HOPE

THE RADICAL RIGHT AND PAID-FOR FACEBOOK ADVERTISING IN GERMANY

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Over the past decade, the use and misuse of social media by political campaigns has been a constant feature of our news cycles, with ever-growing concern about how social media platforms are transforming the nature of campaigning, advertising and debate. Issues around the use of social media during the 2016 US Presidential election and UK Brexit referendum, as well as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, heightened public attention and concern around social media as a powerful and potentially dangerous tool for persuasion and propaganda.

Facebook provides a wide range of means by which political parties and their activists can engage with the public, one of which is the use of targeted paid-for advertising. This element of social media platforms has come under considerable scrutiny over the years. Worryingly, far-right hate groups have been allowed to advertise on Facebook, despite being banned from using the platform. In 2019 a BBC investigation found that British anti-Muslim group Britain First had continued to post adverts on the platform after its own pages had been deleted.[1] Similarly, pages linked to Generation Identity, another anti-Muslim activist group, were also allowed to advertise on Facebook.[2]

KEY FINDINGS

- **AfD spends less on Facebook ads than other parties in the German Bundestag while instead being considerably more successful in terms of organic influence through shares and interactions.**
- **The national socialist National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) has published multiple racist paid-for Facebook ads that have avoided moderation despite clearly breaking Facebook's community guidelines.**
- **Die Linke is the party that spends the most on Facebook advertising.**
- **Facebook's Advert Library has limitations that prevent a truly transparent look at how political actors use the platform.**

One obstacle to understanding the use and impact of targeted adverts on Facebook is the difficulty for outside observers to understand how the targeting takes place, with even users themselves unable to get full details of why they have been shown a specific ad. The extreme detail with which an advert can be targeted to a user based on location, interest and specific demographic information is a unique aspect of social media advertising that requires study to understand its impact on democracy; the lack of transparency therefore makes such research much more difficult. The possibility of producing a large number of variations of a particular ad makes the task even more difficult.[3]

Facebook's role as a host for political advertising came under greater pressure in September 2019, with the announcement that Twitter would no longer carry political advertising.[4] Twitter founder Jack Dorsey explained the decision by claiming that "internet political ads present entirely new challenges to civic discourse: machine learning-based optimization of messaging and micro-targeting, unchecked misleading information, and deep fakes."[5]

In Germany, as in most democracies around the world, the use of social media for political campaigning is a hot-button issue, with concerns the role that recommendation algorithms, fake accounts and echo-chambers can play in increasing political polarisation.

With an estimated 44 million users in Germany, Facebook is the most important means by which Germany's political parties campaign online, the importance of which has only grown throughout the Coronavirus pandemic with the severe limitations placed on traditional offline campaign tools such as rallies, meet-and-greets and doorstep canvassing.

A recent report by HOPE not hate showed that the radical right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) far outperformed other parties in the German Bundestag on Facebook.[6] Its official Facebook page has almost twice the number of followers compared to the ruling CDU party, and AfD's posts are shared close to 15 times more than CDU and five times more than Die Grünen whose posts are the second most shared.

This report examines paid-for advertising instead of organic interactions on Facebook across all

parties in the Bundestag. It provides a snapshot of how German political parties are making use of Facebook ads, examining the spending patterns by selected pages belonging to each of the major parties over the past two years. Specifically, it compares the parties spending with that of AfD and analyses the role that paid-for ads plays for radical right actors. We will also provide an additional case study looking at the use of advertising by a small neo-Nazi party, in order to highlight the particular issues surrounding the use of Facebook by such groups.

METHODOLOGY

We have limited this study to looking at the spending of the six parties represented in the Bundestag: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), Social Democratic Party (SPD), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Die Linke, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and AfD. In addition, we have included a case study of the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) due to the particular issues raised by their activity as a neo-Nazi political party. We have considered the CDU and CSU as a single party when tallying their national spend, but the CDU alone at regional level because the CSU does not contest elections outside of Bavaria.

We tabulated the amounts spent by the different parties using Facebook's in-built Ad Library which allows users to see which adverts a particular page has placed, a broad estimate of the number of views each advert received and the amount spent on the overall advertising buy. The figures provided in this report represent the total sums spent between 15 April 2019 to 23 July 2021, the maximum time period for which data was available. Facebook only provides exact spending amounts for the maximum time period, while individual adverts are given a spending range, eg >€100 or €200-299, which makes calculating spending over shorter periods much less reliable.

