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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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**Alternative Realities on Social Media:  
Twitter and the German Right-Wing**

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### **Abstract**

Right-wing radicalism has moved to the periphery of public and academic attention. This is despite the fact that hate crimes are increasing and right-wing populist parties win enough votes to be represented in parliament or even make up governments Europe-wide. In addition, the Internet has made it easy for the right-wing to network and transport their ideology to a large audience. The research, therefore, asks how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks. Because it is the goal of contrast societies to change the target society in its favor, the Internet offers a space where an ideal society can be created online. Therefore, right-wing networks on Twitter are analyzed with a social media analysis, to establish how the right-wing operates and creates an alternative reality online. The findings suggest that there is a right-wing filter bubble on Twitter. Social media is used to portray Germany's domestic and political situation as perilous; the established elites are at best misguided and at worst conspire against the German people. Therefore, the right-wing online portrays itself as the resistance and the only group in possession of the true facts and only viable solution to return Germany back to a more favorable state.

### **Keywords**

Social media, right-wing radicalism, radicalization, social network analysis, Twitter

28.750 words



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Prague 31.07.2018

Alexandra Pommer

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Institute of Political Science

Master thesis proposal

Research Proposal Master Thesis

Alternative realities on Social Media:  
Twitter and the German Right-Wing

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Faculty of Social Sciences

Institute of Political Sciences

## Alternative realities on Social Media: Twitter and the German Right-Wing

Right-wing radicalism has moved to the periphery of public and academic attention. This is despite the fact that hate crimes are increasing and right-wing populist parties win enough votes to be represented in parliament or even make up governments Europe-wide. In addition, the Internet has made it easy for the right-wing to network and transport their ideology to a large audience. The research, therefore, asks how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks. Because it is the goal of contrast societies to change the target society in its favor, the Internet offers a space where an ideal society can be created online. Right-wing networks on Twitter will be analyzed with a social media analysis using Twitter statistics, NodeXL Pro and Gephi. The analysis will be conducted by identifying online radicalization themes, like for example hate towards refugees, in the form of hashtags, that constitute the alternative reality created online. The results of the analysis will then be presented in the context of radical contrast society's efforts to change society. This way, it will be possible to come to a meaningful conclusion that includes wider societal implications of the right-wings' networking on Twitter.

### **Research question:**

How is the German right-wing as a contrast society portrayed on Twitter networks?

### **Sub-question:**

How does the German right-wing operate on Twitter?

While Islamic radicalism and recently the Islamic State's online organizational tactics have been in the spotlight of public as well as scholarly debate, the field of right-wing radicalism and its online manifestation has moved to the periphery of attention. This is despite the fact that in Germany the years 2015 and 2016 saw five times as many right-wing motivated crimes targeting refugee accommodations as in 2014. The number increased from 199 in 2014, to 1.031 in 2015 and dropped slightly to 970 in 2016. Criminal assault increased even further and in 2016 there were 2.545 recorded acts of violence against refugees and asylum seekers. (Baars and Pinkert, 2017) While there was a 12.9 percent decrease in right-wing criminality in 2016 (Schacht, 2018), support for right-wing parties has increased across Europe. In the German federal elections 2017, the conservative Christian Democratic Party and the center Social Democratic Party lost 1.5 million voters to the right-wing Alternative for Germany party (Holscher and Segger, 2017). Parallel to this, social media has increasingly gained political relevance. Boulianne, for example, finds a positive relationship between social media use and political participation (Boulianne, 2015) and Kahne and Bowyer identify that interest directed activity on social media leads to offline political participation (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018). If this is the case, then social media use and abuse by the far-right is of political significance, for it draws others towards its ideology, encourages offline participation and may ultimately affect public opinion and electoral behavior.

Therefore, an assessment of how the German right-wing operates on Twitter, and how its activities there facilitate the creation of a contrast society will add to the growing body of research on the right-wing's dynamics, as well as the role of social media in creating, maintaining and deepening right-wing networks and their alternative realities.

