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ALTERNATIVE MEDIA NETWORKS AND THE RADICAL RIGHT IN GERMANY



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In recent years, trust in traditional media has become a frequent topic of discussion in academia and society as a whole. In international comparisons, the German public broadly views traditional media outlets as credible. However, views on it are polarised, and people who supported populist views were significantly more critical of traditional media.¹ Previous studies have shown that Alternative for Germany (AfD) voters are among the most critical of traditional media, and that they tend to trust news received via social media to a larger degree than average.²

This report examines a network of right-wing alternative media outlets (hereafter referred to as “alt-media”). In line with previous research, it finds that Germany has a lively alt-media sphere. HOPE not hate scraped over 68,000 articles from alt-media outlets and analysed the connections between the articles. The German alt-media sphere is made up of a closely-knit network of sites that frequently link and refer to each other’s content.

Importantly, this report finds that AfD is the most important actor in amplifying alt-media outlets on Facebook. Pages by its regional branches and its representatives are the most effective actors on the platform in driving shares of links to articles on the 37 alt-media sites studied in this report.

KEY FINDINGS

- AfD has an outsized importance in amplifying alt-media outlets in Germany.
- Of the 20 most effective Facebook profiles amplifying alternative media outlets in Germany, 14 are AfD associated pages.
- AfD representatives and regional Facebook pages regularly share PI News, a racist website with connections to multiple far-right groups including Generation Identity. PI News is currently under observation by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz).³
- Conspiracy theory site Reitschuster.de is the most frequently shared conspiracy theory site on Facebook in Germany, and it focuses almost exclusively on COVID-19.
- Alt-media outlets form a tight-knit network, and frequently link to each other and republish each other’s content.

While AfD is explicitly critical of mainstream media, its direct importance in spreading alt-media on Facebook cannot be underestimated. No other actor more effectively amplifies alt-media outlets. The sites that AfD-associated pages on Facebook share are often racist and conspiracy theory oriented.

The working definition of alt-media used in this report are media outlets that define themselves in opposition to traditional media, and seek to correct their supposedly false and intentionally biased representation of the world. There are of course entirely legitimate reasons to criticise traditional media and establishment politics, and alt-media can be produced from across the ideological spectrum. However, this report focuses on far-right outlets because they tend to spread toxic and divisive narratives around minority populations.⁴ As such they often claim that traditional media are biased, driven by profit motives, have hidden ideological motives or bow down to progressive ideals such as “political correctness”.

There are multiple reasons for why far-right alt-media in Germany and the rest of the world warrants more analysis and investigation. While this report does not delve deeper into the toxic narratives spread by alt-media, these narratives represent a threat to minority populations and to progressive causes. The desire of alt-media to delegitimise experts and science is a threat to equitable and democratic societies. They break down a shared understanding of world events and the state of society. This issue is especially evident in the currently ongoing pandemic. Unfortunately, alt-media are often shared more frequently than stories from traditional media outlets.⁵

Social media platforms are an important way for alt-media sites to attract an audience. Comments and shares of articles from alt-media sites contribute to the spread of their content. Facebook is the largest social media platform in Germany and the most popular platform where people consume news. For this reason, we look at amplification of alt-media on Facebook.

METHODOLOGY

This report looks at 37 different German language right-wing alt-media sites. We produced a list of 37 websites that meet our definition based on previous research and media coverage as well as our own knowledge. Alt-media sites are sometimes short-lived projects and many websites in previous studies are no longer online, which is why we have produced a new list.

All websites were active during the period of 1 January to, and inclusive of, 31 July 2021. This is the time period for all figures in the report.

We used our own software to scrape articles from the websites based on their RSS feeds if this was available. For sites that did not have a working RSS feed we used media analysis platforms Media Cloud to gather lists of articles for the relevant time period. A small number of sites could not be scraped in a practical way and were therefore not included in-order to make sure that we had comparable data for all sites in the sample.

There are multiple alt-media link aggregation sites in Germany that do not produce content of their own, these have been excluded from the sample. Outlets that do not have their own website and only produce content on social media platforms (such as Facebook Pages or YouTube) have been excluded as well. Both of these categories are important but their inclusion would make it significantly more challenging to produce some of the analysis as well as to judge their relative importance.