Facebook's advert library has other serious limitations in the information it provides. While it provides very basic information on the age, gender and geographic location of users who have seen the advert, it does not reveal how the adverts were targeted. Advertisers can choose from a detailed list of tags based on interests and views that Facebook has allocated its users based on their activity on the platform, none of which is available to view.

In looking at the national picture, we combined the spending of both the parties' primary Facebook pages and that of their *Bundestagsfraktion,* the page run on behalf of their respective parliamentary group in the German Bundestag. At the state level, we similarly looked at spending by both the parties' respective pages for each state and, where applicable, that of their representatives in the state parliament.

We also used Facebook's own social media listening tool CrowdTangle[7] for a broader look at the output and engagement of the pages outside of their paid-for advertising, examining their activity during the three month period immediately prior to their State Elections. The tool is directly affiliated with Facebook and is provided to researchers and journalists. Crowdtangle data includes all posts from Facebook that are made by a public page or public group that has more than 110,000 likes. We verified that all official party pages were included in the dataset.

FACEBOOK ADVERTISING SPENDING

NATIONAL PAGES

The six parties in the Bundestag spent a combined total of €2,347,000 on Facebook advertising across their primary and parliamentary group pages between 15 Apr 2019 - 23 Jul 2021.

Party	National Spend	Share of total
Die Linke	€624,715	26.58%
CDU/CSU	€557,654	23.73%
SPD	€488,201	20.77%
FDP	€356,234	15.16%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	€262,036	11.15%
AfD	€58,521	4.90%
NPD	€2,754	0.12%

There are a number of notable features of the spending totals for the national pages. The spending by Die Linke is vastly higher than would be expected from their Bundestag representation and position in the polls, which has seen them in 5th place with between 7-10% projected vote share for most of the studied period.[8]

By contrast, the AfD pages' spending totals are much lower than one might expect, given their slightly higher Bundestag representation and polling numbers. It is particularly notable when compared to the overall number, growth of followers and post engagement that the AfD's main page received over the same period.

Party	Total Interactions	Page Followers	Followers +/-%
AfD	16,900,000	538,327	14.5%
Die Linke	1,151,000	264,136	-0.02%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	1,140,000	225,924	13.3%
CDU	1,990,000	225,765	6.8%
CSU	3,680,000	221,901	3.4%
SPD	1,010,000	210,972	3.4%
FDP	1,170,000	167,664	1.2%
NPD	461,353	141,784	-9.4%

REGIONAL PAGES

This picture of national spending can then be compared to the local picture in the three states that have held elections to their *Landtags,* or state parliaments, in 2021 thus far. Each state has a different political landscape, and the spending totals will be influenced in part by the relative popularity and perceived importance of each state to the parties. The states of Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz held elections on March 14, and the combined spending of their regional and state parliamentary group pages are shown below:

Baden-Württemberg pages		
Party	Regional spend	Share of total
CDU	€105,405	37.7%
FDP	€75,112	26.9%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	€48,439	17.3%
SPD	€36,130	12.9%
AfD	€13,698	4.9%
Die Linke	€580	0.2%
NPD	€100	0.04%

Rheinland-Pfalz pages		
Party	Regional spend	Share of total
CDU/CSU	€63,673	26.94%
SPD	€58,933	24.93%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	€55,353	23.42%
AfD	€35,178	14.88%
FDP	€16,272	6.88%
Die Linke	€6975	2.95%
NPD	€0	0.00%

On June 6 2021, it was the turn of Sachsen-Anhalt to go to the polls. Unusually, in these figures we see that the AfD was the biggest spender on advertising across their regional pages, a reflection of their strength in the region and its symbolic nature as the first state election they contested back in 2016.

Sachsen-Anhalt		
Party	Regional spend	Share of total
AfD	€34,472	27.7%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	€33,036	26.5%
Die Linke	€27,661	22.2%
CDU/CSU	€17,174	13.8%
SPD	€7,045	5.7%
FDP	€5,049	4.1%
NPD	€0	0

There is little correlation between spending on Facebook adverts and electoral success. In each of the three state elections of 2021, the party that spent the most on Facebook advertising came in second place, with a drop of 3-4% in their vote share from 2016:

Region	Top spender	Election Result	Swing
Baden-Württemberg	CDU	2nd (24.1%)	-2.9%
Rheinland-Pfalz	CDU	2nd (27.7%)	-4.1%
Sachsen-Anhalt	AfD	2nd (20.8%)	-3.4%

Similarly, comparing the election results to Facebook spending for the main parties in Baden-Württemberg shows no clear correlation between either the vote share nor swing from the 2016 result:

Baden-Württemberg			
Party:	Share of total spend:	Election Result:	Swing:
CDU	37.73%	2nd	-2.9%
FDP	26.89%	4th	+2.2%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	17.34%	1st	+2.3%
SPD	12.93%	3rd	-1.7%
AfD	4.90%	5th	-5.4%
Die Linke	0.21%	6th	+0.7

While it is impossible to measure the effect of Facebook ad spending on a single race, it would appear that solely outspending your rivals on targeted political advertising does not provide any guarantee of success.

