to focus our analysis on antisemitic conversation.

One of the first things researchers instantly notice when entering 4chan is how vulgar much of the discourse on the platform is. Slur terms and insults, including racist, antisemitic and misogynist attacks, are an essential part of the discussions on the platform, especially on 4chan's infamous /pol/ (politically incorrect) board. Given the overwhelming presence of various types of hateful content, we decided that instead of differentiating between hateful and non-hateful posts, we would like to investigate the presence of posts which go beyond the usage of slur terms. While the wide-spread casual usage of such terms is of course reflective of tolerance for discriminatory language, as well as a toxic discussion culture on the platform, there is nevertheless an important difference between the different ways in which these terms are used on 4Chan. We wanted to look specifically at content which also (or instead) included ideological statements or narratives of a dehumanising 'othering' mindset that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights (in line with ISD's definition of extremism).

Our data sample included 77,000 posts from the most relevant Germany-focused 4chan community called Kraut/pol/, which we accessed using a commercial social media analysis tool called Crimson Hexagon. For the identification and classification of ideological elements of antisemitic conversation, we relied on Method 52, a software platform for the analysis and classification of unstructured text.

We created English language subsamples of posts centred around Judaism (2,907 posts), using a broad range of keywords. We then relied on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition and examples of antisemitism to train the software to identify ideological elements or narratives of antisemitic conversation. Eventually we were able to classify antisemitic content automatically with an accuracy score (F score) of 0.76. A more detailed version of our methodological approach can be found in Appendix D.

Our results showed that within our samples of mentions of Jews under Kraut/pol/ threads on 4chan, 56.9% (1,654 of 2,907) contained ideological elements of antisemitic conversation, while 43.1% merely used slur terms without clearly referencing antisemitic narratives, were not antisemitic or were open to multiple interpretations.

Figure 18 lists the most common types of antisemitic statements and narratives within the posts we analysed. The high share of content including ideological elements or narratives of antisemitism demonstrates that the first impression of an overwhelmingly negative discussion about specific minorities and groups of our society is, at least in regard to Jews, not 'just' reflective of a toxic discussion culture. Instead it exposes a world view that propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mindset that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights.

Figure 18 The most common types of antisemitism expressed on Kraut/pol/

These are the most common types of antisemitism expressed on Kraut/pol/:

- allegations of Jewish control of tech firms (e.g. JewTube), the media, the slave trade, democratic institutions or politicians
- allegations about Jews conspiring to undermine common good to serve interests of their in-group and holding Jews responsible for perceived societal ills (e.g. migration, low birth rates, feminism, alcohol, television addiction)
- direct or circumstantial Holocaust denial (e.g. 'you go to prison for thinking the wrong thing about Jews in Germany')
- denying allegations of antisemitism against well-known antisemites
- suggestions that politicians only refuse to talk about 'Jewish influence' for fear of repercussions
- suggestions that Jews are alien to Germany (e.g. Goymoney)
- suggestions that Jews have a lower standard of behaviour than other Germans.

1.7 Reach of far-right groups and influencers on Mainstream and Alternative Platforms

In this section we present data on the number of followers there are of far-right influencers and groups on mainstream and alternative platforms. In addition to revealing the difference in scale between communities across platforms, we also sought to determine if groups or influencers being blocked on mainstream platforms appeared to have an impact on the size of their groups on alternative platforms.

In order to assess how the reach of far-right influencers compares between mainstream and alternative platforms, we selected 25 far-right influencers and groups from our list of far-right communities who operate a channel or page on at least one alternative platform and at least one mainstream platform (Table 2). The selected influencers and groups cover a range of ideological trends from within the far-right, from Identitarians (4) to groups mainly concerned with a supposed 'Islamisation' (14) to neo-Nazi activists and Holocaust deniers (4). The three remaining influencers are difficult to classify, as they combine elements of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee narratives, conspiracy theories, nationalism and antisemitism (the degree to which antisemitism is expressed explicitly or by using antisemitic codes and stereotypes varies between the three of them).

Table 2 The reach of a sample of far-right influencers and groups who operate a channel or page on at least one alternative platform (n = 25)

No.	Followers		Somewhere	Main channel	Not main	Not blocked
	Alt	**Mainstream**				
1	980	17,812	yes	yes	no	no
2	2,202	30,772	yes	no	yes	no
3	8,741	42,400	no	no	no	yes
4	1,659	16,000	yes	yes	no	no
5	10,684	70,000	yes	yes	no	no
6	1,050	2,694	yes	no	yes	no
7	2,378	12,500	no	no	no	yes
8	8,871	85,100	no	no	no	yes
9	3,192	98,890	yes	no	yes	no
10	6,260	40,400	no	no	no	yes
11	1,596	137,394	no	no	no	yes
12	5,500	12,100	yes	yes	no	no
13	1,992	17,400	no	no	no	yes
14	18,450	14,600	no	no	no	yes
15	5,545	46,100	yes	no	yes	no
16	35,183	107,000	yes	no	yes	no
17	655	154,000	yes	no	yes	no
18	41,339	90,900	no	no	no	yes
19	1,690	61,500	no	no	no	yes
20	154	17,600	no	no	no	yes
21	2,167	17,600	no	no	no	yes
22	777	255,00	no	no	no	yes
23	7,020	4,100	no	no	no	yes
24	14,285	256,000	yes	yes	no	no
25	3,639	33,500	no	no	no	yes
Average Reach	11.3%		9.9.%	8.9%	10.9%	12.7%

Alt. = maximum reach on alternative platforms, Mainstream = maximum reach on mainstream platform, Somewhere = account blocked on at least one mainstream platform, Main channel = account with maximum reach on mainstream platforms blocked, Not main = account blocked and did not have maximum reach on mainstream platforms, Not blocked = no account blocked, Average reach = average number of followers on alternative platforms compared with Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

We gathered the number of followers each of these influencers and groups had on all of the alternative platforms, and chose the highest number, showing their maximum reach on alternative platforms. With one exception, all of these influencers or groups had their largest number of followers on either Telegram or VK. This again demonstrates the importance these platforms play within the ecosystem of alternative platforms used by the far-right. The one influencer who did not have the highest number of followers on Telegram or VK had his biggest reach on Gab.

To compare the reach of the selected far-right influencers and groups on alternative platforms with their reach on mainstream platforms, we additionally gathered the number of followers each of them has on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. In the case of influencers and groups whose account had been removed, we searched for trustworthy indications of their number of followers before they had been removed. Since media and alt-media outlets often cover these de-platforming cases in great detail, we were able to trace at least an approximate number of followers that each of these far-right influencers and groups lost when their accounts were blocked. While in theory it could be possible that supporters or opponents were inflating the number of followers of far-right influencers and groups to make them appear more important than they are, the numbers given seemed credible, and matched our own monitoring of these influencers and groups over previous years.

As with the alternative platforms described above, we then chose the highest number, indicating the maximum reach of these far-right influencers and groups on mainstream social media. Here, the split between the platforms was much more even. While 10 of the selected far-right influencers and groups had the most followers on Facebook, 5 had their biggest audience on Twitter and 10 on YouTube. In turn, we calculated the average number of followers of all selected far-right influencers and groups on alternative and mainstream platforms.

Our results demonstrate that the reach of the most influential voices for the far-right online is much smaller on alternative platforms than it is or used to be on mainstream platforms (Figure 19). In fact, our selected far-right influencers and groups only have 11.3% of the number of followers on alternative platforms compared with their number of followers on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

Figure 19 **The average number of followers of far-right influencers on alternative and mainstream platforms from our sample**
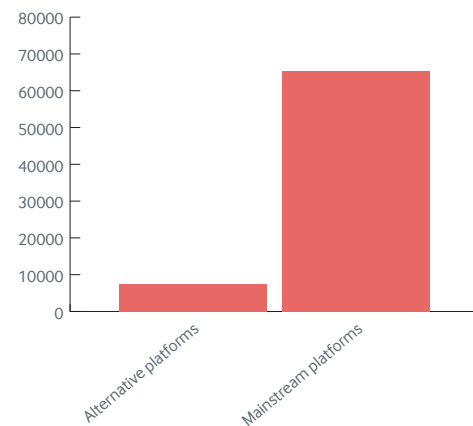
Next, we identified those from within our selected sample of far-right influencers and groups who had at least one account blocked on mainstream platforms, and compared how their follower numbers differed from our overall sample. With 9.9%,[52] the 11 influencers and groups which had at least one blocked mainstream social media account had in fact a lower proportion of followers on the alternative platforms compared to their reach on mainstream platforms than the overall sample of our 25 selected influencers and groups (11.3%); see Figure 20. This runs counter to the assumption that followers of far-right actors who are prevented from using mainstream social media platforms would follow these influencers and groups to new platforms.

