

In the blind spot – Right-wing extremist online radicalisation

Conference report on the 2022 Annual
Conference for the project “Countering
Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist
Online Subcultures”

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Editorial responsibility:

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Contents

Foreword	4
Day One of the Conference	5
Day Two of the Conference	11
Conclusion	19
Endnotes	20

Foreword

In October 2022, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD Germany gGmbH) held a conference entitled “In the blind spot – Right-wing extremist online radicalisation”. It was the second of three conferences as part of the “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” project, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ). The ISD has been researching the online networking of German-speaking right-wing extremists, especially on “alternative platforms”, since early 2021. During the first year of the project, the research team examined the “[Escape Routes](#)”,¹ used by the far-right and extreme-right scene to escape regulation by the current German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) on and around major social media platforms. The team prepared a background report on the project to provide methodological and historical “[Signposts](#)”.² They also investigated Telegram, a platform that constitutes an important “[Buttress](#)”³ for the far-right scene in Germany. In the 2021 Annual Report, “[Detours and Diversions: Online strategies for the Dissemination of Right-wing Extremist Content](#)”,⁴ the researchers addressed the obstacles and challenges they encountered, and compared the manner in which actors with various ideological orientations on different platforms linked content.

In 2022, the team published a brief analysis of [GETTR](#).⁵ In the second year, the focus of the project turned to investigating decentralised video platforms. The trend towards decentralised programmes was advanced by both plans for Web 3.0 and a counter-movement to what

was perceived as the centralisation of internet services. The team therefore analysed right-wing extremists’ use of “[Odysee](#)”, a video platform that uses blockchain technology to offer financial incentives to users,⁶ and “[PeerTube](#)”,⁷ a free software programme that allows people to build their own video platforms. Right-wing extremist and conspiracist actors use such software programmes to create their own platforms and in so doing prevent their videos from being deleted. The 2022 ISD Annual Report, “[Inside the Digital Labyrinth: Right-Wing: Extremist Strategies of Decentralisation on the Internet and Possible Countermeasures](#)”,⁸ shed light on the guiding principles behind these decentralised platforms and suggested options for regulating and moderating them in decentralised contexts.

The results of the research and the methods used for these analyses were presented at the “In the blind spot” conference. Representatives from academia and civil society presented and discussed the research on which they were working on several panels. They also discussed evidence-based regulatory approaches with representatives from politics, the platform industry and law enforcement. The conference programme was rounded off by two high-profile keynote speakers on the reception of the Russian war against Ukraine and religious nationalism by right-wing extremists. Like the first conference,⁹ the 2022 Annual Conference was a hybrid event. This conference report provides a summary of the topics discussed.

Day One of the Conference



The conference opened with a welcome address from Project Manager **Christian Schwieter** (ISD Germany). This was followed by another welcome address from **Huberta von Voss**, Executive Director of ISD Germany, who outlined the topics, challenges and current context of the “Countering Radicalisation in Right-Wing Extremist Online Subcultures” research project. “It’s come at just the right time and we’re confident that we’ll send another strong signal this year”, said von Voss, with regard to extreme right-wing campaigns in autumn 2022. “Regardless of whether people keep their composure or if things hot up this autumn and winter, each one of us will fight against a resurgence of the right with all our might”, she continued. “And that’s why our time together here is so important.” Von Voss concluded her speech by discussing the focus of future projects, including long-term developments in the use of platforms by the far right, before handing the floor over to **Benjamin Strasser**, Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ).

“It is important to respond to current dangers by furthering the debate on regulation. We are grateful that our work makes a contribution to the political discourse on online and hybrid threats to democracy.”

Huberta von Voss



Appearing via video message, Strasser addressed the current regulatory efforts and stressed the importance of civil society in combating online hate. He thanked the ISD for its efforts in the fight against right-wing extremism and hate crime through the project.



“The increase in online harassment has a damaging effect on public discourse. We must prevent a situation in which people no longer express their opinion for fear of threats or hatred, and withdraw from public discourse. Public debate and the exchange of information, opinion and arguments are essential in order for our liberal democracy to function. It is this very discourse that right-wing extremists wish to destroy.”

Benjamin Strasser

Presentation of the interim results of the research project

After an introduction to the topics by Research Manager **Dominik Hammer**, ISD Analysts **Paula Matlach** and **Lea Gerster** presented the interim results of their research and shared their observations on decentralised platforms and protocols.

Matlach addressed the role blockchain technology and the cryptocurrency LBRY Credits play in the case of the video platform Odysee. She explained that blockchain technology allows decentralized storage of videos on a blockchain, making it difficult to delete the videos from a technological perspective. Matlach went on to say that as an “incentivised platform”, Odysee also allows users to monetise content and increase the popularity of uploaded videos by using money. She explained that these technical options (“affordances”) make the platform attractive for right-wing extremists, demonstrating how users make money with videos and providing examples of the most popular anti-democratic content on the platform. Gerster concentrated on PeerTube, a programme that allows people to set up their own video platforms. She explained that this software integrates peer-to-peer technology, making it possible for users to control not only their own channels, but entire platforms. She also highlighted that PeerTube allows networking with several decentralised social media platforms to become part of the “fediverse”. Such “federations” also allow videos from other platforms to be integrated into one’s own, where they can be shared. Gerster explained the basic technology behind the fediverse and demonstrated how far-right and conspiracy-theorist online scenes use this protocol.

After looking at the prospects for future research priorities, Dominik Hammer opened a question-and-answer session, which was characterised by lively interest in blockchain technologies, decentralised protocols and their consequences for platform regulation.