There is a large gap between the amount of academic literature on right-wing radicalization, and its online structures and works on Islamic radicalization respectively. In fact, much research is biased towards specific types of organizations and forms of political action (political parties, elections, and electoral behavior) without regarding the cultural phenomena that surround those parties and often make them successful. This is also mirrored in the terminological variety: authors use varying terms like extreme right, anti-immigration movements and far-right to describe the same parties like for example the French *Front National* or the German *Alternative für Deutschland*. (Caiani, 2017) However, there is plenty of research on historic and contemporary right-wing radicalism

in Germany because it remains an issue of great public relevance. Yet, benchmark research on radicalization processes and pathways mostly concern Islamic radicalization (see for example Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Horgan, 2008; Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004). Of course, general pathways or elements of the process apply to both Islamic and right-wing radicalization. However, as right-wing and Islamic radicals originate in very different milieus, one cannot rely on Islamic radicalization models to explain right-wing radicalization fully. This is not to say there is no academic literature on right-wing radicalization – especially recent works however are not as numerous as literature on Islamic radicalization. Klandermans and Mayer identify events in the radicals' pasts as the most important motivations for their activism, like exposure to traditional, nationalistic or even authoritarian values during childhood coupled with a feeling of stigmatization and loyalty to a (radical) group (Klandermans and Mayer, 2006). In his study on Scandinavian countries, Bjorgo found that search for identity is also a major motivating factor (Bjorgo, 1997).

Regarding the online dimension of right-wing radicalism, Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente, for example, examine how psychological uncertainties and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist Internet propaganda. They find, under psychological uncertainty, authoritarianism predicted higher persuasiveness and less aversion of propaganda videos. In addition, it increased the identification with the participants' German nationality. (Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente, 2017) Holt, Freulich, Chermark and McCauley assess the use of the Internet by the right-wing and jihadists and find that especially videos are powerful in moving individuals to radical action. (Holt, Freulich, Chermark and McCauley, 2015) A growing topic of academic research is the right-wing's use of social media. Khosravini, for example, assesses how during the Brexit campaign, economic grievances have been appropriated in order to project a xenophobic discourse from which right-wing parties have capitalized (Khosravini, 2017).

To conduct the research, a social network analysis will be conducted. Twitter represents an ideal social network for the analysis because it is, as opposed to for example Facebook, open and data is therefore easily accessible. The thesis will start with an introduction to methodological and theoretical concepts. Eli Pariser's filter bubble will serve as an underlying methodological concept. The filter bubble selects content the

user sees by algorithms, based on his or her previous online behavior. Ultimately this traps the user in an endless you-loop that magnifies pre-existing beliefs and hampers creativity and the discovery of new concepts that are necessary for personal growth as well as an informed political understanding. (Pariser, 2011) To introduce the topic, radicalism, as well as radicalization and its online component, are discussed in detail. Thereby it is important to note, that there are different pathways that lead to radicalism and there is no one-way-fits-all. While radicalization itself is not the main focus of the thesis, a nuanced understanding is integral in order to evaluate the importance of the findings correctly – because what may seem as a ‘mere’ right-oriented conservative network can in fact be positioned on the pathway to radicalism (discussed for example in Sedgwick, 2010; Borum, 2003; Borum, 2011; Litter, 2018; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The Internet plays an important role in the radicalization process: individuals can easily be trapped in filter bubbles, due to social media algorithms. Social media can therefore facilitate radicalization through group dynamics, filter bubbles and the contorted presentation of the self online. (Hinds and Joinson, 2017)

Koehler identifies the Internet shapes and even enables radicalization processes and is a major driving factor that establishes and fosters the development of radical contrast societies. Radical contrast societies are “*the habitats of ideologies incompatible with their Target Societies’ dominant ideologies*” (Koehler, 2014 pp. 30, 31) and can be understood as the mechanisms involved in the radical social movement’s efforts to redirect the target society towards the ideologically desired direction. Thereby, the Internet is the predominant vehicle to transport ideological concepts and right-wing infrastructure (for example music, concerts, demonstrations and merchandise) into the target society in order to change individual worldviews. (Koehler, 2014; Koehler, 2014/15) Social media offers a convenient platform to establish the desired society online creating an alternative reality for its members that has the potential to pull them further into radicalization due to the filter bubble’s mechanisms.

To select data for the social network analysis, it will be identified how central elements of the contrast society’s culture are expressed online in the form of hashtags. The subsequent social network analysis will be conducted based on these hashtags. Lastly, the results of this analysis can then be reinserted into the contrast society context and assessed on a wider societal level.

To conduct the analysis, a combination of social network analysis and Twitter statistics will be applied. To establish how the far-right organizes on Twitter, key actors in the scene will be identified and their accounts analyzed using twitonomy statistics. Twitonomy is a Twitter analysis tool that provides detailed statistics on a user's online behavior, like for example interactions with other users, hashtags used and amount of tweets per day. The data gained provides the background against which the social network analysis is conducted with regard to the contrast society's presence on Twitter. In order to assess how the far-right is portrayed as a contrast society, it will be assessed how common themes that make up the far-rights' ideology, like racism, are expressed on Twitter in the form of hashtags. Thus, popular hashtags are analyzed by importing Twitter data through NodeXL Professional and are visualized in Gephi. The results of the analysis will demonstrate the extent of the created alternative reality and enclosure within the filter bubble. Returning to the contrast society's overall goal to change the offline world, it will be possible to come to a meaningful conclusion that includes wider societal implications of the right-wings' networking on Twitter.