In order to better understand how de-platforming of mainstream social media accounts correlates with the size of one's followership on alternative platforms, we drew a further distinction between influencers and groups who had their mainstream account with the most followers blocked and those who had one, but not their mainstream account with the most followers blocked, and compared their numbers with the influencers and groups that did not have any accounts blocked at all. We found that the far-right actors whose main account had been blocked by mainstream social media platforms had the least followers on alternative platforms compared with their audience on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube (8.9%). While the influencers and groups who had at least one but not their main account blocked on mainstream platforms had a higher proportion of followers on the alternative platforms than their reach on mainstream platforms (10.8%), we were surprised to find that far-right activists and groups whose accounts had not been blocked on mainstream platforms, and are therefore less dependent on alternative platforms, had relatively more followers on alternative platforms than their number of followers on mainstream social media.

Figure 20 The percentage of far-right influencers and groups from our sample whose accounts were blocked on mainstream platforms, were not blocked, and whose main channel was blocked
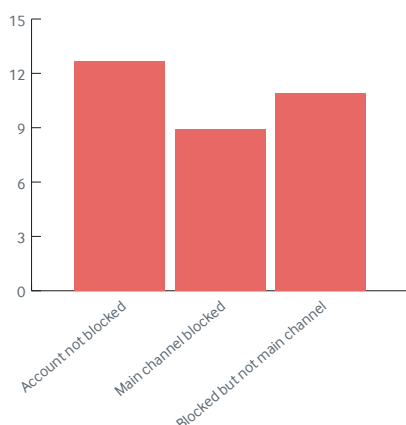
The results from our analysis ran counter to our expectation that the number of followers on alternative platforms would be significantly higher for influencers and groups who had been blocked on mainstream social media, as followers would in turn migrate to the alternative platform. What we found shows that this is not the case, as even the influencers and groups who had been blocked had on average much lower reach than they previously had on mainstream platforms. Our findings are preliminary, and are not based on longitudinal data about the development of follower numbers over time, but our analysis suggests the reach of far-right actors is considerably reduced when they are no longer allowed to use the big platform provided to them by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. While this points towards the potential of takedowns to limit effectively the reach of actors spreading hateful and extremist content, and combat their attempts to mainstream their ideas to broader audiences and normalise their rhetoric in the public discourse online, such repressive measures must be carefully weighed up with legal rights around freedom of expression.

We do not see any obvious reason why de-platforming could not also be used to reduce the reach of entirely legitimate political positions, and unfairly reduce the acceptable range of opinions that can be aired on mainstream social media platforms. Given the increasing importance of social media for public debate, this could present a severe threat to political pluralism and constitutionally granted rights.

1.8 The Interplay Between Alternative and Mainstream Media

Another significant part of the far-right online information ecosystem are alternative media outlets (alt-media). While trust in traditional media is declining,[53] over the past few years we have witnessed the emergence of an entire ecosystem of online newspapers, alternative media and blogs, which are attempting to compete with more established media outlets. These outlets often amplify far-right, anti-migrant and anti-progressive talking points and provide the content that can be shared on mainstream and alternative platforms.[54] Similar to alternative platforms, alt-media aim to establish alternatives to the traditional gatekeepers in the media, to undermine the credibility of what they view as the 'liberal-left' establishment media, and to shift public discourse towards the (far-)right. Beyond these commonalities, there is a great ideological diversity between alt-media outlets. While some of them might cover themes such as migration, multiculturalism and left-wing politics in a way that appeals to the far-right, they may not be far-right themselves. Others are clearly associated with Identitarian groups and other far-right movements.

We sought to explore the prominence of far-right narratives within alt-media and how it differs from professional news outlets. To do so, we used Media Cloud, a software developed by our partners at the MIT Civic Media Lab, which collects public data from online media. Among other things, Media Cloud allows researchers to track the attention specific themes have gathered from online media using keywords and Boolean queries through its 'Explorer' function.[55]

We selected a sample of 17 alternative and 13 mainstream media outlets for our analysis, which focused on five themes that are commonly discussed on alternative social platforms: conspiracy theories, concepts related to the Identitarian movement, migrant crime, fears of 'Islamisation' and attacks on political opponents (in particular the 'political class' as a whole), we investigated a time period between January and October 2019 and a total of 382,753 mainstream media articles and 32,343 alternative media articles. A detailed version of the methodology and the analysis can be found in Appendix E.

Figure 21 References to conspiracy theories (theme 1), in normalised percentage over time
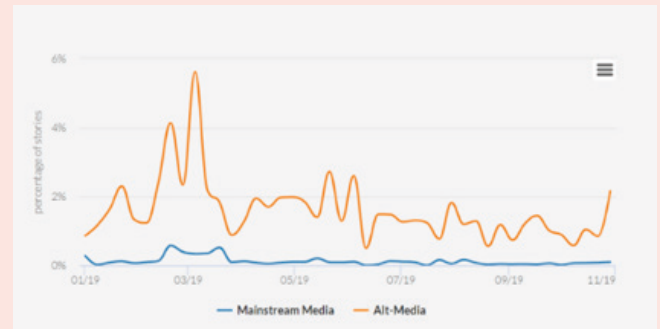

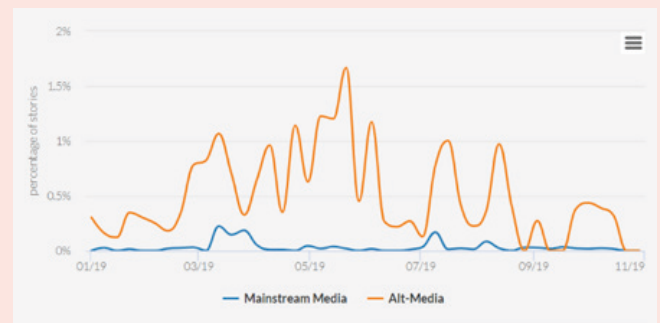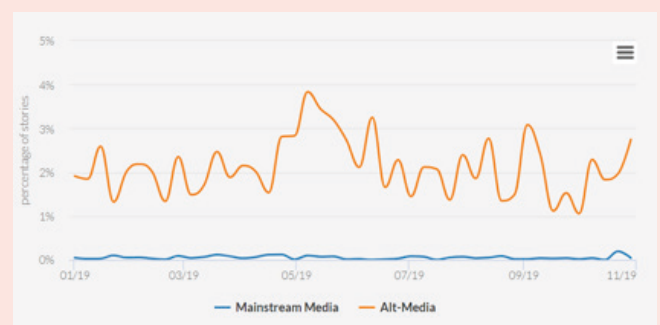**Figure 22** Usage of Identitarian terms over time (theme 2)

Figure 23 References to a supposed "Islamisation" over time (theme 3)

The analysis of the prominence of the five issue areas within alt-media and professional media resulted in three central findings: First, with the exception of the Identitarian concepts, all of these themes are mentioned in about 0.5-6% of all stories in our list of alternative media outlets, without ever becoming anywhere near as prominent in professional media.

Second, while alt-media create and sustain conversations without events that would be relevant enough on a national level, the data suggests that professional media coverage of these concepts is primarily event-driven. Looking at the example of our second theme, which includes key Identitarian concepts including different terminology about the "great replacement" myth, we can see that the volume of stories by alternative media outlets using these terms fluctuates over time. For professional media however, the terms are usually not used much, with the exception of a short spike following the Christchurch attack.

Third, an explorative analysis of the most prominent words within the coverage suggests, that the manner of coverage of the topics differs substantially between alt-media and professional media. Looking at the example of the Identitarian concepts, we see that the words are primarily connected with the Christchurch shooting (as the spike of coverage around the event already suggests). For alt-media, however, the shooting is not even referenced within the top 100 words.

Our analysis shows that our five topics received more coverage from alternative media than mainstream media, which covered them differently and much less frequently. However, more research is needed to assess how harmful these sites are. To highlight a few limitations: we need to keep in mind that the reach of alt-media is limited. In fact, even the maximum estimates suggest that only approximately 3% of Germans consume news from these pages.[56] Next, and contradictory to the popular echo chamber theory, it is important to acknowledge that these sites are usually not the only news source of their users but are consumed alongside mainstream media sources.[57]

Figure 24 Mentions of migrant crime over time (theme 4)
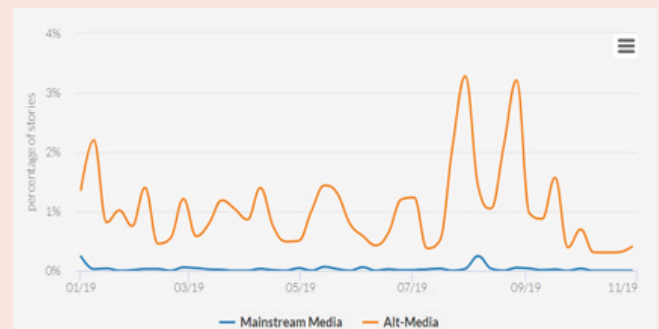
Figure 25 Usage of Identitarian terms over time (theme 2)
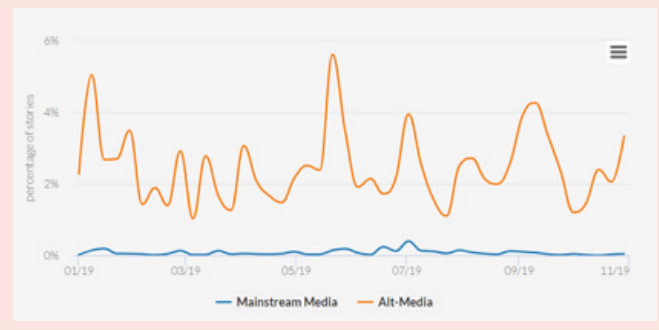
Alt-media do not build a separate and disconnected parallel information universe. Finally, it should be remembered that coming across one or several pieces of such content will not automatically convince readers of far-right ideas, especially if they already have established political opinions.[58]