Facebook's own social media listening tool Crowdtangle⁶ was used to gather data on the platform. 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. Crowdtangle was used to collect data on what groups and pages on the platform shared alt-media sites. All Facebook data also covers the period from 1 January to 31 July 2021.

THE WEBSITES

The following websites were included in our sample of alternative news websites. The list is not exhaustive but includes most of the largest and most influential websites in this category in Germany. International outlets are also in the sample, for example *RT's* German language website and *Epoch Times* German website, which is run by the Falun Gong and operated from the US. These are produced mainly in Germany and are directed at a German audience. We also include some Austrian websites (*Unzensuriert* and *Wochenblick*), which are in German, cover news and events in Germany and are frequently shared by people in Germany. They can therefore be seen as part of the alt-media landscape in Germany.

There is some ideological diversity in the sample. Some have a stronger emphasis on conspiracy theories while others are more explicitly racist and tend to have a smaller audience. Others are adjacent to the mainstream (such as *Junge Freiheit* and *Tichys Einblick*) but has been described as alt-media sites by multiple observers⁷ and are self described as counter traditional news media. They also regurgitate talking points common on far-right alt-media sites, including topics such as criticism of immigration and of "political correctness".

The included alt-media sites are: *1984 Magazin*, *Abakus News*, *Achugut.com*, *Alpenschau*, *Anonymous News*, *Blaue Narzisse*, *Cato*, *Compact Online / Compact-Magazin*, *Deutsche Stimme*, *Deutsche Wirtschaftsnachrichten*, *Die Freie Welt*, *Eigentümllich frei*, *EIKE*, *Epoch Times*, *Frauen Panorama*, *Islamnixgut*, *Journalistenwatch*, *Junge Freiheit*, *KenFM*, *Kopp Report*, *Michael Mannheimer*, *NewsFront*, *PaxEuropa*, *Philosophia Perennis*, *PI News*, *Politik Versagen*, *PolitikStube*, *Reitschuster*, *RT DE*, *Sezession*, *Signal*, *Tichys Einblick*, *UncutNews*, *Unser Mitteleuropa*, *Unzensuriert*, *Wochenblick* and *Zuerst!*

A NETWORK OF SITES

It is common to see alt-media websites rewriting or simply republishing each other's content. Some of these sites are run on a low budget and aim to produce as much content as possible in order to stay relevant. This practice is of course common in traditional news outlets as well, however, as has already been made clear, the selection of alt-media for this report includes a relatively wide ideological breadth ranging from conspiracy theory sites, to conservative sites, from explicitly racist sites to climate change denying sites. Interconnections between them pose a problem if it exposes their audience for content that they would not otherwise have come across. One can, for example, consume conspiracy theory content without holding racist views, and vice versa. References between the sites can therefore function to radicalise an audience to more extreme views.

Additionally, it also indicates overlap between the sites in terms of ideological agreement or collaboration. The alt-media landscape is built up of a collection of sites that together form a milieu. Few of these sites produce a large amount of content and most are thematically narrow. It is therefore reasonable to believe that most of them cannot satisfy their readers entirely and that they will therefore consume content from multiple sites. This is held up by the observation that social media profiles often share links to more than one site, which we will show later in this report. It is therefore important to view and analyse these alt-media sites as a network of actors, with different specialities, focus and audiences but that form a greater whole.



By scraping all articles published between 1 January and 31 July 2021 from the 37 sites in our sample we could analyse how often the sites linked to each other. In total 68,657 individual articles were collected and every link in them extracted. The content was scraped retroactively in August 2021 and individual articles that might have been removed from the sites after publication would therefore not be included in the sample.

The analysis showed that the alt-media sites in our sample are heavily interlinked and heavily reference each other's content. On average each site links to 12.8 other sites in the sample during the first seven months of 2021. In total there were just over 27,000 articles with links to another alt-media site, 39.6% of the sample.