Panel I: Ideological & Strategic Developments in the Far-right Online Milieu

Panel I was entitled **Ideological and Strategic Developments in the Right-wing Extremist Online Milieu** and set the scene for subsequent discussions. **Julian Hohner** and **Simon Greipl** from the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität München opened proceedings with a presentation entitled “Die deutsche extreme Rechte im Umbruch: Die Erkennung zeitlicher Charakterdynamiken rechtsextremer Telegram-Communities während der Pandemie” (“The German Far Right in Upheaval: Recognising temporal character dynamics of extreme right-wing Telegram communities during the pandemic”). In their analysis, Hohner and Greipl demonstrated how the discourse on far-right Telegram channels has changed. As part of the Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalisation (MOTRA) collaborative project, they monitored the discourse and discovered that during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic it moved away from an emphasis on traditional nationalist themes and towards a combination of anti-elite sentiment, conspiracy narratives and a rejection of democracy. The presentations that followed this overview of the dynamics within far-right communities on alternative platforms dealt with specific aspects of the digital far right.

Miro Dittrich from the Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS) conducts research into right-wing extremism. In his presentation, “Militanter Akzelerationismus: Vorbote für die Zukunft des Deplatformings” (“Militant Accelerationism: a Harbinger for the Future of Deplatforming”), he dealt with militant accelerationist communities, explaining that supporters of this far-right movement are convinced the liberal order is doomed and it is imperative to accelerate its end, with resort even to terrorist attacks. Dittrich explained that accelerationist militancy has led to repeated banning of social media accounts in the scene, including those on alt-tech platforms and that in response, activists have turned to decentralised messenger services and other, smaller platforms.

There followed a keynote speech by extremism expert **Julia Ebner** (Senior Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, PhD candidate at the University of Oxford), who discussed far-right strategies with particular regard to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Ebner introduced a far-right tactic known as “mainstreaming”, whereby right-wing extremist actors take several steps to re-position their radical views within mainstream society. First, she explained, the extremists form their own subcultures and strengthen their networks; then, they build their own alternative media and platforms (alt-media).

By spreading conspiracy narratives on polarising issues, Ebner continued — citing the example of anti-LGBTQ+ agitation — the extremist actors attempt to provoke reactions that question liberalism. She explained with reference to the anti-lockdown movement that the extremists’ next step is to increase their influence and become effective on a mass scale. Ebner discussed the final stage of the mainstreaming process — fighting proxy wars — with reference to the pro-Putin agitation of right-wing extremist activists. She illustrated the various stages of the strategy with research from her book “Massenradikalisierung” (Suhrkamp, 2023), providing numerous examples of the phenomenon in both Europe and the USA. Ebner believes that sophisticated approaches are required to resolve such a complex problem, and should address root causes, engage a broad range of stakeholders and rebuild trust. She also advocated giving a voice to those affected by violence and online harassment in order to reinforce the injuries suffered by victims of smear campaigns.

After a question-and-answer session chaired by Jakob Guhl (Senior Manager Policy and Research, ISD), anti-feminism expert **Veronika Kracher** (Amadeu Antonio Foundation) made a presentation entitled “‘Schizopilling’ als Radikalisierungsfaktor in rechtsextremen Online-Subkulturen” (“‘Schizopilling’: a Factor for Radicalisation in Far-right Online Subcultures”). According to Kracher, the subculture of “schizopilling” (defined as flirting with mental illness and nihilism) and the associated aesthetics were also evident in the digital footprint of the Highland Park shooter. She defines schizoposting as sharing memes in the form of images, text, audio and video that share a common schizopilling aesthetic in that they refer positively to mental illness and denial of reality, address paranormal phenomena and tend to be characterised by extreme nihilism and cynicism. Kracher also identified that they glorify perpetrators of violence and often have antisemitic, misogynist or conspiracist content, references which she said have an ideological affinity with nihilistic and fatalistic currents within the incel and alt-right spectrum. She did, however, explain that schizoposting is not necessarily explicitly right-wing extremist, highlighting that “schizoposts” reach a wide audience on social media and placing the schizopilling subculture within the broader social media trend of fascination with mental illness and self-diagnosis. Kracher noted that reasons for this trend require analysis within the context of both deradicalisation strategies and broader research into online subcultures.

The final Panel I presentation, “Hass im Schafspelz: die Verwendung von Humor zur Verschleierung rechtsextremer Ideologie” (“Hate in Sheep’s Clothing: Using Humour to Disguise Far-right Ideology”), by **Heidi Schulze** and **Ursula Schmid** from the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität München also addressed the use of memes and aesthetic means in anti-democratic online milieus. Schulze and Schmid are researching the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the early detection of criminal offences and the impact of digital media on hate speech as part of the MOTRA and KISTRA projects respectively. They analyse the occurrence of hate speech, humour in the use of hate speech and possible countermeasures. Together with



their colleague Antonia Drexel, they also looked at how humour is used as a means of concealment and can contribute to the spread of far-right ideology online. They argued that while humorous forms of expression have always been part of hate speech, they take on a different weight in online spaces. Schulze and Schmid cited various analyses that demonstrate that condescending humour lowers the inhibition threshold for accepting prejudices and the expression thereof. They asserted that extremist groups use humour, particularly in the form of memes, as a means of normalising hate speech and introducing it into mainstream society. Schulze and Schmid conducted quantitative content analysis to determine the features that allow memes to succeed. By examining a large sample, they came to the conclusion that although humour is used to disguise hate speech in various memes, it occurs less frequently than previous research had led to believe and that the combination of humour and far-right narratives actually had a negative impact on the reach of online content. In contrast, criticising and raising the issue of COVID-19 were found to be successful predictors of widespread dissemination. Schulze and Schmid also pointed out that dissemination does not equate to impact and that the effect of hate speech that is disguised using humour may be gradual and slow.