But how does alt-media matter? First, it is important to highlight that its audience can grow substantially if it is shared on mainstream platforms like Facebook — which happened for example with Breitbart during the 2016 US election.[59] In Germany, the AfD has already attempted to co-operate with alt-media outlets.[60] The greatest strategic victory for these sites would be to hijack mainstream media successfully — which again was the case with Breitbart during the US election 2016.[61]

Second, it is well established that encountering extreme and polarising content can make users even more extreme in their attitudes. This holds true even when they are not stuck in a separate echo chamber. As research on political polarisation has shown, the combination of consuming like-minded content (alt-media) and exposure to diverging information can in fact harden a person's previously held political convictions.[62]

Third, it is important to understand not only how many but who these sites reach and affect. Studies show that consumers of such fringe websites are on average more politically interested and active. Also, AfD supporters rely on social media and alt-media more than average news consumers.[63] So even though alt-media does not have a direct impact on a massive audience yet, it might have a polarising effect on very politically active subgroups. This might lead to an increase of broader societal polarisation.[64]

2. Conclusion

There are two main challenges that could arise from the alternative ecosystem of the far-right. First, it could contribute to the radicalisation of individuals towards violent extremism, as has been demonstrated by the attacks in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle. Second, it could catalyse the (potential) mainstreaming of far-right ideology from these fringe spaces of the internet towards a broader mainstream audience.

As we demonstrate in our analysis, the far-right online ecosystem provides a constant stream of migrant crime, conspiracy theories and anti-establishment narratives. While most of the content we identified did not advocate violence, non-violent far-right content may nevertheless contribute to radicalisation processes. The importance placed on various versions of the 'great replacement' myth in the manifestos of recent far-right attackers in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle demonstrates that nominally non-violent ideas can inspire violent extremism and terrorism. More research needs to be conducted to explore the pathways that lead to the adoption of these non-violent far-right ideas, and in combination with which factors they may inspire violent attacks.

Our analysis shows that while the number of far-right channels and communities on alternative platforms is sizeable, the number of users active in them is a very small proportion of the general population. Similarly, only a minority of users online consume alternative media that amplifies far-right narratives and talking points. They do not garner a significant amount of attention from a substantial number of citizens. Although the exact number is impossible to determine, the communities we have found on the alternative platforms studied may have tens of thousands of members, and the alt-media websites are consumed by no more than 3% of Germans.[65]

To understand the relevance of these spaces for a broader audience, it is vital to understand how extreme ideologies can be pushed from the fringe into mainstream discourse. Research on the connections between fringe and mainstream platforms, which still have much larger audiences, needs to be further explored to better understand the interplay between them.

Entry points and the underlying mechanisms of distribution for far-right content and narratives on these platforms need to be identified.[66] Additionally, understanding the role of right-wing populist political parties such as the AfD and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ; Freedom Party of Austria) is crucial as they not only have a substantial audience online, but also have access to the platform provided by mainstream media. ISD's research tracking 'remigration' narratives showed how far-right ideology, once picked up by AfD and FPÖ politicians, can gain a level of attention that goes far beyond the reach of the Identitarian movement, with whom the term originates.[67]

Gaining the attention of mainstream audiences is considered a great strategic victory for far-right groups and influencers. It is crucial to understand how far-right actors try to influence the agenda of mainstream media, which retains broad reach and the ability to heavily influence the public and news agenda. This is especially true for a country like Germany, in which many people still rely on established media outlets when consuming online news.[68]

These alternative ecosystems of social media platforms and media outlets nevertheless can serve a number of crucial functions for the far-right, including the development and dissemination of far-right ideas, the radicalisation of already sympathetic users, and the provision of a space to organise themselves and build communities centred around far-right ideology.

The limited but genuine risks of potential radicalisation towards violence and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas created by the online far-right ecosystem raise a number of challenging questions. What would success look like in limiting the far-right's ability to reach broad audiences online? How far down the digital rabbit-hole should pressure be applied on platforms and far-right communities? How can a balance be achieved between protecting fundamental and legitimate rights to freedom of speech, and protecting the rights of those who are targeted, abused or attacked by online far-right users and communities? Do we have to accept that extremism and hate will likely continue to operate in fringe, private or encrypted corners of the internet as long as we also seek to protect rights to privacy?

Some counter-extremism policymakers and practitioners may suggest that alternative platforms are exactly the kind of online space where we may have to accept that elements of the far-right will operate. Many of these platforms are public, and can therefore be monitored by civil society and law enforcement where required, and as our analysis shows, the far-right's reach is significantly reduced when their accounts are removed by mainstream social media platforms. A balance needs to be achieved between limiting the far-right's influence online by applying further policy or regulatory pressure without forcing the entire far-right online ecosystem to move towards genuinely closed, private and ungoverned online spaces.

Any action taken in response to the far-right online ecosystem should address the two highlighted challenges of radicalisation and the mainstreaming of far-right ideology through targeted and proportionate measures, based on a careful and considerate balancing between trying to reduce harm effectively and not undermining fundamental rights. We should evaluate the impact of these measures not only by their effectiveness, but also by their potential impact on fundamental rights like freedom of speech, freedom of religious practice, freedom of the press and privacy. We seek to address the questions outlined above by making the following recommendations relating to the policy implications of our research, the role of civil society and potential further research.

3. Recommendations

3.1   Responding to illegal online content & activities

— **Mainstream platforms, international initiatives, and research organisations should strengthen partnerships with smaller alternative platforms to improve their capability to counter illegal terrorist or violent extremist content.**
The moderation of illegal content needs to be improved on alternative platforms. As outlined in Appendix A, the alternative platforms analysed in this report have adopted a wide range of community standards. While some of these platforms are ideologically opposed to moderating hate speech or extremist content, many may be willing to take further steps to moderate illegal violent extremist or terrorist content. The wider tech and research sectors can play an important role in addressing genuine capacity and resource gaps that smaller platforms may have. Initiatives like Tech Against Terrorism and the GIFCT have sought to develop capacity and resource-sharing practices between large technology companies and smaller platforms, and partnerships between smaller platforms and research organisations can provide them with much needed specialist insights into the groups that operate on their platforms. However, different strategies will be needed for libertarian platforms, especially those based in and only adhering to US law, as well as platforms created by those with ideological sympathies with the far-right.

— **Given the increasingly decentralised, post-organisational and 'crowdsourced' nature of far-right terrorism, enabled through the online far-right ecosystem, governments and policymakers must develop policy and legal frameworks that are not overly reliant on the proscription of terrorist or violent extremist *groups*.**
The attacks in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle symbolised the trend towards post-organisational forms of far-right terrorism: while the attackers had not or had only been very superficially involved with organised far-right groups or movements, they were deeply embedded in the ideology, symbolism, language and humour of the far-right subcultures found on platforms such as 4chan, 8chan and Gab.

Policymakers need to recognise and respond to the changing landscape and evolving organisational dynamics of far-right terrorism, and collaborate internationally with civil society and academia to develop shared definitions of and frameworks for the threat emanating from post-organisational forms of far-right terrorism. For example, existing private sector approaches towards countering terrorist content online, including the GIFCT, have largely and understandably relied on the official terrorism proscription lists of the UN. However, UN proscribed organisations are almost exclusively international Islamist terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS.

The onus therefore should be on democratic governments rather than private companies, in transparent consultation with researchers and civil society, to determine which far-right online influencers or communities meet the required legal thresholds for content or account removal. This would enable efforts such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) 'hashing' database, that ensures previously identified terrorist content cannot be re-uploaded, to include a more comprehensive and consistent list of content by, or supportive of, far-right terrorism and far-right terrorist groups or perpetrators, and provide added democratic legitimacy and accountability. This could begin with extreme right terrorist groups that have been proscribed by some national governments but not others, such as Atomwaffen Division, Combat 18 and Blood & Honour.