Only a small number of sites are not tightly connected to other sites in the network. The most referenced sites are unsurprisingly also the largest outlets. Among these we find *Junge Freiheit* and *Tichys Einblick* which are closer to the mainstream but also *Epoch Times* and *RT*.



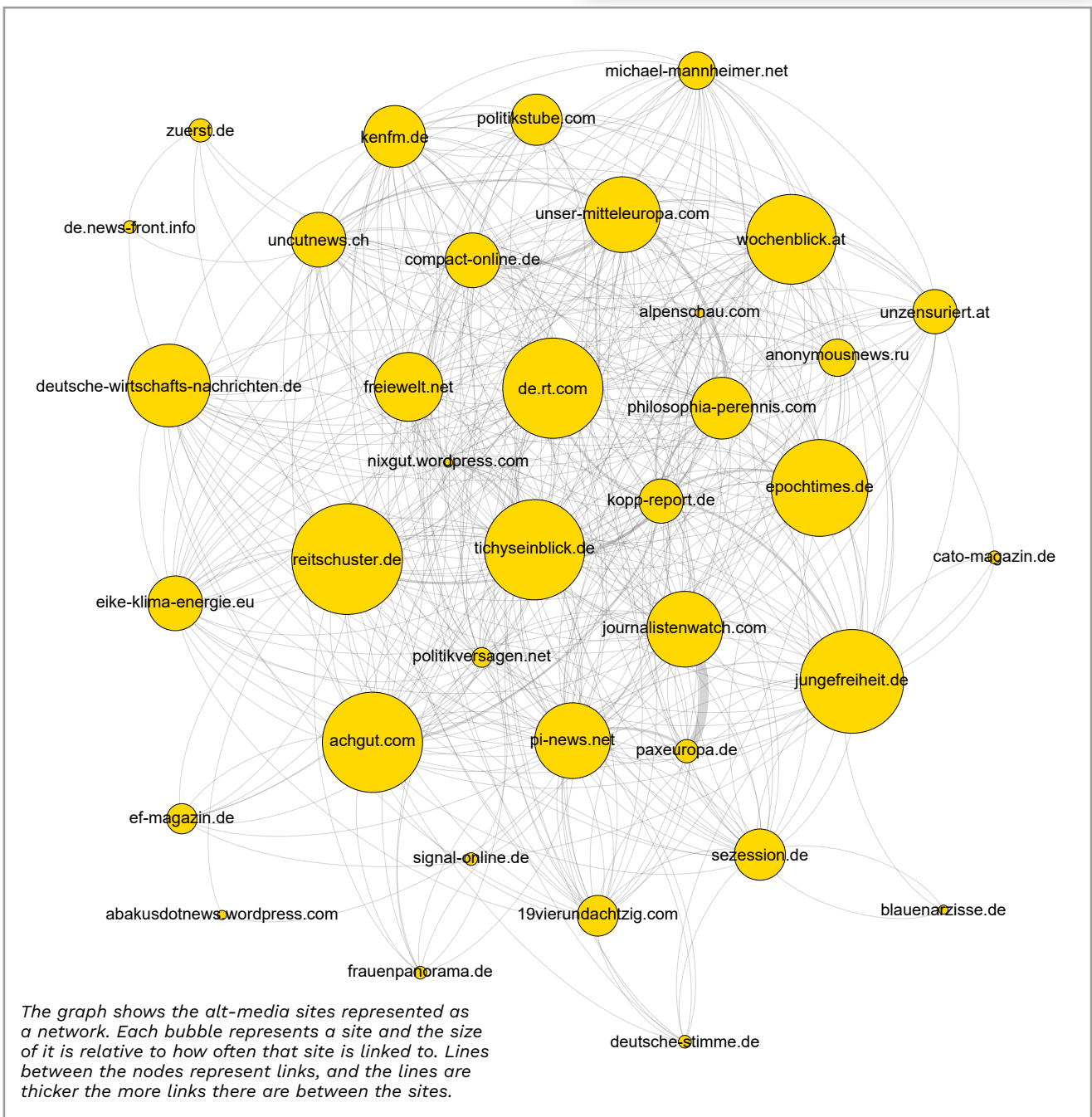
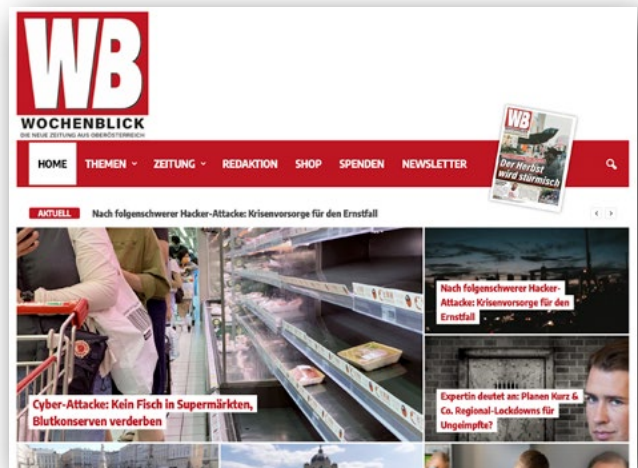
There are more politically extreme outlets that are frequently referenced as well. *PI News* (Politically Incorrect News), is one of the most explicitly racist outlets in the sample and it is regularly linked to by other sites in the network. The website was launched in 2004 and produces virulent racist content, usually directed at Muslims. The website positions itself against what it calls “creeping Islamisation” of Europe.⁸ The website has multiple times used racist slurs against Muslims, going as far using the slur “Moslemratten” (Muslim rats). At the end of April 2021, it was announced that the website was under observation by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution because it is “demonstrably extremist”.⁹ Anti-racism organisation Amadeu Antonio Stiftung has called the site “an incubator of terror”.¹⁰ The website also has clear connections to far-right organisations. The website supported the far-right street protest movement Pegida and in the header of its current website it links to Phalanx Europe, a clothing brand and webshop founded (but no longer run by) Austrian Identitären Bewegung (Generation Identity) leader Martin Sellner and fellow activist Patrick Lennart.