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# 1. Introduction

The last couple of years have seen a surge in right-wing populism across Europe. It has eroded the center parties' support base that has been stable for centuries and disturbed the center-left/center-right duopoly that has governed the continent since the end of WWII. While it was initially thought to have originated in the protracted great recession, the populist challenge stayed – despite Europe's economic recovery. It has now become evident that it feeds on public resistance to cultural liberalization, mass immigration and a perceived surrender of national sovereignty to international bodies. Especially immigration has become a subject of fiery debates. For many, it raises cultural, economic and security fears and weakens the legitimacy of international institutions that are considered to be overruling the will of the people in using their national political means to protect themselves against threatening developments. This anti-internationalist and anti-immigration sentiment that has shifted the European political balance may have serious consequences for liberal democracy itself. (Galston, 2018)

Elections have become crucial tests to the status of Europe's center-left/center-right balance. Russia's alleged involvement in the 2016 US presidential campaign has brought the potential of Internet 'trolls' to influence elections to public attention. The Russian Internet Research Agency, with close ties to the Kremlin, is reported to have hired hundreds of trolls to post false news and socially divisive contents to social media. (Masters, 2018) While the social media manipulations of the US elections were (and to some extent still are) covered extensively on the news, the involvement of bots and trolls in the 2017 German federal elections made all but a few headlines. Prior to the elections, German right-wing online activists have created a secretive network to coordinate and launch social media campaigns to even the odds for Germany's populist right-wing parties. While not as groundbreaking as the campaigns in the United States, they succeeded in creating trending hashtags on Facebook and Twitter. Some of their campaigns were even adopted by the Russian RT and Sputnik. In addition, some right-wing activists even received – some to their own surprise – support from Russian bots. (Gensing and Kampf, 2018)

In addition to the growing support for the populist right and their instrumentalization of social media, Steve Bannon, the architect of Donald Trump's very successful election

campaign and godfather of the American alt-right, has announced the establishment of a political foundation in Europe called The Movement, that is to unite the European right. In the US election, he stirred social tensions, economic nationalism, incited anger at elites and used systematic discrediting of reasoned argumentation as well as the spread of false news to achieve victory. In Europe, his first target is set to be the European parliamentary elections in 2019, whose turnout has constantly declined. In fact, voters have used the EU parliamentary elections to express discontent about their national conditions and protest parties have been the beneficiaries. (Steve Bannon's plot, 2018)

Due to these alarming developments, a thorough understanding of how the right-wing operates on social media is crucial, in order to meet these (new) challenges effectively. Therefore, this research seeks to illuminate the German right-wing's operations on Twitter. Specifically, it asks how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks.

There is a large gap between the amount of academic literature on right-wing radicalization and its online structures and Islamic radicalization respectively. This is not to say there is no academic literature on right-wing radicalization – especially recent works, however, are not as numerous as literature on its Islamic counterpart. (Caiani, 2017) In fact, benchmark research on these processes and pathways mostly concerns the latter (see for example Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Horgan, 2008; Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004). In addition, much research is biased towards specific types of organizations and forms of political action (political parties, elections, and electoral behavior) without regarding the cultural phenomena that surround those parties and often make them successful. (Caiani, 2017)

Research on the right-wing's online activities is a dynamic and growing field. Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente, for example, examine how psychological uncertainties and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist Internet propaganda. They find, under psychological uncertainty, authoritarianism predicts higher persuasiveness and less aversion of propaganda videos. In addition, it increases the identification with the participants' German nationality. (Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente, 2017) Holt, Freulich, Chermak, and McCauley assess the use of the Internet by the right-wing and jihadists and find that especially videos are powerful in moving individuals to radical action. (Holt, Freulich, Chermak and McCauley, 2015) The right-

wing's use of social media is, therefore, a growing topic of academic research. Khosravini, for example, assesses how during the Brexit campaign, economic grievances have been appropriated in order to project a xenophobic discourse from which right-wing parties have capitalized (Khosravini, 2017). There is, therefore, a growing body of research on the right's online activities and a thorough analysis of the German right-wing's activities on Twitter will add valuable insights to this field.