— **It is of central importance to increase victim support for public and private figures and ensure the proper application and enforcement of laws in relation to harassment, hate speech, and libel online.**
Digital activities or campaigns designed to harass, intimidate, and silence public and private figures have become an increasingly important tactic of the international far-right's playbook. Typically planned and coordinated by far-right communities on alternative platforms, these tactics often disproportionately target women and minorities, and can have a significant 'chilling effect' on legitimate speech and political participation.[69]

In order to deter these attempts to drive political opponents out of online discourse, existing laws in relation to harassment, hate speech, and libel must be properly enforced online. Effective and proactive enforcement would remove the onus on victims to take action themselves. Governments should make it a priority to audit the application of such laws online and ensure there are fewer impediments to their enforcement. In the context of the increasing abuse and attacks on public and private figures, legal and psycho-social support for victims of online harassment and libel is crucial. The financial support provided by the Federal Justice Ministry (BMJV) to Hate Aid, a civil society organisation which provides exactly this type of support to the victims of online hate speech, is therefore a promising sign.[70]

3.2   Responding to legal but potentially harmful online content and activities

— **Alongside existing legislation tackling illegal *content,* the German government should explore a proportional, risk-based 'duty of care' approach to regulating platform operators to encourage a greater focus on user safety.**
While NetzDG, which legally obliges platforms to remove content that is 'manifestly illegal' within 24 hours of being notified, focuses on the removal of illegal content, it is not designed to tackle the majority of legal but potentially harmful content we identified as one of the major features of far-right communities on alternative platforms. Extending the law to include the smaller alternative platforms covered in this report will likely not be workable in many instances. Platforms lacking the same capacities and resources as the major social media platforms may not be able to moderate illegal content on their platforms as is required from major platforms under NetzDG.

NetzDG also has a narrow focus on *content* moderation and removal, leaving inherent and undesirable system-level issues unaddressed. Features common across a wide range of platforms that are intended to maximise attention and create dense networks of similar content or likeminded users can inadvertently serve to amplify legal but harmful content, connect users across the far-right spectrum, and enable coordinated harassment and abuse. As Mark Zuckerberg himself has noted, "when left unchecked, people will engage disproportionately with more sensationalist and provocative content".[71]

We argue that policymakers must also focus digital policy solutions on these structural issues. A 'duty of care' approach, as has been developed by William Perrin and Professor Lorna Woods for Carnegie UK Trust,[72] and been proposed in the UK's *Online Harms White Paper,*[73] could be designed to place a proportionate responsibility on platform operators for the wellbeing of their users and their protection against anticipated or potential risks, such as radicalisation, abuse or harassment, in accordance with their size and technical capabilities.[74] This would create incentives for companies to design their platforms, products, and processes with a greater focus on user safety and the reduction of online harms, including the abuse of existing and emerging technologies by the far-right, for example by not prioritising legal far-right content in content or channel recommendations.

While there remain several unanswered questions in terms of how such a regulatory environment would operate (e.g. the challenges of scope, international jurisdictional issues, defining cross-sectoral Codes of Practice, and the necessary range of enforcement powers and sanctions as outlined in ISD's response to the UK Government's Online Harms White Paper consultation)[75], in our view the duty of care approach represents the most promising current proposal for broader regulation of online platforms.

— **Although our research highlights the potential of de-platforming measures to limit the reach of far-right groups, and thereby their ability to mainstream their ideas, more research is needed on the potential unintended consequences of such actions.**
Further research is needed on the potential unintended consequences of de-platforming measures. In particular, there remains a lack of evidence demonstrating whether or how such repressive measures reduce the likelihood of radicalisation of influencers and their followers. Some research on extreme-right violence even suggests that repressive measures taken against far-right opinions may be correlated with increased levels of extreme-right violence.[76] Additionally, the impact of de-platforming on wider audiences beyond the far-right also merits further investigation, as research has suggested that the perception that communications norms are too restrictive may predict support for right-wing populist politicians.[77] Lastly, it would need to be empirically tested whether de-platforming measures have the desired impact of limiting the exposure of mainstream audiences to online far-right communities.

Such repressive measures intended to protect the fundamental rights of minorities and other targets of far-right violence, harassment and abuse must be carefully balanced with the protection of fundamental rights of freedom of expression, within the law. Otherwise, there is a risk that users' ability to express entirely legitimate political positions will be limited, and the acceptable range of opinions that can be aired on mainstream social media platforms will be unfairly reduced.

— **Where de-platforming measures are used, platforms need to communicate their decision-making processes in a consistent, justifiable and understandable manner, and provide greater transparency around opportunities for redress.**
While NetzDG requires platforms to remove illegal content, the decision to de-platform far-right influencers is often made in accordance with platforms' own policies and community standards, unless they are officially proscribed.

In the context of our findings about the potential of de-platforming to limit the reach of far-right influencers, these decisions by platforms need to be made in a consistent, justifiable and understandable manner. Given the increasing importance of social media for public debate, private companies need to avoid perceptions of being unfairly politically biased or repressive of legal and legitimate speech. Additionally, greater transparency needs to be provided around the opportunities for those who believe they have been unjustly de-platformed to make an informed appeal against the decision. While progress has been made in improving the levels of independence and transparency around company moderation processes and practices, initiatives such as Facebook's proposed Oversight Board remain in development.[78] ISD has proposed a framework and specific technological transparency requirements for complaints and redress that could help build accountability and enhance the public's understanding of content moderation decisions.[79]

3.3   Civil Society and Frontline Practitioner Responses

— **Different types of proactive, non-regulatory interventions should be trialled and tested on alternative platforms. These must be tailored specifically to each platform, including consideration of the thematic interests, platform subculture, technical functionality and level of potential risks and unintended consequences.**
While most of the users of alternative platforms will of course not take up violence, the increased tempo and severity of far-right attacks in recent years highlights the role these platforms can play in radicalisation processes. Beyond regulatory solutions to the amplification of legal but harmful content, and the removal of illegal content, it is vital to compete with, challenge and dissuade far-right ideologies and behaviours through different forms of online interventions.

These could include one-to-one online messaging between radicalised individuals and qualified intervention providers, one-to-many communications such as participating in online forums, or a range of efforts to disrupt or discredit far-right online communities. To date, none of these approaches has been systematically trialled and tested on alternative platforms, representing a major gap in our collective response. As pilots, including those delivered by ISD, on mainstream platforms such Facebook have demonstrated however, online interventions can succeed in establishing sustained engagement with radicalised individuals.[80] In fact, intervention providers working with radicalised individuals are increasingly taking interventions online, as well as directly initiating contact with apparently radicalised individuals.[81]

Far-right ideologies and movements manifest in a variety of ways on these platforms, and a universal approach is therefore bound to fail, but this diversity also potentially offers opportunities for interventions. As our analysis of users' motivations for joining 4chan, Gab and Discord, and our comparison of the most prominent themes on the platforms show, there are ideological disagreements between and within platforms and online far-right online communities. However, given the heightened potential for counter-productive efforts in alternative online spaces, responses will need to be tailored towards specific audiences on particular platforms on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, users of some alternative platforms have been associated with violent attacks, thereby representing a greater risk of triggering unintended consequences. The tone of online outreach efforts most likely to lead to engagement will depend on the architecture and functions of platforms, and the culture and types of discussions that feature within certain communities. Interventions that may work in a direct messaging format may not be appropriate for forums based around public discussions. All these factors need to be considered when designing and delivering online interventions with individuals showing signs of radicalisation on alternative platforms.

Counter-narrative campaigns, on other hand, are typically ineffective with radicalised individuals unless combined with pro-active and constructive engagement. Additionally, they appear ill-suited to the subcultural dynamics of the far-right online, such as the transgressive humour, cynicism and meme culture found on platforms such as 4chan. Additionally, the evidence-base for the traditional format of 'counter-narratives', which aim to undermine extremist communications online, suggests their impact may be strongest when trying to inoculate users who are not already radicalised or sympathetic to extremist messaging.[82] For far-right users on alternative platforms, this would likely come too late, and risk a backlash against the creators of counter-narrative content and campaigns in the form of trolling and harassment.

— **Researchers should explore the potential of early warning systems for civil society groups and 'soft targets' that combine ethnographic monitoring with technology to identify specific threats posted on alternative platforms.**
In combination with ethnographic monitoring, machine learning technologies such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) can help identify specific threats, especially against targeted individuals or 'soft targets' such as community centeres, religious institutions or activist groups originating on alternative platforms. Although partly automated analyses of user generated content pose genuine concerns over privacy, data sharing and surveillance, they could help to identitfy risks to vulnerable individuals and groups targeted by the far-right if sensitively managed with appropriate procedures and safeguards in place. Researchers could use this data to produce meaningful outputs for communities to understand their risk and take precautions against far-right mobilisation and coordination if concerning content is identified. This data could also be used to provide rapid notification and longer-term strategic briefings to houses of worship and other potential soft-targets.

— **Provide updated or additional safeguarding training for intervention providers, youth workers, parents, teachers and staff of other public institutions to ensure they are aware that participation in far-right communities on these online platforms may constitute an increased risk of radicalisation.**
Individuals spending significant periods of time in these groups are exposed to a constant stream of dehumanising and aggressive content about migrant crime, conspiracy theories and narratives that seek to dehumanise other groups and create a sense of urgency, in the form of a loss of identity and community, to galvanise violent actions. Many former participants in the online far-right ecosystem, such as Caleb Cain[83] Katie McHugh[84] and Samantha (last name unknown),[85] have recently recounted their experiences of being drawn into far-right groups, and the negative impact this had on them. Therefore, providing training and up-to-date information to intervention providers and others working with at-risk individuals to help them to identify the types of platforms and online communities that may pose a safeguarding risk as sources of harmful content, behaviour and community dynamics. Former extremists can play a key role in delivering such training in a credible and impactful way. Their voices need to be amplified through initiatives such as the Against Violent Extremism[86] (AVE) Network, so their experiences can inform preventative responses.