There followed a panel discussion in which possible countermeasures, reasons for the success of humorous hate speech, and the effect of shared humour on fostering a group dynamic were discussed.

Panel II: New Technologies and Regulatory Challenges

In Panel II, which was chaired by **Paula Matlach** (ISD), experts discussed the impact that the spread of new technologies has on regulating right-wing extremist online activities. The first presentation was “Metaverse: Neue Freiheit oder Nährboden für Extremismus” (“The Metaverse: New-Found Freedom or Breeding Ground for Extremism”) by **Dr Octavia Madeira** from the Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS) at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. Dr Madeira is researching the metaverse, a planned virtual reality and a manifestation of Web 3.0 that allows people to network worldwide, as part of the MOTRA project. She suggested that the metaverse offers potential for extremists and that they might use such new online spaces to recruit and radicalise new members, establish extremist groups and organise activities, such as attacks. Dr Madeira asserted that the degree of “malevolent creativity” that extremists display in their use of the metaverse is key to the potential for abuse of this new technology. She explained that she had worked with other researchers in a workshop to develop scenarios in order to assess whether the metaverse would drastically alter extremist activities. They found that the extent of freedom (e.g. no restriction of activities vs. restriction of user behaviour) and security (e.g. encrypted communication vs. tracking of users) are decisive factors in how extremist actors use the metaverse. According to Dr Madeira, the metaverse is unlikely to spark a trend towards encapsulation. She highlighted that the involvement and participation of users in development and content moderation are crucial for a democratic metaverse and raised the question of how, as a global online space, the metaverse might affect the role of individual states.

In his presentation “Rex@web3 rechtsextreme Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)” (“Rex@web3: Far-right Non-fungible Tokens [NFTs]”), **Louis Jarvers** (PD GmbH, public sector consultant) discussed NFTs, digital images whose certificates of ownership are stored on blockchains and were coveted by art collectors in 2021 and 2022. Jarvers explained that trading in these certificates has become a billion-dollar market in a very short time and that right-wing extremists also trade in NFTs, some examples involving antisemitic propaganda images or audio and video files of speeches from the

milieu. According to Jarvers, trading these files can fulfil various purposes for the extreme right, from financing and propaganda to radicalisation (if for example, the files were to be displayed in closed rooms in a metaverse context). To gain more precise insight, Jarvers and his team examined thousands of NFTs, collecting the images using keywords that have extreme right-wing connotations. While the proportion of clearly extremist NFTs in the resulting sample was very low (around two percent), seventeen percent of the files appealed to extremists. While the two percent of NFTs categorised as clearly extremist contained explicit right-wing extremist messages, the seventeen percent that appealed to extremists included historical images from the Nazi era or symbols that are used (although not exclusively) by right-wing extremists. Jarvers explained that right-wing extremist NFTs can be found on various blockchains and that slang typical of the scene was used in the description of the NFTs. He also highlighted that systematic research into far-right NFTs is subject to several limitations and that as Web 3.0 expands, so does the danger of abuse for extremist purposes. Jarvers asserted that in order to observe this, it is necessary to bundle open-source intelligence (OSINT) capacities and capacities for investigating cybercrime to create “crypto-intelligence” (CRYPTINT). Jarvers’ plans for further research include financial analysis and investigating extremist use of the metaverse.

In the following lecture “Governing the Ungovernables? Logiken & Rechtfertigungen der Moderationspraxis auf Alternativplattformen” (“Governing the Ungovernable? Logic and Justification in the Moderating of Alternative Platforms”), **Maik Fielitz** (German Federal Working Group Gegen Hass im Netz [Against Hate on the Net], Institute for Democracy and Civil Society [IDZ]) explained the role of social media platforms in disseminating right-wing extremist content.

Fielitz specifically looked at alternative platforms, asking how moderation policies for such platforms might be classified and what evidence there is of the logic and justification behind these policies. He explained that even alt-tech platforms, which often promise minimal moderation and unregulated speech, have to moderate and in some cases delete content in order to protect users. He went on to say that the more the platforms grow, the more constraints they would encounter. He

gave the example of compliance with legal regulations and attempts to retain advertisers leading to platforms having to comply with moderation and regulatory standards. Fielitz explained the external stakeholders that exerted an influence on platforms using a model adapted from Gorwa's Platform Governance Triangle (2019),¹⁰ according to which platforms operate in a framework of NGO — state — firm. Fielitz's "Alternative Platform Governance model" instead regards the determining factors as being core political clientèle — state/security authorities — digital infrastructure. He asserted that the moderation practices of the various platforms are negotiated in this triangle and that while examining these platforms, he noticed recurrent parallels with large social media companies in that the alternative platforms' emphasis on the importance of free speech mirrored the attitude of the larger companies when they had first been established. Fielitz explained that economically successful alternative platforms gradually regulated themselves in order to retain their target groups and take responsibility, and that in doing so, they resorted to forms of moderation similar to those of established social media, despite having different stakeholders.