In this research, it will be argued that the German right-wing creates an alternative reality as a contrast society on Twitter, in which it acts out elements of its ideology. Therefore, relevant actors of the German right-wing scene will be introduced first, in order to gain an overview of members in the offline world, which will be subject to assessment in a social network analysis. In addition, also the right-wing ideology will be discussed, so that ideological elements can be identified and classified during the analysis. Furthermore, the German online landscape is mapped in order to put the analysis of Twitter networks into the wider online context. This will include the political relevance of social media activity, in order to emphasize its relevance as well as media use in Germany in general and a brief introduction to German right-wing use of the Internet – again to put the subsequent analysis into its wider context.

The actors identified will be analyzed in a social network analysis so as to establish *how the German right-wing operates on Twitter*. This will, on the one hand, serve to demonstrate that the right-wing conversation on Twitter largely takes place within a filter bubble, and on the other, to identify online structures and networks beyond these groups' offline organizations. In addition, these groups' approaches to persuade potential supporters, solidify existing views and justify their position will be assessed. This step will furthermore determine radicalizing themes in the form of hashtags that these actors use, like for example #NoIslam. These themes should be used by a large segment of the German right-wing online population and create a discourse that portrays their reality in a very different light. It will be argued that they, in fact, portray an alternative reality on Twitter that diverges from the real-world offline reality, and thus construct a contrast society, as defined by Daniel Koehler. Therefore, it will be assessed *how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks*. To answer this question, the before identified radicalizing themes will be analyzed by extracting quantitative data from Twitter and performing a social network analysis.

Together with the previous step, this shall demonstrate how the contrast society is constructed on Twitter networks. Lastly, the results of the analysis will be put into the broader societal context, so that a general conclusion of the right-wing's online activities for society as well as politics can be made.

This introduction is therefore followed by a methodology chapter, which introduces the research question, as well as Eli Pariser's filter bubble as an important underlying concept. It also includes an introduction to social network analysis, in which the means of analysis and the data used are introduced. Chapter 3 on right-wing radicalism examines theoretical approaches to radicalism as well as radicalization. Thereby it needs to be noted that radicalism is an ambiguous term that lacks a clear definition. With regards to radicalization, academia currently identifies various different pathways into it; therefore an overview of the different pathways and elements is offered in sub-chapter 3.1. This is followed by a more elaborate discussion of online radicalization. While approaches to radicalization, in general, include online elements to some extent, a more nuanced understanding of online radicalization is necessary, due to the approach chosen in this research. Chapter 3 finishes with a section on Daniel Koehler's take on radical social movements as contrast societies. This concept serves as the underlying framework against which the analysis will be conducted.

The analysis in chapter 4 begins with an introduction to German right-wing actors and their ideology, followed by an outline of the German online landscape in sub-chapter 4.2. Thereby the political relevance of social media activity is discussed first, followed by an overview of media use in Germany and an introduction to the German right-wing's use of social media. In sub-chapter 4.3 the German right-wing on Twitter, the actors previously identified will be analyzed with various Twitter analysis tools in order to assess how the German right-wing operates on Twitter and which radicalizing themes re-occur. The latter will be analyzed in sub-chapter 4.4, right-wing Twitter networks as a contrast society. Together these last two sub-chapters will provide the answer to the research question "*How is the German right-wing as a contrast society portrayed on Twitter networks?*", that will be discussed and evaluated in the conclusion.

## 2. Methodology

The introduction has demonstrated that the right-wing is evolving and society and politics need to catch up with it. To arrive at a more thorough understanding of these issues, the German radical right is conceptualized as a contrast society in order to put its actions into the wider societal context. Therefore the research question is:

How is the German right-wing as a contrast society portrayed on Twitter networks?

In a first step, the concept of radicalism, as well as radicalization, are introduced and discussed. This is important to have a concise comprehension of what contributes radical behavior and which processes foster radicalization. The latter is specifically important as knowledge of the dynamics of the radicalization processes can help to comprehend why groups and parties that are on the verge of being radical are still dangerous. After these concepts are clarified, Koehler's approach to radical social movements as contrast societies is discussed. Conceptualizing the German right-wing as a contrast society adds depth to the analysis and structures the assessment of its Twitter networks. In order to accomplish the latter, a sub-question has been developed that will aid and direct the analysis:

How does the German right-wing operate on Twitter?