PAID-FOR VERSUS ORGANIC ENGAGEMENT

Looking at the European radical right and their spending on Facebook one finds that it varies significantly between countries. In the case of Vlaams Belang (VB) in Belgium it was found that the party's Facebook advertising spending matched that of all other parties in Flanders combined in 2019.[9] VB, just like the AfD, is successful on Facebook, having approximately 50% more followers than the largest party New Flemish Alliance (NV-A). However, in the case of France and National Rally (Rassemblement National), the party's official page has not published a single Facebook ad.

Our analysis finds that the case of AfD lies somewhere in between the two extreme cases of Vlaams Belang in Belgium and Rassemblement National in France.

Compared to other parties in the German Bundestag, AfD is remarkably successful on Facebook. Its official page has 538,271 followers as of July 1 2021, compared to ruling CDU party's 225,763. No other party in the Bundestag matches this number. Importantly AfD's posts are shared (reposted on a users own profile page, optionally with a comment) on average 931 times, 14.7 times more than CDU and 4.9 times more than Die Grünen which posts are the second most shared.[10] Research by Trevor Davis from George Washington University from 2019 explained AfD's success through the large number of posts the party produces, the way it often latches on to current news stories and how its messaging is often emotional, playing off of anxieties and fear related to crime and immigration.[11]

The high follower count and engagement that AfD pages receive illustrates a broader theme

ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY / ALTERNATIVE FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

Founded in February 2013, AfD's most important issue at the time was heavy criticism of the Euro bailout policy in the wake of the financial crisis. However, in recent years it has firmly transitioned into the radical right and is deeply linked to the broad spectrum of reactionary, racist and nationalist groups in Germany. The party received 12.6% of the popular vote in the 2017 federal election.[15]

Primarily, through its anti-immigration and anti-Muslim positions AfD has established itself as part of a nativist mass movement that has emerged in Germany. The party's 2019 manifesto confirms their position as one of the most explicit anti-Muslim parties in Europe. It argues that Islam is incompatible with Europe and states that the AfD will "defend" Europe from it. The party has stated it wants to ban foreign funding of mosques, ban the burka and the call to prayer from mosques.

It has also directly supported projects by more extreme elements of the far right. It has joined campaigns against the accommodation of refugees in Saxony and Berlin alongside the nazi NPD. While the AfD officially decided not to collaborate with groups like the Identitarian movement, several of its activists do so, especially those from the party's youth wing.

about Facebook usage that can be observed worldwide: that the emotive and provocative themes beloved of populist right wing movements and ideologues are well-suited to achieve viral success on Facebook. Research such as that carried out by the *New York Times* columnist Kevin Roose has shown that incendiary news content put out by hyperpartisan right-wing outlets and commentators consistently receives higher engagement than that of mainstream, more credible media sources on Facebook.[12]
In September 2020, an unnamed Facebook executive speaking to *Politico* suggested that the reason related to the topics involved: "Right-wing populism is always more engaging", he said, because it invokes a "strong, primitive emotions" on topics such as "nation, protection, the other, anger, fear".[13]

Their success in terms of organic reactions and followers could explain their lower spending on paid-for ads. AfD spends what could be considered a meaningful amount of resources on Facebook ads but as we have shown, it is far outspent by other parties. In Baden-Württemberg for example, the AfD's main page spent just 5% of the total advertising spend of the 6 main parties, the second lowest amount, and went on to receive just 9.7% of the vote.

It is however important to note that AfD's large engagement on Facebook in terms of shares and interactions with their content does not come for free. The party has a much higher output than all other parties in terms of posts per month.[14] Facebook advert spending is just one part of any party's resources put towards their outreach on the platform. The spending by communications teams of the different parties is however a much more demanding task.