The historian **Stephen Albrecht** presented a study he had prepared together with the political scientist **Reem Ahmed**. Both work at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg and deal with challenges in regulating extremist websites. In a lecture entitled "Hidden in Plain Sight", Albrecht demonstrated that traditional websites and forums (known as Web 1.0), still play an important role in both right-wing extremist and right-wing terrorist online subcultures. He suggested that like alternative platforms, these websites and forums offer the far-right milieu a greater degree of creative freedom and more self-sufficiency than the large platforms of Web 2.0, as they are better protected against external interference, constitute a space free of contradictory voices and fulfil the function of a digital archive. Albrecht is of the opinion that despite this, the importance of websites and forums for the extreme right has not really been reflected in the specialist literature in recent years and that although legal regulation is certainly aware of traditional websites, it tends to concentrate on social media. He feels that Web 1.0 is given lower priority and that if the regulatory gap is to be closed, it must be kept in mind that the problem is multi-dimensional. Albrecht argued that neither a "Wild West" nor a "European Union Firewall" are desirable, but that regulations must find a balance between effectiveness and protecting fundamental rights.

The subsequent panel discussion addressed how to research various manifestations of right-wing extremism on Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. The consensus was that a comprehensive view was also a question of resources and that timely analysis of new phenomena could help to avoid expensive attempts to fill gaps in knowledge.

After the panel discussion, the attendees gathered for dinner and discussed the findings of day one of the conference in a more informal setting.



Day Two of the Conference



All the presentations made on day two of the conference were in English. **Christian Schwieter** opened the day's proceedings with an overview of the objectives and findings of the ISD research project. He presented the ISD report on the blockchain-based platform Odysee and addressed the regulatory implications of the technical developments that had been analysed. In her role as ISD Senior Digital Methods Lead, **Dr Francesca Arcostanzo** (ISD & CASM Technology), introduced the methods and technical aspects of her research as well as the ISD analysis of PeerTube. There followed a discussion in which the ISD research team answered questions from the attendees.

The first panel of the day addressed organisational and discursive developments in the international radical and extreme right. "Authoritarian Agitation Online: Symbolic Economies of Far-right Gender Discourse", presented by **Agnes Wankmüller** (University of Passau) focused on far-right influencers on YouTube and demonstrated how narratives of heroic masculinity are used in an attempt to save the national community. She explained that this appeal to heroic masculinity is linked to the belief in a "natural gender order" and that in right-wing extremist arguments, family and nation are presented as important symbolic communities that are under threat and must be defended by heroic men. Wankmüller argued that unlike the demagogues of the early 20th century, it is not individual agitators that are responsible for the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups, but exchanges on social media. She went on to say that YouTubers who regard and promote traditional masculine attributes, e.g. physical fitness, are in this context contributing to a political agenda. Wankmüller explained that idealising body-building and training also allows men who cannot accumulate social capital through possessions to be

included and gives them an opportunity to identify with the programme. She also describes how certain influencers extend this opportunity to identify to "beta" men, who they considered weaker: according to these right-wing extremist online personalities, this right can be extended to such men as long as they follow men with high "thymos". According to Socrates, thymos is a part of the human soul and includes both striving for recognition and the desire to atone for injustice. As such, it is closely associated with anger and indignation. However, Wankmüller emphasised that within this scene, the meaning of this ancient term has changed and moved towards a political interpretation of the concept. She explains that some of those who watch such videos equate these men with supposedly high thymos with fascist dictators. According to Wankmüller, heroic masculinity is the symbolic core around which various far-right online communities are formed and grouped.

"Post-organisational Terrorist Attacks and their Influence on Immigration Narratives", presented by **Anna George** (Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford), focused on the terrorist attack in Buffalo, New York in May 2022 and analysed how mass murders perpetrated by right-wing extremist individuals influence discussions about migration in society as a whole. George's research team identified the focal points by creating a topic model for the Buffalo gunman's manifesto. One of the primary focal points, the definition of "ethnic Europeans", was discussed with strong emotional and moral rhetoric. The conspiracy-theorist narrative of the "Great Replacement" appears to have gained notoriety as a result of the Buffalo shooting. George identified a surge in mentions of "replacement" in discussions regarding migration in a forum on the social media site Reddit. She asserted that the interim results of the research project indicated that such attacks contributed to the spread of right-wing extremist content in the online discourse on migration.

The political scientist **Damla Keşkekci** (Scuola Normale Superiore, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM)) examined another large platform in her lecture "Connected by Hate? Hyperlink Networks of German Radical Right Actors on Facebook". Keşkekci presented an analysis she had carried out as part of the "From the Margins to the Mainstream" (RaMi) project at the DeZIM Institute together with Dr Liriam Sponholz and Prof Sabrina Zajak. The investigation revealed that Facebook was still attractive for parts of the radical right.

It demonstrated that institutionally bound actors (e.g. those in political parties) in particular continue to have networks on Facebook and disseminate content that addresses their own group or person, or links to their own institution (“self-reflexive sharing”). Keşkekci stated that shared links are generally from individuals’ own scene and that it is usually pages from Germany that are linked. She explained that it is not only links to other Facebook pages that are shared and that actors from the radical right also share links to other websites and platforms. Keşkekci suggests that Facebook is therefore still an important platform for the German radical right.