Therefore, to answer the sub-question, the German far-right actors and their ideology are introduced. This overview is important to, on the one hand, identify which parties and groups to include in the analysis, and on the other, to identify themes, in the form of hashtags, that will be used to assess how the radical right as a contrast society is depicted on Twitter. It is the goal of contrast societies to change the target society in its favor and the Internet offers a space where an ideal society can be created online. Twitter has been chosen as the subject of analysis because it is open and data can be easily attained. For the right-wing, it is also a convenient platform to communicate and share ideas. Conceptualizing the right-wing online as a contrast society serves a double function: it puts the alternative reality lived by the right-wing into a societal context and provides a framework on how to assess its interactions and connection to the wider online population. Especially with the use of hashtags, a larger conversation is



established that solidifies existing beliefs and ideology but also reaches the broader Twitter community and potentially takes influence there. Therefore, the sub-question will aid in identifying radicalizing themes (like for example #noIslam), that are pillars in the contrast society's alternative reality created online. These themes are to be analyzed with a social network analysis and the results will provide a picture of the German right-wing's motifs, strategies, and networks on Twitter. Using the contrast society concept, this overview is then put into the broader societal context to arrive at a meaningful conclusion.

Before the overview of theoretical concepts in chapter 3, this chapter discusses the filter bubble as a methodological concept that forms the basis of the research, as well as the research methods used in the analysis.

## 2.1 *Filter Bubble*

The filter bubble is an important methodological part of this paper because it has a great effect on social media users' online activities. A thorough understanding is required prior to the commencement of the research.

The news we consume, our job opportunities, shopping bargains, loans, and insurances are increasingly tailored to our preferences; predetermined by algorithms based on clicks and likes. While it is convenient, increasing personalization eventually leads to informational determinism whereby what one has clicked in the past determines what one sees next. It is an 'endless you-loop', in which ideas and beliefs are continually reinforced, without challenge, whereby one can get stuck in an ever-narrowing version of oneself. "*Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we're being offered parallel but separate universes*" (Pariser, 2011 p. 8). In his book "*The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*", Eli Pariser calls this dynamic 'filter bubble': content is selected by algorithms based on users' previous behavior (Bakshy, Messing, Adamic, 2015), as visualized in Figure 1.

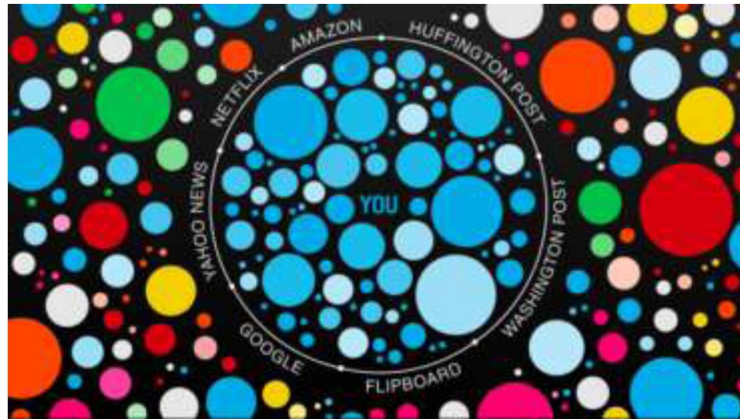


Figure 1: Filter bubble visualized (Pariser, 2015)

The filter bubble functions like a lens and controls what we see and do not see on the Web. On the one hand it can serve as a magnifying glass by increasing knowledge in a niche area, but on the other, it limits what we are exposed to and therefore affects how we think and learn. The latter thereby strengthens existing ideas and removes contents from the environment that inspire to learn. As proven in numerous psychological studies, the knowledge that something is hidden inspires curiosity. However, because the filter bubble hides invisibly, we are not compelled to learn more about what we do not know. Moreover, a filtered world can upset the mental balance between open-mindedness and focus – a balance that creates creativity.

Today, our Google or Facebook identities color everything else the Internet shows us. This is a stark departure from the appeal of the World Wide Web's early days: it was sought to be a revolutionary tool, a great equalizer that granted children in the streets of an impoverished country the same access to information as businessmen in New York City. But instead of equalizing, personalization separates us into different categories. Most personalized filters work in a three-step model: first, they establish who people are and what they like, then they provide content that may be of interest. Lastly, the person fine tunes these contents to get the fit right. The underlying logic behind this is that one's identity shapes one's media. Pariser, however, argues that this logic is flawed and media also shapes identity. *“As a result, these services may end up creating a good fit between you and your media by changing ... you”. [...] we're now on the verge of self-fulfilling identities, in which the Internet's distorted picture of us becomes who we really are.*” (Pariser, 2011 p. 63) Thus, while students at Ivy League colleges see targeted job advertisements, students at state schools may never be aware of these

opportunities. This example signifies the great impact the filter bubble can have on our decisions and ultimately, on who we become.