3.4 Further Research

Further cross-platform research of the uses, networks, audiences and cultures that exist not just within, but between platforms, is required to build the evidence base required to design effective responses.
This report provides an overview of the ecosystem of platforms serving different purposes for the far-right online, and demonstrates that influencers and users alike are typically active on multiple platforms. In the context of political pressure and repressive measures by the major platforms, it seems conceivable that the online landscape of platforms used by the far-right will splinter further, leading to a greater decentralisation of users, at least temporarily.

It is therefore crucial to conduct more cross-platform research into the uses, networks, audiences and cultures that exist not just within but across platforms. While researching dynamics and networks within certain platforms will continue to be of great value, the ecosystem-nature of platforms used by the far-right necessitates a greater focus on understanding cross-platform dynamics. In particular, mapping the URL's and shortlinks provided by the bigger alternative platforms within the far-right's ecosystem, such as Telegram, VK and 4chan's /pol/ board, would contribute to our understanding of where users are being directed from these hubs. Research done on the shortlinks shared on pro-ISIS channels on Telegram, has demonstrated how the group's use of multiple platforms allow Islamist extremists to evade the impact of crackdowns and content takedown on any individual platform, and continually distribute content.[87] Only with a fuller understanding of these online spaces, and the far-right communities they host, will policymakers be in a position to respond proportionately and effectively.

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Appendices

Appendix A Platform Descriptions

4chan

Origin	4chan was originally founded to share anime images, but has become an important gathering point for far-right users, from the early 2010s onwards, especially on the /pol/ board.[88]
Function	The site allows users to join message boards, begin new threads, share images and make comments on a variety of topics. It has been instrumental in pushing 'memes' as a form of content communication.
Usage	Previously unrestricted policies around what could and could not be discussed and shared on the platform led to a litany of hateful and bigoted message boards being created ranging from anti-Muslim, antisemitic to anti-LGBTQ and misogynistic. The site is now used by alt-right and far-right sympathisers to co-ordinate online 'raids' on mainstream social media platforms.
Community standards	While the community standards differ across the various boards within 4chan, there are several boards which explicitly set no other content rules than US law and encourage users to 'speak your mind' (with a few exceptions like the ban of advertising, which is always in place).[89] Some commitment to the removal of extremist content was shown for example in the context of 'Gamergate', which led to a user migration towards 8chan. Moderation is enacted by a system of volunteers and the platform itself.[90] 4chan does not provide public transparency about their content removal and/or banning process and its outcomes. It is possible to appeal against a ban from the platform.

Reddit

Origin	Reddit is a social news aggregation, web content rating and discussion thread website created for online communication (often between anonymised users).
Function	Users can submit content such as links, text posts and images to the site, which can then be up-voted or down-voted by other members.
Usage	Reddit increased its content removal policy after controversy over 'Gamergate', and the exposure of highly offensive threads that were presenting the site as a place for abusive and violent speech. The site gained particular notoriety during the lead up the 2016 US presidential elections with the notorious subreddit 'r/The_Donald' (which was quarantined in June 2016 for repeated comments inciting violence), in which alt-right users created pro-Trump and anti-Clinton memes for distribution on mainstream social media platforms.[92]
Community standard	Reddit has content policies in place which go beyond legal requirements and include offences like harassment and bullying. As mentioned above, it has tightened its policies recently. NSFW (not safe for work)[93] tagging of content is required if necessary. Moderation is enacted by a systems of volunteers. Reddit publishes a yearly transparency report, which gives an overview of the content moderation requests and removals.[94] The report is very detailed on some levels (e.g. gives a breakdown of governmental removal requests), but lacks important details on other levels (e.g. a breakdown per category of reported content violations vs violations the company acted on). It is possible to appeal against a ban from the platform.

Appendix A Platform Descriptions

8chan

Origin	Created with a similar objective to 4chan, but with greater leniency on content removal policies.
Function	Allows users to create message boards, join message boards, create new threads, comment on pre-existing ones, and share images and text with other users.
Usage	Influential during 'Gamergate' as a space where misogynistic users were able to interact and co-ordinate. It is used by extreme-right and white nationalist communities to discuss topics and threads that were previously banned on 4chan for being too offensive. 8chan gained major international attention after the Christchurch attacker posted a thread from which he linked to his 'manifesto' and a livestream of the attacks.
Community standards	8chan allows the creation of new boards including the setting of board rules, so the community standards differ across the various boards. The only 'global' (across all boards) content rule is compliance with US law; the company highlights that it will only act on illegal content. The platform describes itself as unmoderated, but has a system of board owners and volunteers in place to moderate illegal content. 8chan does not provide public transparency about their content removal and/or banning process and its outcomes. It is possible to appeal against a ban from the platform.[95]

Telegram

Origin	The messaging service was designed by the VK founder Pavel Durov to provide users with secure communication and avoid government observation. Today it has 200 million monthly active users, and is the most used 'alternative' platform within this list.
Function	An instant-messaging service and voice over Internet Protocol service that allows users to access public channels anonymously, and send encrypted messages to other users.
Usage	Telegram has gained considerable media attention after being used by Islamist extremists to radicalise new members and co-ordinate terror attacks. The public channels allow groups such as ISIS to reach supporters and sympathisers from around the world with their latest propaganda and instructional materials. A study by the Georgetown University's Program on Extremism uncovered 636 Telegram pro-Islamic State channels that contained English language propaganda.[96]
Community standards	Telegram has some content policies in place covering public illegal content.[97] They explicitly highlight that they do not apply to what they consider 'local restrictions on freedom of speech', without much further explanation of what they perceive this to be.[98] The company has made efforts to ban ISIS related channels, including co-operating with Europol in late 2019 and provide some limited transparency around it. Private messaging is unaffected by any content policies.[99]

Appendix A Platform Descriptions

Discord

Origin	Discord was designed for gamers to communicate with each other while playing multi-player games in a way that was distinct from the channels provided by gaming consoles or platforms.
Function	A free software, designed for gaming communities, that specialises in text and audio communication between users in a chat channel.
Usage	The site hosts a number of far-right channels, including those that helped alt-right and white supremacists in the US to co-ordinate the 2017 Charlottesville rally. There is also a channel called Reconquista Germania, which was set up to disrupt the German election, as revealed in ISD's publications *The Fringe Insurgency* [100] and *Hass auf Knopfdruck [Hate at the touch of a button]*.[101] The anonymised channels provide a space for the far-right to discuss tactics for radicalising new members and disseminating their propaganda across mainstream platforms.
Community standards	Discord's content policies go beyond strict legal requirements and cover offences like harassment and defamation.[102] The company provides some explanation of what is covered under these rules, but it is not very detailed. The transparency report published by Discord gives an overview of the content moderation procedures, removal requests and enacted removals.[103] The categories are relatively broad and summarise for example personal insults and hate speech within one category, which limits the information value. The responsiveness towards complaints varies substantially across categories (e.g. 13% harassment vs 95% spamming).

Minds

Origin	Minds was created to integrate crowdfunding, cryptocurrency and rewards into a social network that was intended for internet users who wanted greater transparency of data usage and fewer restrictions on content and speech.
Function	A message and content-sharing site, which has a built-in monetisation function. It has encrypted chat messaging with private passwords and is designed as a response to the restrictions placed on Facebook.
Usage	Minds' messaging calls users to 'Take back your Internet freedom', and provides a censorship-free space for users to post and share messages and content that would otherwise be removed from mainstream platforms. Far-right, alt-right and white supremacist users from US, UK and European use the platform. The German groups are much smaller, with the most prominent self-described 'patriotic' group reaching almost 1,000 members, but it has low levels of activity. It is hard to find any channels with more than a few hundred subscribers.
Community standards	In accordance with its self-declared mission of 'internet freedom' Minds does not apply any content policies which go beyond the minimum of US law.[104] NSFW tagging is required not only for content like porn or violence, but also for 'sensitive commentary' about race, religion and gender. The company provides a relatively transparent overview about its procedures on how to handle violations of its policies, but does not provide additional transparency in the form of statistics or other information.[105]

Appendix A Platform Descriptions

Voat

Origin	Voat was created for the users of Reddit, 2chan, 4chan and 8chan who had seen their threads removed for harassment and abusive language or content.
Function	A messaging forum and social network platform, which aggregates news and provides a platform for community members to submit multimedia content without limitations.
Usage	As the site administrators do not enforce any content moderation, the platform has been used by the far-right in the US and UK to express violent views on minorities and promote their ideologies. The site contains a substantial amount of antisemitic, anti-Muslim, racist and misogynist commentary and conspiracy theories. The interface is similar to that of more popular messaging forums such as 4chan, but receives considerably less media attention and user activity.
Community standards	Voat allows the creation of new subforums, and the setting of rules for each specific subverse, so the community standards differ across the platform.[106] The only platform-wide content rule is compliance with US law, and the company highlights that it will only act on illegal content.[107] Moderation of illegal content is enacted by volunteer moderators and the company itself. Voat provides a detailed interface for every subverse about moderation decisions like banned users, removed submissions and removed comments, but lacks similar statistics for the platform as a whole.