In her presentation “‘Where there is Smoke, There’s Fire’: The Construction of Election Fraud Discourses on YouTube”, **Antonia Vaughan** (University of Bath) demonstrated how reactionary influencers use Facebook to spread conspiracy narratives about the 2020 US presidential election. Vaughan asserted that YouTube constitutes an independent media system, separate from established media houses, and that on it, libertarian, dedicated racist and other right-wing and extreme-right influencers interact and exchange ideas, networking by means such as guest appearances and joint videos. Vaughan went on to explain that YouTube’s communal, interactive nature provides an environment in which radicalisation takes place, with dissociation from the established media being a key aspect. She argued that unlike figures on mainstream media, YouTube influencers build parasocial relationships and interact with their audience, allowing influencers to receive feedback and thereby making influence and radicalisation a reciprocal process. Vaughan claimed that influencers present themselves as more trustworthy, more transparent and closer to the public than the mainstream media. Using a US case study, she illustrated the strategies employed to introduce extreme-right content into the political centre or “mainstream” it, identifying “repositioning” as a discursive strategy in this context. Vaughan asserted that influencers present themselves as members of the political centre or as disappointed leftists and that while adopting radical right and extreme-right positions, they suggest these positions actually represent the political centre, or common sense. She went on to say they shift and redefine political categories by such means as rejecting the traditional left-right distinction, instead using discursively constructing populist hostility between the people and the elites, with the primary political target being the US Democratic Party. The alleged

manipulation of the 2020 US presidential election was addressed several times in a case study in which Vaughan analysed the online activity of a specific person. Vaughan explained that in this context, the expression “where there is smoke, there’s fire” has its origin in the lawsuits filed in various courts by Trump supporters and suggests election rigging, while never explicitly claiming electoral fraud has taken place. Vaughan asserted that this rhetoric aims to sow doubt rather than to convince the audience of a claim and that by adopting this strategy, the person producing the videos not only avoids violating platform guidelines, but can also present themselves as being moderate. She explained that the riots of 6 January 2021 were played down and reframed using this tactic and that the person under investigation had appeared more moderate than her audience. According to Vaughan, although the comments revealed the commentators to be both more radical than the person and critical of the person’s moderate stance, they attributed an important role for radicalisation to it.

After the presentation by Vaughan, the floor was opened for questions from the audience with Dominik Hammer (ISD Germany) chairing. The various contributions demonstrated that both alt-tech and established platforms still play an important role in the media strategy of the far-right online milieu and that they are a site for spreading conspiracist and anti-democratic discourses.

After the lunch break, a panel on content moderation, platform governance and regulation discussed blind spots in content moderation and the limits of platform regulation. Henry Tuck, Head of Digital Policy at the ISD, chaired the panel and commenced proceedings with an introduction to the topic.



In her presentation entitled “Politics of Deliberate Inaction: Platform Justifications & User Imaginaries about Content Moderation in a ‘Free Speech’ Online Forum”, **Dr Mathilda Åkerlund** (Umeå University) introduced her research on Flashback, an anonymous Swedish online forum that has existed since 2000. According to a survey by a Swedish research institution, Flashback is used by about a third of the Swedish population. A range of right-wing extremist content and campaigns of bullying against individuals can be found on the platform. Dr Åkerlund explained that the forum not only does not moderate content, but that it also prevents users from deleting their own content or accounts. She went on to explain that the forum operators justified this on the grounds of freedom of expression and that they claimed this approach prevented users from being pressured to delete their content and exonerated the forum operators from the responsibility of moderating content. According to Dr Åkerlund, another argument used by Flashback is that by not deleting content, the forum operators are also protected because the integrity of the discussion is preserved. In this way, she continued, the forum distinguishes itself from platforms that are increasing content moderation in order to meet legal requirements and retain users and advertisers. Dr Åkerlund said that although the platform forbids the dissemination of hate speech and child pornography in its “netiquette” and terms of use, it mentions loopholes that allow the dissemination of not only harmful, but also illegal content. She noted that in so doing, the platform not only refused to take action against such content, but also actively provided evidence of strategies that undermined their own terms of use. According to Dr Åkerlund, the decision not to delete content, which is upheld even when users explicitly ask for content to be deleted (in situations such as when their forum

identity has been exposed) contradicts Flashback’s argument of concern for forum users. She argues that it therefore appears more likely to be an ideologically motivated decision that helps to disguise control over the platform. Paradoxically, Flashback’s cyber-libertarian interpretation of freedom of expression leads to its own manifestation of paternalism: users’ freedom of expression is so highly valued that they are denied the right to delete shared content. Although Dr Åkerlund reported that Flashback has not had any legal problems resulting from illegal content since its foundation, she suggests this could change as a result of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA).

In the next presentation, “Branding Hate: Far-right Influencer Culture and Gender Blind Spots in Regulation”, **Dr Eviane Leidig** (Department of Cultural Studies, Tilburg University), argued that there are countless examples of gender blind spots in the regulation of social media due to use of social media platforms being gender-specific, with women playing an important role for the extreme right. She explained how female influencers from this scene solicit donations, provide organization, spread propaganda and recruit for right-wing extremist movements on mainstream platforms by disseminating content that does not constitute a clear breach of the platforms’ rules and so escapes moderation. Dr Leidig described how female far-right influencers make use of “networked intimacy” by presenting themselves to fans and followers as affable, approachable, authentic, and responsive, as such applying the concept of “alt maternalism”. She went on to explain that this term was coined by the communications scientist Ashley Mattheis to describe a far-right concept of motherhood that deliberately connects the role of the mother and a political programme with white, ethno-nationalist currents. Dr Leidig told how female supporters of “alt-maternalism” regard the role of women in the far-right scene as crucial for the continued existence and “legacy” of the movement, by ensuring the propagation of the nation through raising children. She described how female “alt-maternalist” influencers recruit followers by focusing on motherhood and the roles and topics traditionally associated with it, such as cooking and food. Dr Leidig explained how these everyday topics are used as a gateway to introduce followers to racist content, in so doing, influencers reference their own motherhood in order to add weight to a political message. She provided examples showing how motherhood and “gastro politics”

were employed to recruit followers for the far right on large platforms. Dr Leidig explained how apparently apolitical content regarding proper nutrition is often used to create “networked intimacy” and covertly spread a political message, and drew on the example of linking recommending local produce and stockpiling to political narratives (such as the rejection of globalisation, the conspiracy narrative of the “Great Reset” and prepper ideologemes). She described how female alt-maternalist influencers connect political messages to the commercial promotion of specific products and claimed that such influencers are aware of how to use different platforms for different purposes and to adapt their content accordingly. Dr Leidig asserted that this tactical use of multiple platforms and circumventing content-based regulation (e.g. using codes or alternative spellings) poses challenges for both “hard” and “soft” forms of platform regulation. She suggested that countermeasures need to take into account platform governance as well as the fact that different platforms are used for different purposes and that platforms are used in a gender-specific manner. Dr Leidig emphasised that right-wing extremists address and target existing online cultures in order to radicalise and retain followers.