A click on a link signals interest in a topic – and one will be more likely to see articles about it in the future. Research has shown, that when repeatedly confronted with a statement, people tend to believe it is true. The same applies to an article that has been clicked: this topic will come up in the news feed in the future, increasing the chances to become convinced of its statements. Pariser argues that if the personalized filters have misrepresented somebody's identity, then what the algorithm thinks is that person, becomes amplified and may ultimately shape him or her.

In the scientific world, to test a hypothesis, one always looks to prove it wrong – by finding the outlier. Thus if Netflix knows somebody loves romantic comedy, it should suggest that person to watch Transformers to prove itself wrong. Yet this does not happen because the filter bubble writes-off outliers, despite that fact that it is the latter, that are known to inspire creativity and change.

The Internet was also hoped to *decentralize* power, but because the filter bubble is controlled by just some central companies like for example Facebook and Google, power is *concentrated* instead. This also applies to the political process: targeted voter ads, for example, will inform potential voters only about campaign contents that interest them and leave out all the rest. Issues of public concern, like homelessness, are lost to citizens because of the filter bubble's dynamic and fail to reach them through public election campaigns. Pariser concludes therefore that while the Internet offers an incredible amount of options, we miss many of them through the filter bubble: *“while the Internet can give us new opportunities to grow and experiment with our identities, the economics of personalization push toward a static conception of statehood. While the Internet has the potential to decentralize knowledge and control, in practice it's concentrating control over what we see and what opportunities we're offered in the hands of fewer people than ever before. [...] But what's troubling about this shift to personalization is that it's largely invisible to users and, as a result, out of control. [...] The Internet may know who we are, but we don't know who it thinks we are or how it's using that information.”* (Pariser, 2011 p. 119) The Internet has great capacity, yet it does not address core problems. Instead, there is a distraction overlay, focusing our attention away from issues like homelessness and climate change. (Pariser, 2011)

While the filter bubble signifies an online ‘space’, the echo chamber is a concept that precedes the filter bubble and can refer to a situation both online and offline. Mostly, however, the two are used interchangeably in research and media – or one is mentioned and the other neglected. Many attribute Sunstein as the ‘founder’ of the echo chamber and his original 2002 volume “*Republic.com*” as well as its two revisions from 2007, “*Republic.com 2.0*” and 2017 “*#Republic*” are often cited in other scholarly work on echo chambers and filter bubbles. Yet, seeking a clear differentiation between Pariser’s filter bubble and Sunstein’s echo chamber, one finds that Sunstein conceptualized the echo chamber as a literary term (Sunstein, 2002, 2007, 2017), whereas the filter bubble is a concise theoretical concept. Therefore, the filter bubble concept is used in this research.

Pariser’s filter bubble powerfully demonstrates the real-world implications that online algorithms can have: they not only have the capacity to change the user but can also remove important societal issues from his or her perception, despite the fact that uncomfortable truths need to be told for citizens to make informed political choices.

## 2.2. *Research Method*

In order to establish how the right-wing is depicted as a contrast society on social media, a social network analysis (SNA) will be conducted. Twitter has been chosen as the network of analysis due to its open nature. It is therefore much easier to get access to data than on more private platforms, like for example Facebook. SNA is an interdisciplinary research field that aspires to ascertain the relationships between social entities and draws inferences about the network as a whole, or those belonging to it individually or in clusters. Much of SNA is borrowed from graph theory, a field in the mathematics that is concerned with discrete relational structures. A social network is made up of entities and the relations between them – this way social relationships can be visualized in a graph. The visualization is made up of nodes (here Twitter accounts) that are connected to other nodes via edges (their social relationships). The location of nodes is subjective because it is defined by aesthetic or communicative criteria. This is due to the fact that social networks are defined by the patterns of edges among the nodes, which is not affected by the different placement of nodes within the display.

Thus, there are different visualization algorithms that can be chosen to visualize the data. Most layout algorithms have a common aim to place nodes close to their network neighbors, prevent nodes from overlapping, minimize the number of edge crossing and retain approximate edge length. The size and shape of nodes can be customized according to different individual attributes or structural properties. The width of edges can be used to indicate the connection's strength and color can be used to distinguish between distinct nodes or edges. (Butts, 2008 and Knoke and Yang, 2008)

This research combines SNA and Twitter statistics to analyze the data. To establish how the far-right organizes on Twitter key actors in the scene will be identified and their accounts analyzed using twitonomy statistics. Twitonomy is a Twitter analysis tool that provides detailed statistics on a user's online behavior, like for example interactions with other users, hashtags used and number of tweets per day. The data gained provides the background against which the SNA is conducted with regard to the far-right's organization on Twitter. In order to assess how the right-wing is portrayed as a contrast society, it will be assessed how common themes that make up its ideology, like racism, are expressed on Twitter in the form of hashtags. Thus, popular hashtags are analyzed by importing Twitter data through NodeXL Professional and are visualized in Gephi. To provide more depth, this part also includes Keyhole hashtag analysis. Keyhole is a tool that provides a detailed output on hashtags, like for example how many users a hashtag has reached, how many use it and how many interacted with, as well as hashtags frequently used together with it.