The relative importance of a site like *PI News*, and how larger sites like *Tichys Einblick* have linked to it, is an example of how the network of alt-media sites amplify each other.

Sites that produce content based on conspiracy theories also make up an important part of the network. To clearly separate conspiracy theory sites from far-right sites is not entirely straightforward;

for example, ideas such as an ongoing and intentional “replacement” of white Christian people in Europe with Muslim immigration (as expressed by *PI News*) is also a conspiracy theory. However, some sites in the list are more explicit in their support for conspiracy theories not directly associated with the far right, such as climate change denial or that vaccines would be dangerous.

These sites include the Austrian *Wochenblick*, which is frequently shared by other sites in the network. *Wochenblick* has in July published articles with titles such as “Ex-Pfizer researcher: ‘The point of the spike protein is to clump the blood’”. *Reitschuster.de* is also a conspiracy theory site central to the network. It has recently almost exclusively focused on the pandemic.



AUDIENCE SIZE

The audience sizes of different alt-media websites vary significantly. Some are run by single individuals and have simple, often blog-like websites, whereas others are hard to distinguish from traditional media outlets and have dozens of writers. Reach of a site's content does not relate to impact in a linear way, as this is also influenced by their rhetoric and topics they cover. Especially inflammatory language could, for example, have grave real world effects. However, audience size gives some indication of popularity and interest there is in the content of a website.

To accurately compare visitor numbers between websites is not a feasible endeavour as this data is collected by the sites individually and usually not shared publicly. Social media platforms, and especially Facebook, has in previous research been shown to be an important referrer of visitors to news sites.¹¹ Based on the assumption that this holds true also for alt-media sites, the amount of exposure they get on social media works as a proxy which can be compared across sites. Using CrowdTangle we gather public posts on Facebook that have shared each of the sites in our sample. The combined shares of each site gives a good approximation on the relative reach of each site. NewsFront (de.news-front.info) is excluded from this list because it has been determined to break Facebook's Community Standards and links to it cannot be shared on the platform.