The next presentation focused on platform regulation. In “Multistakeholder Governance & Right-Wing Extremism: Rationalities of Content Moderation and Strategic Communication”, **Dr Bharat Ganesh** (Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen) discussed the regulatory environment surrounding online platforms, addressing in particular the problems and weaknesses of such multi-stakeholder approaches. Ganesh asserted that extremist content is regulated in a number of different ways. He argued it is possible to make a distinction between measures such as deleting illegal content (or content that violates platform rules) and positive interventions such as strategic counter-speech. He also argued that another difference exists: that between legally prescribed and voluntary forms of regulation. Dr Ganesh explained that while regulation is in the first instance a matter for the platforms, government agencies have increased their involvement and have formulated measures in the form of greater liability for platforms, “Trusted Flagging” and more stringent transparency requirements for platforms. He asserted that the legal framework conditions of the respective countries and the will of the platforms to regulate were decisive for the specifics of the design and that differing

extremist content has been and continues to be assessed differently in a regulatory context. Dr Ganesh suggested that the problem of right-wing extremist online activities, such as those of the “alt-right”, was a later development and that regulatory authorities were focusing on individuals rather than their networks. He cited one anomaly as being the early action taken against Islamic State (IS) content and suggested that it was this action that advanced multi-stakeholder approaches to platform regulation. Dr Ganesh suggested that involving various stakeholders from civil society, the platform industry and government agencies would provide solutions for platform regulation. However, he also demonstrated some weaknesses of multi-stakeholder approaches, including the question of whether formats organised by the private sector actually allow involvement in and distribution of decision-making power, or whether this power is then shifted largely in favour of the platform economy. He suggested that the platform economy could in this case strategically employ multi-stakeholder processes with the primary goal of asserting its own interests. Dr Ganesh remarked that social media companies seem to have more influence than state actors with regard to existing procedures and that the reasoning behind such multi-stakeholder formats also influences its forms and outcomes. He identified the central concepts as being risk avoidance, a tendency towards the automation and cost minimisation of regulation, the specific logic of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) sector and ideas of a “market of opinions” as shaped by Silicon Valley libertarianism. According to Dr Ganesh, when the question is raised as to which parts of civil society should be involved in multi-stakeholder processes, CVE logic leads to the pre-selection of potential stakeholders. He argued that finding a balance between different interests automatically limits which organisations can participate.



Dr Ganesh identified a similarly restrictive, sometimes non-transparent procedure in the selection of “Trusted Flaggers” by social media companies. He explained that one of the main problems of multi-stakeholder initiatives is that they do not address the key issue of extremism — and in some cases do not have a clear definition of right-wing extremism — instead choosing to rely on purely technical solutions (e.g. strategic communication or creating databases of problematic accounts).

Dr Ganesh concluded by providing an overview of the key issues for future debates on platform regulation, which included the advantages and disadvantages of no-platforming, the need for greater transparency and consistent implementation of content moderation, greater focus on how platforms shape regulatory projects, and investigating the logic and ideologies that drive multi-stakeholder approaches.



There followed a discussion during which it was revealed that the reporting behaviour of users on platforms has changed and that this decline points to two trends: expanded use of automated content recognition and social media companies’ increasing reliance on specialised reporting institutions such as “Trusted Flagger” and decreasing reliance on regular platform users. Henry Tuck, Head of Digital Policy at the ISD explained that companies prefer reports from Trusted Flaggers because they are often more accurate. He also noted that empirical research on the impact of user reporting was being hampered by insufficient data as a result of the limited data platforms publish on reporting processes. Other questions addressed the strategies of “alt-maternalist” female influencers. Dr Leidig explained that such influencers are in constant dialogue with their current audience and identify contemporary discourses

that are of relevance to their target audience, providing the example of the shift in discursive focus from anti-vaccination in the context of COVID-19 to conspiracy narratives about the “Great Reset”.



The panel discussion “Combating Hate Crime and Extremism Online: What are the Consequences of the Digital Services Act?” was opened by the chair, **Mauritius Dorn** (Senior Digital Policy Manager, ISD Germany), with a review of the 2021 Annual Conference and a short introduction to the German Digital Services Act (DSA). Dorn introduced the panel, which included **Ahmed Gaafar** (Head of the “REspect! Gegen Hetze im Netz” and “#Antisemitismus” reporting centres at the Jugendstiftung Baden-Württemberg youth foundation), **Josephine Ballon** (Head of Legal, Hate Aid) and **Stefanie Nicka**, a prosecutor from the Bavarian Central Office for Combating Extremism and Terrorism (ZET). Nicka opened the discussion by explaining the implications of the DSA from the perspective of law enforcement and compared key aspects of the DSA with the provisions of the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG). She explained that EU regulations now cover all online platforms and messenger services rather than just specific social media platforms (as was the case with the NetzDG) and that all illegal content is now captured both at EU level and at the level of individual member states. Nicka provided the example that Holocaust denial, which is a criminal offence in Germany, is also listed as illegal content under the DSA. She explained that unlike the NetzDG, however, the DSA does not stipulate any obligation to delete content within a particular time frame, which she identified as a step backwards compared to the NetzDG from the ZET’s point of view. She also pointed to the fact that the DSA does not stipulate any penalties for platforms that do not delete content, suggesting that