To visualize the data, the ForceAtlas2 algorithm is chosen. ForceAtlas2 is an algorithm in Gephi, developed by Mathieu Jacomy, a founding member of Gephi, at the Sciences Po Médialab in Paris. It is scaled for small- to medium-sized graphs (10 to 10.000 nodes) and therefore ideal for the data used in this research. Like the more well-known Fruchterman Rheingold algorithm, it is continuous, meaning it is a strong algorithm that can be manipulated while it is rendering. It is a linear model – so all nodes in the graphic have a linear correlation and it features a Barnes Hut optimization. (Jacomy, 2011) The latter is a non-linear approximation algorithm and allows for the visualization of clusters of nodes that can be grouped based on their connections. Therefore, it will be possible to visualize filter bubbles in the social network analysis.

Besides the visual representation of social networks, Gephi also provides a variety of analytical measures to deepen the network analysis. The most insightful measure for the

purpose of this research is the modularity measure. It detects and characterizes community structures in a network and thus uncovers densely connected groups of nodes that have only sparse connections between groups. This means that the modularity measure can detect filter bubbles in the sense that it uncovers whether Twitter users communicate within small groups and whether those groups are interconnected or just sparsely so. The modularity measure ranks from 0 to 1. A high modularity measure signifies there are dense connections between the nodes in a module, but sparse connections between nodes in different clusters. (Newman, 2006) For the analysis of the graph, the nodes will be also colored by modularity, in order for the clusters to be clearly distinguishable. In addition, the nodes' size is also ranked by modularity. Thus, in clusters with great density of connections between the nodes, the central nodes are bigger, than in clusters with lower density. Together, the application of ForceAtlas2, as well as the modularity measure and node appearance, will create graphs that provide meaningful information about the network and its sub-groups. The observations gained through the SNA will determine how the far-right is organized on Twitter and how it is portrayed as a contrast society.

While there is a reasonably large amount of German right-wing Twitter users, this research only discusses the networks surrounding popular parties and movements. This provides the acquisition of data with a structure but also limits the research. However, a broader focus would exceed the limits of this research and is therefore not viable.

To establish a thorough comprehension of what radicalism and radicalization constitute and imply, the following chapter elaborates on these concepts in detail.

### **3. Right-wing Extremism**

In order to correctly evaluate right-wing radicalism online, it is paramount to approach the topic with a sufficient comprehension of radicalism on the one hand, and radicalization processes on the other. While the latter is not the primary focus of this research, knowledge of the dynamics that facilitate radicalization can add depth to the assessment of the German right-wing online. This chapter, therefore, begins with a general introduction to radicalism, followed by an elaboration on radicalization. Both include online as well as offline components, but because this research focuses on

online activities, chapter 3.2 illustrates online radicalization in detail. This is followed by an introduction to Koehler's approach on radical social movements as contrast societies, which provides the underlying framework against which the German right-wing online will be assessed.

### 3.1 *Radicalism and radicalization*

The concept 'radical' in itself is uncontroversial. It is synonymous for extremist and opposed to moderate and thus indicates a relative position on a continuum. But where does the moderate end of the continuum lie, and where to draw the line? And what type of continuum should be used – not all groups are single-issue. There are numerous approaches to define radicalism – which will be discussed in the following.

#### Radicalism

A classic philosophical approach as outlined by José Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish political philosopher, states that radicalism constitutes the desire to correct the uses of something, e.g. power, rather than the abuses of it. Following this approach however, 90 percent of the Arab population would be classified as radical. Egon Bittner, an American sociologist defines radicalism as “*a unified and internally consistent interpretation of the world*” which becomes an inflexible guide to action” (as cited in Sedgwick, 2010 p. 482). This interpretation too, however, risks classifying any devout religious follower as a radical. Analytic definitions are rare; most researchers assume that the absolute meaning of radical is understood, or rely on its relative meaning. Some draw a distinction between activism and radicalism; activism is understood as “*readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action*” (as cited in Sedgwick, 2010 p. 483), whereas radicalism is shaped by a “*readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action*” (as cited in Sedgwick, 2010 p. 483). Both definitions regard radicalism not as a state of mind as the philosophical interpretations do, but as a tendency towards a certain range of action (Sedgwick, 2010).