Gab

Origin	Gab was created with the intention of providing a space for internet users who had been removed from, or felt restricted by, mainstream sites' stricter content policies.
Function	Users can read and write messages up to 300 characters long called 'gabs' and share multimedia content.
Usage	Gab allows groups and individuals who have been removed from Twitter to continue to promote their messages using a similar format and interface design. Fringe and populist politicians such as the far-right UK politician Anne Marie Waters (PEGIDA UK and For Britain) and AfD members in Germany use the site. There is also an active alt-right, white supremacists and Identitarian user base on Gab, whose members use it to develop lines of communication and collaboration between the far-right across Europe and North America.
Community standards	Gab does not apply any content policies which go beyond the legally required minimum of US law. It describes the US First Amendment as the guideline for moderation decisions. Users only lose access if they undertake illegal activity and can re-join if they are able to prove that the contested activity was not against the law.[108] The company provides a relatively transparent overview about its procedures on how to handle violations of its policies, but no transparency in the form of reports or statistics. Moderation is enacted by the platform.

Appendix A Platform Descriptions

BitChute

Origin	Created to host videos and content that were being censored by YouTube, it also hosts general entertainment content.
Function	A peer-to-peer content-sharing platform where users can upload and share videos, using much the same interface and approach as YouTube.
Usage	The site claims it was created in response to internet censorship and has attracted far-right and conspiracy theory content creators. It has a smaller user base than PewTube but numerous alt-right and far-right influencers in the UK, US and Germany have established profiles on the site. Moderation is enacted by the platform.
Community standards	BitChute restricts its content policies to the legally required minimum of US law and might sometimes also implement local restrictions on illegal content (such as child abuse or terrorist material) and on occasions has also implemented geographical restrictions of the availability of content to comply with certain national laws.[109] Moderation is enacted by staff members. Tagging of sexually explicit, offensive and violent content is required. The platform provides limited public transparency about its content removal and/or banning processes and their outcomes. It is possible to appeal against a ban from the platform.

VK

Origin	VK was created by a Russian student, Pavel Durov, in 2006. After Durov refused to shut down activist pages during protest critical of the Russian government in 2011, he was pressured into selling his shares of the company to corporations and business-people loyal to the Kremlin.[110] Durov was fired as the CEO of VK in 2014, after refusing to hand over data about protestors in the Ukraine, and left Russia. While living in exile, he created the instant-messaging platform Telegram.[111] Nevertheless, VK continues to be the most visited website in Russia, with its user count exceeding that of Facebook.
Function	VK has many functions similar to Facebook, such as a news feed, groups, messaging, and like and comment buttons.
Usage	Although VK was not designed to host extremist content, it has attracted far-right extremist actors, whose presence on the platform seems to be tolerated. VK is far from a free speech zone, however: the site censors relatively innocuous memes supposedly offending the feelings of religious believers, which is illegal under Russian law.[112]
Community standards	VK's content policies go beyond Russian legal requirements and also cover offences like racism and religious hatred.[113] However, the platform does not provide details as to what is covered under these rules, and only provides limited public transparency about the site's content removal and/or banning process and its outcomes.

Appendix B Extended Method Section for the size of the Far-Right Online Communities

Inclusion Criteria

To avoid misclassifying groups or individuals, our researchers relied on the following guidelines in order to decide whether or not a community, channel, group or influencer met the threshold for inclusion in our sample of far-right actors on alternative platforms:

— We included known communities, channels, groups and influencers that belonged to known far-right organisations or individuals. Apart from organisations known to our researchers from previous projects looking at the far-right, we used the annual reports by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution,[114] Germany's domestic intelligence service, and the list of key groups, campaigns and media outlets associated with the German 'new right' by the journalists Christian Fuchs and Paul Middlehoff. [115]

— We included communities, channels, groups and influencers when they repeatedly and affirmatively shared the content of known far-right organisations or expressed support for them.

— We included the groups and individuals in question if they posted content that clearly fell under Mudde's definition of the far-right, exhibiting at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy.[116]

— In cases where the communities, channels, groups and influencers shared content by organisations or individuals not previously known to us, we conducted an open-source search investigation to find out more about their ideological background, and whether they would fall under Mudde's definition of the far-right outlined above.

— We also included communities, channels, groups and influencers when they repeatedly posted hate speech according to the definition found in Facebook's community standards, which define hate speech 'as a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity and serious disease or disability'. This includes 'some protections for immigration status'. Attacks are defined 'as violent or dehumanising speech, statements of inferiority, or calls for exclusion or segregation'.[117]

The researchers noted down the justification for the inclusion of all selected communities, channels, groups and influencers, which were then confirmed by a second researcher.

Collection Process

For this research we aimed to analyse both purely German-language communities, groups and channels belonging to the far-right as well as far-right international communities discussing Germany.

Data collection is one of the major challenges in studying extremism online and because of the secretive nature of the subject, it will always be difficult to know whether all relevant data points were included. For this research project this meant that we could never be sure that we were able to find every community, group and channel we were looking for.

To deal with this challenge and to increase the recall of our data collection and make it as systematic as possible, we followed these three steps:

1) study previous ISD research on far-right online communities, groups and channels

2) create keyword lists of vocabulary associated with the far-right online using platform search functions

3) building on the first two steps, undertake a manual 'snowball' search on each platform.

First, we drew on ISD's experience of monitoring the far-right's usage of social media, and the propaganda campaigns they had organised and conducted over several years. Using our knowledge from gained from working on previous research projects on the German federal elections of 2017, the Bavarian state elections of 2018 and the European parliamentary elections of 2019, we included organisations, groups and influencers which were operating accounts on one or more of these alternative platforms. We also looked at whether groups and influencers known to us mainly from mainstream social media platforms had created new communities, groups or channels, or whether we might have missed these as the alternative platforms had not been the main focus of our analysis.

Second, we used the search function of each of the alternative platforms to look for specific keywords associated with far-right conversations online. These keyword lists were again taken from ISD's previous research projects looking at the space over the past years, or expertise in far-right ideologies and our ongoing monitoring of developments and debates within different far-right movements. In order to ensure the task of identifying relevant communities, groups and channels remained feasible for our researchers, we reduced the number of keywords we would use to 25 German and 10 English keywords.

Although the search function of each platform was crucial for us in identifying new influencers, communities and channels, it is important to note that their functionality could conceivably limit or even bias our findings.

For example, we did not understand how the search function of Telegram works, how its output is determined, how comprehensive the results it shows us are and what type of results it does not produce. Additionally, we have no way of assessing how the search functions, their capacities and their limitations differ between the platforms we were investigating. Again, it is possible that Reddit provides us with a much more comprehensive picture of communities, groups and channels that would meet our criteria than Gab or Minds. The search functions are indeed black boxes for us. The 'blind spot of the digital publics' described by Sängerlaub in relation to the difficulty of systematically analysing major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram exists very much with regard to alternative platforms as well.[118]

Third, we conducted manual searches within each of the alternative platforms, starting from communities, groups and channels identified through the steps described above. As it is very common for these communities or users within them to recommend or link to other similar communities, we were able to snowball from our initially identified set of communities, and build a more comprehensive picture of the number of potentially relevant communities for our research.

Again, to ensure this task would remain feasible for our researchers, we agreed in advance that they would stop looking for further communities, groups and channels if they had not been able to identify a new one for more than one hour. Thereby, we took care that this process could not be prolonged endlessly, while also ensuring that the resulting list of communities was arrived at by following a standardised procedure.

Date Range of Data Collection
A team of four ISD researchers identified communities and collected the subsequent data between 2 and 26 September 2019. Therefore, the exact collection date per platform differs.

Appendix C Extended Method Section for Themes Within Far-right Communities Using Alternative Platforms

One of our key areas of interest during this research was to identify the main themes and narratives that are being discussed across the far-right's online ecosystem. A few issues arise with regard to trying to classify the ideological leanings of online communities on these different platforms. While some of the channels we identified as far-right on these platforms, for example on Telegram, are based around one influencer sharing content with his or her followers (one to many), other communities, for example on Gab or VK, allow members of groups or even non-members to post and thereby shape the conversation. Additionally, even on Telegram, channel administrators have the opportunity to create a comment section below specific pieces of content. The extent to which channel administrators use this function varies between channels and over time. This has consequences for the degree to which individual communities, groups or channels can be seen as ideologically coherent. Especially within groups and forums that do not put up any barriers to participation, contradictory positions may be expressed. Within one VK group that we were monitoring, there was a constant back and forth between supporters and opponents of the Identitarian movement from within the broader far-right.

As many of the communities, groups and channels we identified had some level of ideological disagreement, we decided instead of coding entire communities as a whole, to code for themes of individual posts within our overall set of far-right communities, groups and channels.