this was unlikely to encourage action on the part of the platforms. Nicka went on to identify another weakness of the DSA compared to the NetzDG, explaining that the narrower definition of offences that platforms must report to law enforcement agencies means that in some instances, child pornography and sharing symbols of unconstitutional and terrorist organisations are no longer reportable offences under the DSA. She asserted that ultimately, from a law enforcement perspective, it is problematic that the responsibility for enforcing the regulations lies with the countries in which the platforms have their place of business, and that this makes prosecution in Germany more difficult.

The panel then discussed the implications of the DSA's definition of illegal content. Gafaar explained that the question of who posts illegal content in which country has posed a major regulatory challenge. Different legal frameworks, the use of proxy servers, and the spread of harmful, but legal content reveal the limits of the DSA. Josephine Ballon noted that there is no conclusive clarification as regards the extent to which content that is illegal under the law of one EU member state can be legally pursued in another member state. She explained that the risk of particularly restrictive rules in one member state limiting online communication throughout the union is limited by provisions on proportionality. The panel was in general agreement that the DSA's lack of stipulation of a time limit for deleting hate speech is likely to make it more difficult to take action against illegal content and that platforms would probably interpret the regulations largely in their favour, thereby hindering even the evaluation of content. The possibility of a high threshold being set for action to be taken was mentioned, to which Ballon voiced her suspicion that this could give rise to lawsuits.

Ahmed Gafaar commented on the obligation to report illegal content to law enforcement agencies as stipulated in the NetzDG and the DSA and provided an insight into both the role of reporting institutions (such as Respect) and the reporting process. He explained that after being reviewed by a legal team, the content is forwarded to the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and that those affected are informed. Gafaar asserted that in cases involving harmful but legal content, those affected receive counselling and are put in contact with organisations such as HateAid. He stated that he

regarded the developments on the part of the platforms as positive, especially with regard to dealing with terrorist content. He also explained that although such content is now deleted more reliably, it does so on a different legal basis, namely international anti-terror legislation. Nicka also noted an increase in the number of reported cases and mentioned dealing with civil litigation and out-of-court settlements as another important aspect of the DSA.

Nicka stated that time would reveal how individual EU member states will staff the envisaged out-of-court arbitration bodies, how they will act, and that regular court cases can be expected. Another topic of discussion was who in Germany would take on the role of the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) envisaged in the DSA and how this institution should be assessed. Ballon stated that the DSC fulfils an important function as a defined point of contact, especially for smaller platforms, explaining that while larger platforms tend to deal directly with the commission, smaller platforms, some of which are active at the level of individual states, have as their main contact the respective DSC of the EU member state. She emphasized that it will be a challenge to bundle the various necessary competences into a single institution and that in the case of Germany, the federal system and the role of the individual federal states must be taken into account with the legal framework posing a challenge in this regard.

The panel was critical of the "due diligence duties" that the DSA imposes on platforms. Drawing on the experience of the implementation of the NetzDG by social media platforms, Gafaar voiced scepticism as to whether the obligations in the DSA would be implemented. He questioned whether the new EU rules would be adopted, citing how platforms had repeatedly taken legal action against obligations in the NetzDG in the past.

Dorn asked Nicka what implications the DSA would have for other laws on network regulation and whether there was a danger that the DSA would undermine other regulations. Nicka responded that this depends on how the courts decide on the numerous as yet unclarified points with regard to the DSA, highlighting that EU law usually takes precedence over national law. Ballon added that as a historic project, it was hoped that the provisions of the DSA would be adopted beyond its jurisdiction. However, she also acknowledged the danger that EU

legislation might restrict national laws that respond to society-specific threats in individual member states and prevent such threats from being addressed effectively and appropriately. Ballon explained that national laws such as the NetzDG and the German Telemedia Act (TMG) will be almost completely replaced by the DSA. In response to a question from the audience, Ballon cited the involvement of civil society as being the advantage of the DSA over EU regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The discussion concluded with a look at “awful but lawful” content. It was suggested that in such cases, out-of-court settlement channels, for which the DSA provides, might offer approaches for a solution.



Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss, an expert witness for the US Congress, the United Nations and several security agencies, gave the **closing keynote** of the conference, which was entitled “The Trickle-Down Effect of Religious Nationalism in Global Online Youth White Supremacist Extremism”. Dr Miller-Idriss is the Founder and Director of the Polarization and Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL) and a professor at the School of Public Affairs and the School of Education at the American University in Washington D.C. She is also the author of “Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Fight” and “The Extreme Gone Mainstream”. Dr Miller-Idriss explained the importance of the concept of cultural schemas for understanding the rise of religious nationalism in online subcultures, pointing to traditional patterns of interpretation that allow people to process and classify new information quickly in complex situations. She described how such patterns of interpretation function both consciously and subconsciously and include religious values.