Unsurprisingly, the most shared sites also contain some of the largest outlets (*Tichyse Einblick*, *Junge Freiheit* and *RT*) but among them are also smaller outlets that are further from the mainstream. Notably, *Reitschuster.de* is the second most shared alt-media site on Facebook in our sample, ahead of even the state-funded outlet *RT* and outlets that publish much more frequently, such as *Junge Freiheit*. The site is run by Boris Reitschuster, and over the last year its content has heavily focused on conspiracy theories relating to the ongoing pandemic, vaccines and anti-lockdown material¹² in addition to sporadic Islamophobic¹³ content. Its large amount of shares makes it one of the largest conspiracy theory sites in Germany at the moment.

Several conspiracy theory sites are among the most shared alt-media sites on Facebook. Besides *Reitschuster*, *Wochenblick* - the fourth most shared site - also pedals conspiracy theories relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Achgut.com* is also critical of the current measures relating to the pandemic but does not directly pedal conspiracy theories, it does however regularly minimise the importance of climate change.

While most sites in our list, including the larger outlets like *Tichys Einblick* and *Junge Freiheit*, are also critical of many of the restrictions introduced to combat the pandemic, they do not directly cast doubt on the benefits of the vaccines or the reality of the disease. It is, however, clear that the current pandemic is one of the most frequently covered topics across all sites in the sample.

The large number of shares for sites that peddle COVID-19 conspiracy theories is likely an effect of the salience of the topic at the moment. As websites that are explicit in their opposition to traditional media as well as politics, it is not surprising that they take an opposing view on an important and ongoing conversation. However, it demonstrates the potential harm of alt-media sites. Spreading misinformation about vaccines and undermining the severity of the SARS-CoV-2 virus can have real effects on our ability to reduce transmission of the disease. It also means that we need to consider alt-media websites as an important part of the modern conspiracy theory movement.

TABLE 1: Shares on Facebook of alt-media sites

Site	Shares on Facebook
tichyseinblick.de	827871
reitschuster.de	607048
jungefreiheit.de	511853
wochenblick.at	355728
de.rt.com	219168
achgut.com	219168
epochtimes.de	195825
unzensuriert.at	195825
deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de	146320
freiewelt.net	93483
journalistenwatch.com	82888
philosophia-perennis.com	63569
kenfm.de	47890
unser-mittleuropa.com	40369
pi-news.net	36163
uncutnews.ch	34813
politikstube.com	27100
compact-online.de	25250
zuerst.de	23701
deutsche-stimme.de	22993
eike-klima-energie.eu	17817
19vierundachtzig.com	14028
kopp-report.de	10831
anonymousnews.ru	10666
alpenschau.com	6731
ef-magazin.de	3727
frauenpanorama.de	2500
michael-mannheimer.net	1917
sezession.de	1248
paxeuropa.de	1164
signal-online.de	1152
blauenarzisse.de	782
politikversagen.net	252
abakusdotnews.wordpress.com	187
nixgut.wordpress.com	150
cato-magazin.de	41

AMPLIFIERS OF ALT-MEDIA SITES

Social media platforms are an important source of visitors for alt-media sites. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have perfected algorithms to provide running feeds of content that users are likely to find engaging. The often emotive content of alt-media sites can provide content that is well suited for this mode of communication with their focus on corruption, crime, immigration and supposed deterioration of society.

The platforms could theoretically provide a way for their users to receive content that is relevant to them, based on what their friends enjoy, their local area and interests. However, pages with a large number of followers naturally have a greater possibility to amplify content than small personal accounts. In this section we therefore analyse what profiles (including public Pages and Groups) have the greatest influence in spreading content from alt-media sites in Germany.

Using CrowdTangle we retrieved a list of all public posts including a link to one of the 37 alt-media sites in our sample for the time period of 1 January to 31 July 2021. We summed up the total number of posts that shared one of the sites per Facebook profile, and how many times those posts had been shared in-turn. This gives us a figure on how much exposure the alt-media sites received due to individual accounts. It provides a strong indication of which Facebook pages are most important in amplifying alt-media in Germany.