There are number of fundamental differences with regard to the architecture of the alternative platforms we were analysing and the way the far-right uses them. For example, since users on 4chan post on certain boards, which have a reputation for transgressive humour, provocative memes and at the very least tolerance for far-right ideas, user-created communities do not play a major role on 4chan. Communication on these boards takes place in a space that is clearly designed to be public, even though most users post anonymously.

Telegram on the other hand does not provide shared public spaces, where all users could enter into conversation with each other. Instead, channels or groups need to be established, and other users need to join them in order to take part in discussions or view the content that is being shared by channel administrators.

Therefore, it makes little sense to compare the number of communities on platforms like 4chan (fewer, but relatively large public forums) with platforms like Telegram (innumerable channels, with varied levels of size, barriers for entry and plausible presumption of privacy). Thus we have treated 4chan as a distinct type of platform, for which we have added an extra section in which we analyse its different forms of racist discourse.

Furthermore, our ability to scrape the content of some of these platforms in a manner that would produce comparable data was limited by ethical, legal and technical constraints. Minds is designed not to be scraped and to do so would be against its terms of service. VK has an official application programming interface (API) more geared towards commercial actors, and an unofficial API. Using this scraper violates the platforms terms of service, however. Discord is a predominantly private means of communication and for many channels requires explicit permission to access, and it is unclear whether scraping the site is against its terms of service. It is similarly unclear whether scraping violates the terms of service of Telegram. Voat has a poorly documented API with few guidelines, resulting in a lack of clarity around overall feasibility of scraping the platform. Although scraping Reddit would have been possible, the small size and low level of activity of the few far-right communities we identified on the platform did not suggest it would be worth scraping them. Cloudflare ceased to provide technical support for 8chan after the far-right terrorist attacks in El Paso. Crimson Hexagon provided scraping capacities for 4chan, which we used to conduct a more in-depth analysis of anti-minority speech in the Germany-focused Kraut/pol/ threads (see Appendix D).

In order to compare the prominence of specific themes across these different alternative platforms despite these constraints, we manually coded each of the last ten posts per community selected for analysis. We restricted the number of communities analysed to a maximum of 30 per platform, and chose the largest among these. As a number of communities we identified in the earlier section are in fact quite small, it seemed justified to exclude for example BitChute channels that only receive a few dozen views per video, though it should be noted that we thereby excluded a number of particularly extreme, neo-Nazi channels, especially on Telegram. However, the follower numbers on these neo-Nazi channels likely overlap, as channels often advertise for each other. There are entire lists of neo-Nazi groups, bands and events being shared on these channels, which often have very similar follower counts. It thus seems conceivable that we effectively excluded channels from further analysis that are quite similar to each other, and share a lot of followers.

As the level of activity differs significantly between different groups and communities, the time period during which these posts were published ranged from January 2019 to November 2019, even though they cluster in the latter half of the year, when the analysis was conducted.

For each of the communities, groups and channels we had included for further analysis, we coded ten posts into themes, thereby enabling us to assess whether certain issues were more widely discussed on some platforms than on others. Overall, ISD coded almost 1,000 posts over this time period. A sample was coded independently by two fluent German-language analysts at ISD based on a framework of the topics selected (listed in section 'Themes Within Far-right Communities Using Alternative Platforms') in order to determine the proportion of conversations on alternative platforms about topics of particular importance to the far-right.

It needs to be highlighted that there are clear limitations of this analysis. The ten posts we extracted from the different communities sometimes cover a time period of less than an hour, sometimes of several months.

Sometimes they might belong to a single user, sometimes to ten different users. The extracted data samples therefore differ substantially from each other. However, we could not extract bigger data samples because of the difficulties of data access discussed above. We therefore want to underline the explorative character our analysis, which sheds some light into a large number of formerly under-researched spaces, but which should not be taken as a completely accurate reflection of them.

Appendix D Extended Method Section for Case Study 2, Analysis of Anti-minority Content on 4chan

Concepts and Operationalisation

As we learned from our analysis of the motivations for joining different alternative platforms, anti-minority hatred was a key motivator given by users who had become active on 4chan. As has often been by observers of the platform, conversations on 4chan and on the now-defunct 8chan are often characterised by in-jokes, obscure references, cynicism and irony, making it difficult for outsiders to know when users actually mean what they say and when they are 'just trying to make a joke'. One of the first things researchers instantly notice when entering 4chan is how vulgar much of the discourse on the platform is. Slur terms and insults, including racist, antisemitic and misogynist attacks, are an essential part of the discussions on the platform, especially on 4chan's infamous /pol/ (politically incorrect) board.

Given the overwhelming presence of various types of hateful content, we decided that instead of differentiating between hateful and non-hateful posts, we would like to investigate the presence of posts which go beyond the use of slur terms. While the wide-spread casual usage of such terms is of course reflective of tolerance for discriminatory language, as well as a toxic discussion culture on the platform, there is nevertheless an important difference between the different ways in which these terms are used on 4Chan.

We wanted to look at content which also (or instead) included ideological elements or narratives of a dehumanising 'othering' mindset that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights (in line with ISD's definition of extremism). We therefore relied on the IHRA definition and examples of antisemitism to identify such ideological elements or narratives within our data.

We used International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition and examples of antisemitism as a guide for classifying 'relevant' (includes antisemitic ideological elements or narratives) and 'irrelevant' (does not include antisemitic ideological elements or narratives) mentions of Jews. Based on the specific material of 4chan posts we were analysing, we added guidelines that were slightly different to the examples provided by the IHRA definition as well. As mentioned above, we classified the mere use of slur terms which did not reference such antisemitic ideological elements or narratives as 'irrelevant'. Additionally, when multiple interpretations of a statement were possible, at least one of which would not meet our threshold for antisemitism, we also coded the post as 'irrelevant'. This often was the case when the use of irony made posts difficult to interpret or because there was a lack of context. Although we classified some statements about Israel as antisemitic in line with the examples in the IHRA definition, we coded descriptive conversation about Israeli government policies or its rivalry with other states (e.g. Israel did x, Iran did y) as 'irrelevant' as well. Lastly, we coded all other content that was not clearly relevant as 'irrelevant'.

Data collection
Using Crimson Hexagon, a commercially available tool for analysing social media, we were able to access all posts and comments between 30 November 2017 and 30 November 2019 that contained the phrase 'Kraut/pol/' and the URL 'boards.4chan.org'. 'Kraut/pol/' is one of the main hubs for Germany-focused far-right discussions we had identified in previous research projects on 4chan's /pol/ board. The data collection we accessed is based on a daily scraping conducted by Crimson Hexagon and includes all content from 4chan's most active forums going back to late 2016.

Our query resulted in some 77,000 posts, which we exported in individual batches of 10,000 posts (Crimson Hexagon's maximum for exporting posts at once), and merged the resulting files together to create our dataset for analysis.

Method 52
We uploaded the 77,000 posts into Method 52 for further analysis. Method 52 is a software platform for analysing unstructured text. One of Method 52's core functions is to allow researchers to train 'classifiers'. These are algorithms which process natural language documents, and can be taught to make distinctions within those documents according to the terms they contain. The training process is designed to allow the algorithm, at scale, to learn to make choices which would traditionally need to be guided by a human researcher; for example, given a 4chan post, whether that post represents an 'othering' mindset with regards to a particular group. This approach has proven to be extremely helpful in determining how the far-right uses language and to understand their narratives.

We then created keyword annotators to filter all posts for terms commonly used for Jews or Judaism, either descriptively or negatively. As Method 52 allows for any text string to be recognised (it works with regular expressions), we were able to include symbols like '(((' or ')))', which have become dog-whistle symbols hinting at a supposed Jewish influence or control over a certain societal actor or institution (for example, the formulation 'ISD is a (((research organisation)))' suggests that ISD is controlled by Jewish interests). These seed terms were then iteratively updated after coding initial samples of resulting posts to ensure that we captured additional terms relevant to the conversations about Jews and Judaism on 4chan, but absent from our initial list of keywords were included (Figure 26). We additionally created a language annotator, and filtering into German and English posts, and proceeded to code the English samples as most of the conversation on 4chan takes place in English, though posts recognised by the language annotators often contained mixtures of English and German text. After working through all these steps, we ended up with an English language subsample of 2,907 posts centred on Judaism and Jews.

Figure 26 Keywords used to identify posts on Judaism and antisemitism

> '(((' '6 million' '#abe' '^abe' 'abe' 'anti-semit' 'antisemit' 'Ashkenaz' 'goy' 'goy' 'goyim' 'happy merchant' 'happymerchant' 'israel' 'jew' 'Judaism' 'JQ' 'kike' 'Mizrahi' 'rabbi' 'Sephard' 'Shekle' 'Schekle' 'Schekel' 'Shekel' 'Schmeckel' 'Swastika' 'synagogue' 'Star of David' 'torah' 'yid' 'zionis'

In the next step, we created a 'gold standard' against which future performance can be judged. Two coders independently coded an initial sample of 100 posts, and then discussed any disputed posts which had led to disagreement between the two researchers. This enabled us to identify difficult cases and refine the rules according to which we were coding the data. This initial labelled set of posts has no bearing on the ability to classify and label posts correctly. For future research an increased size of the gold standard (e.g. 150 posts) might improve the overall results, but as our dataset is rather small (2,907 posts), the smaller gold standard should be sufficient for our purposes.