Dr Miller-Idriss suggested that cultural schemata are particularly important when people are confronted with an abundance of rapidly transmitted information or new information paths. In this context, she explained, the decision-making processes, i.e. the question of what we consider to be true, has a lot to do with the various cultural schemata to which we adhere. She asserted that to serve these cultural schemata and appeal to Christian voters, many Christian nationalists cloak their political message in religious rhetoric. She stated that Christian nationalism is an ideology that postulates that the USA is and should remain a white, Christian nation, and that some kind of quasi-apocalyptic final battle is imminent. Dr Miller-Idriss identified an inherent and explicit friend-foe distinction in the expectation of this cosmic struggle in which history is thought to culminate. Using the example of several Republican candidates, she explained that the rhetoric of Christian nationalism has in some cases even made it into mainstream US conservatism.

Looking at radical discussions, Dr Miller-Idriss identified three recurring topics that are strongly influenced by Christian nationalist motives, the first of which being the invocation of the dichotomies of purity and contamination as well as the sacred and the profane. She stated that such rhetoric is sometimes used to defame opponents as Satanists or in one case, the “son of Satan”. She went on to describe how this dichotomy of purity and contamination is linked to racist and sexist narratives in order to devalue Black and Muslim people. According to Dr Miller-Idriss, another aspect of this frequently employed rhetoric is the power of the processes of purification to create a sense of identity. One example she provided is when people, motivated by Christian nationalism, quit drugs or make efforts to improve their own physical fitness. She asserts that the actual advantages that such a lifestyle afford are used to confirm the truth of the ideology. Dr Miller-Idriss identified the second recurring topic as being underpinned by Christian nationalist rhetoric and related to ideas of a supposedly natural order and God-given hierarchies. She explained that this outlook justified social inequalities with reference to both alleged biological differences and religiously interpreted divine will. She revealed that the scene uses the term “redpilling” to refer to the underlying ideological learning process by which these ideas are internalised, a process that clearly echoes Christian baptism and the associated awakening to life in faith. The third recurring topic that Dr

Miller-Idriss identified revolves around mythical fantasies and the moral obligation to act. She asserted that the interpretation of an impending apocalypse demands that supporters of right-wing extremism wage a spiritual war and in so doing make sacrifices. She stated that the urgency of the language used to conjure up an imminent final battle constitutes a call to action. The examples she provided as sources of this religiously charged rhetoric include right-wing extremist online spaces, some of which do not necessarily regard themselves as Christian. In these spaces, Dr Miller-Idriss continued, right-wing extremists identify themselves as disciples of an idea, understand their activities as part of a crusade and refer to right-wing terrorists as “saints”.

She argued that religious patterns of interpretation, especially those of Christian nationalism, shape the ideas of the extreme right and are used to gain access to society as well as to win over religious people as supporters. There followed a discussion in which the question was raised as to what can be done to counter propaganda that employs religious arguments. In response, Dr Miller-Idriss suggested a strategy of exposing manipulative tactics to immunise people against this kind of demagogy.

ISD Project Lead Christian Schwieter concluded the conference with a closing speech. He cited the terrorist attack in Bratislava on 12 October 2022 as a sad example of just how pertinent right-wing extremist use of the internet is and said that the organisers of the conference were thinking of those affected. Schwieter noted that the event was occupying extremism researchers, as attested by the fact that several people were unable to attend day two of the conference because it was their professional duty to analyse the assassin’s manifesto. He said that given the stressful nature of such work, it is



comforting to be able to exchange ideas at conferences like “In the Blind Spot” and to experience a sense of community between the worlds of research, civil society and regulatory authorities in person. Schwieter expressed his gratitude for the excellent quality and fascinating content of the presentations and gave special thanks to the State Secretary of the German Federal Ministry of Justice, Benjamin Strasser, for his welcoming address. He said the comprehensive support of the ministry was to thank for the progress in research on alternative platforms and the important space for exchange that the Annual Conference provides. He also thanked the conference team, moderators, speakers and the technical team. Schwieter described how inspired he was by the large number of practical approaches to solutions both within and beyond the regulatory framework he had heard during the conference. On behalf of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, he expressed the hope that the conference would strengthen networking and promote essential exchange between research and practitioners. Finally, the Executive Director of ISD Germany, Huberta von Voss, thanked Christian Schwieter and the ISD team for the successful event and bade the attendees farewell.

Conclusion

This is the second time that the ISD has brought together various sectors and topics at a conference in Berlin. The presentations demonstrated the wide-ranging nature of the technology employed in this field: right-wing extremist activities were found everywhere on the net, from traditional web forums and social media platforms to messenger services and Web 3.0 phenomena. The conference also revealed great diversity in the strategies and approaches right-wing extremist actors employ to spread their messages. There is, for example, a considerable difference between the tactical, manipulative use of moderate positions and “soft” issues by alt-maternalists, the yearning for an end battle adopted by accelerationists, and the nihilism of the “schizopilling” scene. The wide range of ideological forms, strategies and tactics of international right-wing extremism is evidence that the focus of the project for 2022, “Tendenzen der Dezentralisierung” (“The Tendencies of Decentralisation”), addressed highly topical trends (ideological and technical developments

as well as regulation and its pitfalls) in the online spaces studied. From a practical perspective, the weaknesses of multi-stakeholder approaches and the in some cases problematic implications of the German Digital Services Act (DSA) were also highlighted. It was therefore all the more gratifying that countermeasures that extend beyond the traditional methods of regulation were also discussed at the symposium. The conference provided a discussion space for people to engage with the worlds of research, civil society, regulatory authorities and the platform industry, and to discuss ways in which to approach the challenge of online extremism. **We would like to thank the German Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ) for facilitating the research on right-wing extremist online subcultures and for making the conference possible. This event is a valuable opportunity for exchange that allows us to look beyond the boundaries of project research and position the project within the framework of the research field and larger developments.**

Endnotes

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