Many of the alt-media sites run their own Facebook pages and these play an important role in amplifying their own content. Boris Reitschuster, who runs *Reitschuster.de*, for example, has a large Facebook page with over 82,000 followers. His profile is also one of the most important in amplifying alt-media sites, especially his own content. This is unsurprising and does not indicate spread of alt-media content outside of its immediate supporter audience. Facebook profiles of publishers of one of the 37 alt-media sites are therefore excluded from the following analysis.

The results reveal the outsized importance of AfD in amplifying alt-media in Germany. Of the ten most effective profiles in amplifying alt-media content, eight are profiles of AfD's official pages or pages of its representatives. Jörg Meuthen, the federal spokesperson for the party, is the most important followed by several other high profile AfD representatives, including leader Alice Weidel. Notably, AfD's official Facebook page and that of its regional party in Bayern are also included. Expanding the list only highlights AfD's importance. Of the 20 most important Facebook profiles amplifying alt-media, AfD takes 14 spots and of the 50 most important, 27 are official party pages or belong to one of its representatives.

TABLE 2: Most effective sharers of alt-media sites on Facebook

Page	Reach of alt-media posts
Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen	472778
Georg Pazderski	329710
Die Wahrheit liegt auf der anderen Seite	310740
Harald Vilimsky	268879
Alice Weidel	264577
AfD Bayern	225012
Petr Bystron	218877
Johannes Huber MdB	209764
AfD	208613
Dr. Birgit Malsack-Winkemann MdB	181961
Jörn König, MdB	165551
TTIP - Aktionsbündnis - Österreich	164426
Roland Tichy	161615
Prüfe alles, glaube wenig, denke selbst.	155712
Guido Reil	154012
Markus Wagner	151261
Martin Sichert, MdB	142845
Beatrix von Storch	133524
Andreas Winhart	131913
Markus Buchheit	129521

AfD profiles share content from a wide range inside our sample of 37 alt-media sites. 21 of the 37 pages are shared by AfD associated pages between 1 January and 31 July 2021. Worryingly, among the most shared pages by AfD are some of the most extreme sites. *PI News*, one of the most openly racist alt-media sites in our sample, is the fourth most shared alt-media site after the conspiracy theory oriented *Reitschuster.de*. 13 different AfD associated profiles share *PI News*. Most frequently it is shared by AfD's regional page for Langenhagen, Garbsen and Seelze as well as by Petr Bystron, a candidate for Munich North in 2017. Björn Höcke, and

member of the Bundestag Jörn König as well as several other regional pages share *PI News*. *RT* is also one of the most frequently shared sites. *Journalistenwatch* or “*JouWatch*” is a site that, according to its own account, criticises traditional media but it also regularly publishes far-right hate content, especially common is anti-Muslim content.¹⁴ The site was shared 51 times in 2021.



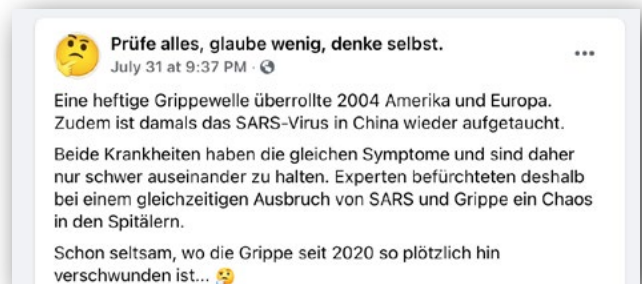
AfD page sharing an article from PI News.

Next to AfD, profiles associated with the Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ) are also frequent amplifiers of alt-media sites. Its current chairman Herbert Kickl and Member of the European Parliament Harald Vilimsky also frequently share alt-media sites. Compared to AfD, however, FPÖ’s influence is smaller.