The classifier was then trained through the labelling of additional documents by human researchers. The algorithm used these newly labelled posts to build up a series of rules, dependent on language present in each, guiding them in how they should be labelled. These rules were then applied to the initial 'gold standard' dataset to measure the classifier's accuracy.

The three crucial variables concerning the accuracy of the algorithms predictions can be seen in Figure 27: precision, recall and F-score.[119] Each measure is provided for the classifier's ability to predict both relevant and irrelevant posts. For a given label — relevant or irrelevant — the algorithm's 'precision' shows the proportion of documents to which it applied that label which were correct — how many posts in the gold standard which the algorithm labelled as 'relevant' were also labelled as 'relevant' by researchers. 'Recall', in contrast, measures the proportion of posts in the gold standard labelled as 'relevant' by researchers which were also judged to be relevant by the algorithm.

The F-score is essentially an agglomeration of these two values. As we were mainly interested in the classifier's ability to recognise antisemitic ideological elements or narratives, our 'irrelevant' category includes everything that would not fall under 'relevant'; the value we are most interested in was the F-score for 'relevant'. We trained the classifier up to an F-score of 0.762 as shown in Figure 27 (column 'FB1', row 'relevant').

Figure 27 The classifier used to determine antisemitic content on 4chan using Method 52
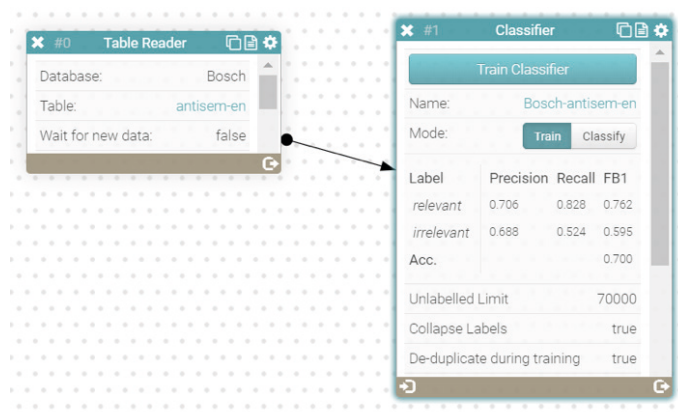
Appendix E Extended method section for interplay between alternative and mainstream media

Among other things, Media Cloud allows researchers to track the attention specific themes have gathered from online media using keywords and Boolean queries through its "Explorer" function. In addition to entering one or a set of keywords of interest, researchers need to select media sources (eg. The Guardian, The Spectator), collections (eg. Global English Language Sources, Germany — National) or a combination of both.

For mainstream media, we included 13 widely read, national newspapers and magazines from across the German political spectrum, including left-leaning publications such as the Taz and Spiegel, and conservative outlets such as the FAZ and Focus.

To measure the how often alt-media used our keywords, we combined a pre-existing collection of German "right-wing populist news sites" previously created by the Weizenbaum Institute,[120] and added a four additional alt-media outlets and blogs that we had identified in our research looking at the German far-right over the last years.

Mainstream media	Alt-media
suddeutsche, bild.de, deutschlandfunk.de, Focus, Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ), Tagesspiegel, spiegel.de, stern, taz.de, zeit, ntv.de, freitag.de, Tagesschau	achgut.com, blauenarzisse.de, compact-online.de, Frauenpanorama, Freie Welt, freie-presse.net, journalistenwatch.com, jungefreiheit.de, Philosophia-perennis.com, pi-news, politikstube.com, sezession.de, tichyseinblick.de, zuerst.de, Arcadimagazin, Staatspolitik.de, Unser Mitteleuropa, michael-mannheimer.net

We focused our analysis on the first ten months of 2019 (01.01.-31.10.2019), and compared how often certain keywords widely used in far-right conversation on alternative platforms online were used by alt-media and mainstream media over that time period, and when there had been any spikes. From all of the sources and collections included in our lists of alt-media and mainstream media, stories had been gathered throughout the entire period, thereby ensuring that the rise and fall in media coverage of themes could not be attributed to missing data.

In turn, we created a set of keywords for one of these themes and trialled with Media Cloud whether or not the stories the software identifies in return accurately reflected the issues we were interested in, by looking at the sample stories Media Cloud provides for each query. Where necessary, we removed keywords from our lists again that produced to many irrelevant results. While it is possible that we may have missed keywords that would have provided us with more results, we are therefore confident that our keywords accurately capture the theme we were looking for, and contains the most important keywords relating to these narratives.

This enabled us to look at whether or not alternative media outlets seem to have any power in driving the agenda-setting of mainstream outlets.

We operationalised our themes using the following keywords:

— **Theme 1 Conspiracy theories:** Soros, Kalergi, Rothschild, Rothshild, Rothschilds, Rothshilds, "Hooton Plan", "Kalergi Plan", "Soros Plan"

— **Theme 2 Identitarian concepts:** "great replacement", Remigration, "Defence of what's ours", "population exchange", ethnocultural, ethnopluralism, ethnopluralist

— **Theme 3 Islamisation:** Islamisation, Eurabia

— **Theme 4 Migrant crime:** "refugee crime", "migrant crime", "migrant gangs", "No-go-Area", "No-go-Zone", "imported criminality", "knife migrants", "migrant violence", "refugee violence", "criminal refugees", "criminal migrants"

— **Theme 5 Against the political establishment:** "traitors of the people", "parties of the system" [German: Altparteien], "Merkel regime"

A challenge with this research was that the databases for the two media types differed substantially, and made a direct comparison between the two news sources difficult. On the one hand, the total number of mainstream articles (382,753) was much higher than the total number of alternative media articles (32,343). We therefore decided to use the normalised percentage of stories as the metric to compare the prominence of themes between alternative and mainstream media.

For example, while the total number of stories for our first theme, conspiracy looks quite close (below on the left), the normalised percentage (below on the right) shows that the keywords came up in between 2-4% of all their stories, they were used in close to 0% of mainstream media outputs with the exception of a mini-peak in the month of March.

Figure 28 References to conspiracy theories (theme 1), in total (left) and normalised percentage over time (right)

Mainstream Media   Alt-Media
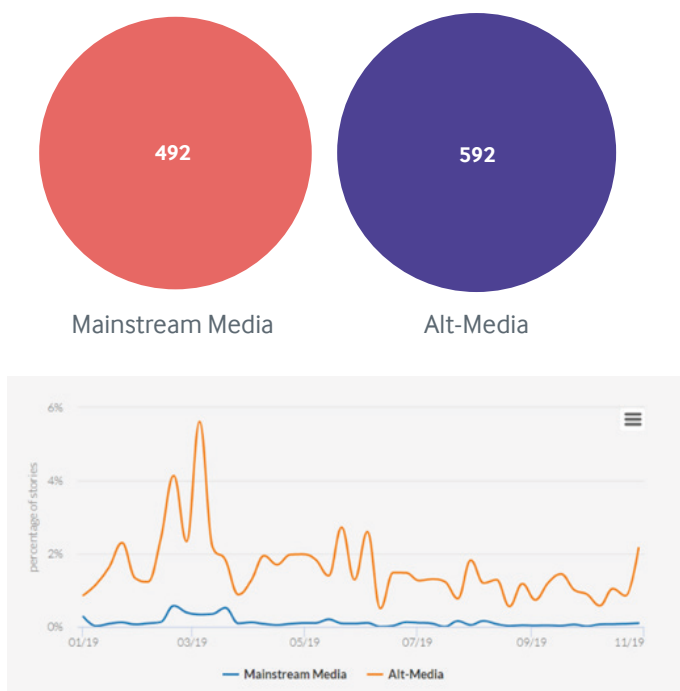
This approach also presents certain methodological difficulties: while the mainstream media data included articles from sections such as sports and culture, alternative media typically focuses on politics and often times does not include comparable sections. Comparisons will therefore always be imperfect.

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      The concept of downplay National Socialism is measured by multiple questions on of which asks whether or not one believes the crimes of National Socialism had been exaggerated.

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48.   http://www.europarl.europa.eu/germany/de/presse-veranstaltungen/eurobarometer-september-2018

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51.   During the 2018 state elections in Hesse, 83.2% of voters decided to abolish the death penalty that was still nominally part of the state's constitution, even though it was legally overruled by the Federal constitution's prohibition of the death penalty. https://www.wr.de/panorama/hessen-schafft-die-todesstrafe-ab-nach-72-jahren-id215700237.html

52.   Example: If Influencer X had 100 followers on Facebook and fewer than 100 on Twitter and YouTube, 10 on VK and fewer than 10 on all other alternative platforms, the proportion of followers on the alternative platforms compared to their reach on mainstream platforms would be 10%.

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