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF GERMANY / NATIONALDEMOKRATISCHE PARTEI DEUTSCHLANDS

The NPD is an explicitly racist and antisemitic party that is notorious for its hostility to minority Germans and provocative stunts. Founded in 1964, in 2016 the party itself was declared unconstitutional by a German federal court due to its neo-Nazi links and structural antisemitism, although the court resisted the attempt to outlaw it outright due to its unpopularity and thus minimal risk of challenging the national constitution.

The party has made a number of shocking statements over the years, including campaigning against the presence of ethnic minority players in the German football team, denigrating players such as Germany-born Mesut Özil as "Plastic Germans"[16]. The party also claimed that the election of President Barack Obama represented "Africa conquering the White House" and claimed that he planned to destroy "White identity"[17].

CASE STUDY: ISLAMOPHOBIC AND ANTI-LOCKDOWN ADS BY THE NPD

Though on a far smaller scale, this higher level of Facebook engagement for far-right pages can also be seen in the data for the NPD pages. The NPD's main page for Sachsen-Anhalt - the only state in which the party fielded candidates in 2021 but which ran no advertising in the recorded period - has 3,572 followers, higher than that of the SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. Yet the party received just 0.27% of the vote on election day, in comparison to 8.41% for the SPD and 5.94% for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.

By comparison to the main parties, the amounts spent on Facebook advertising by the neo-Nazi NPD is extremely small, as might be expected by their miniscule vote share in elections. However, the content of the adverts they have placed is so distasteful that serious questions must be asked about whether Facebook should be accepting payment to show these ads to their users, or indeed allowing the party use of the wider platform at all.

The NPD's main Facebook page has not run any adverts in the period for which data is available, but regional pages have. The most active NPD branch page in placing advertisements is that of Wetterau, a district of the central Hessen state. Their regional page placed 15 adverts on the platform in the run up to the local elections in Hessen, spending a total of €2,754 and receiving between 116,000 to 155,000 views in total.

A number of deeply provocative and divisive ads were placed by NPD Wetterau, some that appear to be in clear violation of Facebook's rules. One advert posted by the page called for a ban on the building of any "mosques or prayer houses" in the region.

Another advert that is perhaps even more shocking was one posted by the NPD branch in Lahn-Dill-Kreis, a neighbouring district of Hessen state. Emblazoned over an image containing a silhouette image of a man's headdress, similar to that worn in the Middle East and South Asia, is the text "We wish you a good trip home", a clear suggestion that immigrants from those regions should be deported.

These adverts fall foul of Facebook's community guidelines, which prohibit calls for the expulsion or social exclusion of any religious group. The latter restriction is defined as "things such as denying access to spaces (physical and online) and social services", which a ban on the building of places of worship by a particular religious group should certainly be considered an example of.

The adverts posted by NPD Wetterau were paid for by Daniel Lachmann, the head of NPD in Hessen state. In the month following the posting of the adverts, Lachmann had his personal and political Facebook pages removed for unspecified violations of community standards, but the

NPD pages he controls remain on the platform. Lachmann has now established a channel on the largely-unmoderated Telegram messaging app, one of the most popular destinations for far right figures after their removal from mainstream platforms.

NPD Lahn-Dill-Kreis also appears to have had its page removed since the above advert was posted, although the advert itself appears to have run unchallenged. Numerous other individual NPD pages have been removed such as that of their youth wing, Junge Nationalisten, in 2013.

Another case is that of the regional page for Baden-Württemberg. Most of the adverts placed by page are less extreme in content than the regular, unpaid posts that appear on their page, some of which appear to be in breach of Facebook's Community Guidelines. For example, the below post, which appeared on the page in June of 2021, is a clear breach of a rule prohibiting "content targeting a person or group of people on the basis of their protected characteristics with generalisations about criminal behaviour".

However, the group did place an advert which ran between 9 -11 of January, the caption of which called on citizens of Baden-Württemberg to defy the newly strengthened lockdown measures in the region by illegally reopening their businesses. A Facebook spokesperson announced in April of 2020 that the company would not allow anti-lockdown protests "that defy government's guidance on social distancing" to be organised via the platform's Events function; it is therefore hard to see how paid-for advertising urging such behaviour would not fall under the same prohibition:

Given the NPD's explicitly racist activity both offline and on, with its systematic antisemitism affirmed by a German federal court ruling, serious questions must be asked about Facebook's continuing hosting of NPD pages and, worse still, accepting payments to carry their adverts. Facebook ads, because their targeted nature are more easily missed by journalists, academics and activists and moderation of them therefore needs to be more reliable.

Endnotes

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