However, a significant role is also played by right-wing conspiracy pages. Among the most important amplifiers of alt-media are pages that spread conspiracy theories about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The third profile on our list is “Die Wahrheit liegt auf der anderen Seite” (The truth is on the other side). The page’s profile picture contains the slogan “Masken weg für alle!” (Masks away for everyone!) and it posts articles, videos and short texts casting doubt over the efficacy of vaccines, the intent of the current government and the danger of the virus itself. It also promotes demonstrations and activism relating to the pandemic. Another similar example is the page “Prüfe alles, glaube wenig, denke selbst” (Check everything, think for yourself) and “David gegen Covid” (David against Covid) which also almost exclusively outputs conspiracy theory content relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 3: Alt-media sites shared by AfD associated pages

Site	Shares on Facebook
jungfreiheit.de	859
tichyseinblick.de	608
reitschuster.de	170
pi-news.net	104
de.rt.com	101
achgut.com	101
epochtimes.de	67
unzensuriert.at	67
freiewelt.net	58
journalistenwatch.com	51
wochenblick.at	48
philosophia-perennis.com	40
19vierundachtzig.com	15
unser-mitteuropa.com	14
deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de	9
politikstube.com	8
compact-online.de	7
eike-klima-energie.eu	7
uncutnews.ch	4
sezession.de	3
ef-magazin.de	3



A Facebook post by a conspiracy theory page suggesting that COVID-19 is being conflated with the regular flu.¹⁵

LOOKING AHEAD

Alt-media sites are an important part of the far-right online landscape in Germany. Multiple sites receive hundreds of thousands of shares per month. This report only examined Facebook, but other social media sites likely also contribute with visitors to these sites. Alt-media websites do not fall under the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) which regulates how social media platforms moderate hate speech. However, Facebook plays an important role in amplifying content from these websites, despite their content often clearly breaking the terms and conditions applied to users on Facebook. The content on certain sites, in particular *PI News*, is deeply hateful. Other sites publish COVID-19 conspiracy theories that would not be allowed on Facebook.

Whilst specifically assessing AfD's role in this was not the initial goal of this report, the

analysis revealed that the party's role cannot be underestimated. Individual AfD representatives and pages funnel a significant number of users to alt-media sites, including some of the most racist sites in our sample. The links between AfD and the sites themselves were not investigated in this report, but are notable and have been highlighted in previous journalistic work. Perhaps most prominently, *Die Freie Welt* which was founded by deputy leader Beatrix von Storch.¹⁶

The crossover between conspiracy theory, anti-lockdown movements and right wing and far-right alt-media outlets is also meaningfully demonstrated by this report. We find that conspiracy theory sites are among the most shared alt-media sites. This is testament to a worrying rise of conspiracy theory content in the current pandemic. Their connections demonstrated by direct linking to and from distinctly far-right sites presents a problem in terms of radicalisation.

NOTES:

- 1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/fact-sheet/news-media-and-political-attitudes-in-germany/>
- 2 (Alternative) Media Sources in AfD-centered Facebook Discussions [Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-2-128>]
- 3 <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/pi-news-bundesamt-fuer-verfassungsschutz-stuft-islam-feindlichen-blog-als-erwiesen-extremistisch-ein-a-e2995ba3-0002-0001-0000-000177330635>
- 4 https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/toxic_narratives.pdf
- 5 <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/EU-Data-Memo.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.crowdtangle.com>
- 7 See <https://www.belltower.news/lexikon/tichys-einblick/>, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISD-The-Online-Ecosystem-of-the-German-Far-Right-English-Draft-11.pdf> and (Alternative) Media Sources in AfD-centered Facebook Discussions [Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-2-128>]
- 8 <http://www.pi-news.net/leitlinien/>
- 9 <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/pi-news-bundesamt-fuer-verfassungsschutz-stuft-islam-feindlichen-blog-als-erwiesen-extremistisch-ein-a-e2995ba3-0002-0001-0000-000177330635>
- 10 <https://www.belltower.news/media-how-racism-and-hate-toward-muslims-led-pi-news-to-become-an-incubator-of-terror-115917/>
- 11 <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/legacy/NIELSEN-STUDY-Copy.pdf>
- 12 <https://www.belltower.news/verschwoerungserzaehlungen-im-wahlkampf-die-welt-der-wahlbetrugs-narrative-117781/>
- 13 <https://reitschuster.de/post/verhaeltnis-zum-islam-neu-ordnen/>
- 14 <https://www.belltower.news/lexikon/journalistenwatch/>
- 15 https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=317961039851555&id=100049129852371
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