Randy Borum suggests an approach that defines radicalism as a political ideology that opposes a society's core values and principles. In liberal democracies, this would be any ideology that promotes religious or racial supremacy and/ or opposes the core values of democracy and human rights. Radicalism also includes the measures through which

actors try to achieve their goals that demonstrate a disregard for life, liberty and human rights of others (Borum, 2011).

Official definitions vary greatly too and illustrate the different approaches countries take to radicalism. In his article, Sedgwick compares the definitions of the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark, which represent a range of official thinking. All agree that a radical and a terrorist are different: the terrorist is also a radical, but the radical is not necessarily a terrorist. All also define the radical with reference to the extremist and most definitions include a reference to the radical as a threat. None of the three add much analytical depth, however. The first is important, yet uncontroversial, the second follows the relative definition and does not add more precision and the third is a circular argument: radicalism that is a threat is threatening radicalism. Therefore one must look at the points of divergence in the official definitions. The relationship between radicalism and violence is such a divergence. While something that leads to violence is certainly a threat, can something that does not directly lead to violence or something that does not lead to violence at all be still classified a threat? Another divergence is the relationship between thought and action: while some official definitions of threat-radicalism refer to ideology of belief, others do not. (Sedgwick, 2010)

Adding to the confusion around the definition of radicalism are the different contexts within which the term is used and the ensuing competition between different agendas. Sedgwick identifies two official and semi-official agendas which are of relevance to right-wing radicalism: the security and integration agenda. Because, like most radicalization literature, Sedgwick focuses on Islamism, relevant aspects concerning right-wing radicalism are added here. The security agenda focuses on how radicalism may pose a direct or indirect threat to the state or its citizens. Apart from the direct threat of terrorism, indirect threats are manifold, like the distribution of propaganda. These, however, are subject of dispute as it is very difficult to draw the line between for example free speech and sedition. Because terrorist groups can be placed into a broader social, political or ethnic movement (both violent and non-violent) such groups may also be on the security agenda. This may lead to an increased feeling of oppression and feed into the radicals' narrative. For the integration agenda, Sedgwick argues that desegregation and the avoidance of segregation are important elements to prevent radicalism. Good integration is vital to counter the neo-nationalist agenda. While the



latter is not always represented in national governments, established parties take their positions into consideration to appeal to potential voters and keep such parties out of parliament. With regard to right-wing extremists, the German government promotes intercultural dialogue and strong counter-narratives. Both agendas can conflict with one another sometimes, for example, if a right-wing party argues against immigrants, it would be considered radical in terms of the integration agenda, but not so for the security agenda. Such a group might actually be useful as a source of information – here the two agendas conflict. Also, security-wise it may be sensible to support a group that is not a security threat (but one to the integration agenda) to provide an alternative to a group that is a security threat. Also, Islamic home-grown terrorists are or seem to be, often well-integrated into society and evade the integration agenda's attention. (Sedgwick, 2010)

### Radicalization

Now that the term radicalism has been explained, the same will be attempted for radicalization. Just like radicalism, the latter is very difficult to define, for there is not one single pathway that causes an individual to radicalize and approaches to explain the phenomenon are plentiful. In fact, it is “*one of the most opaque and difficult research areas in the study of contemporary extremism*” (Litter, 2018 p. 95), as reliable data is very difficult to access, causation hard to establish and no valid measurement tools can be created. And because a universal ‘terrorist-profile’ has not been found – despite great efforts – the quest to develop a grand theory of radicalization appears to be doomed to fail (Litter, 2018). Nonetheless, the stories of terrorist’s pathways into radicalization have enabled research to identify possible pathways into violent radicalization that provide valuable insights. While the radicalization process of right-wing radicals in Germany is not the main focus of this paper, approaches to radicalization pathways still illuminate the dynamics of radicalism online and the individuals and groups analyzed later are situated on the here introduced pathways. Thus, a clear understanding of the radicalization processes and dynamics will add significant insight into individual and group dynamics, the significance of findings and threats of further radicalization. It also needs to be noted, that while the last decade has seen a shift in social communication that increasingly blurs online and offline engagement, ‘online radicalization’ is not a specific or separate phenomenon, but a part of radicalization in general. (Litter, 2018)

The structural elements that make individuals susceptible to radicalization are similar for most forms of extremism, with only the triggers and narrative frames differing between extremist groups. Little academic theory focuses exclusively on the radical right, but mostly on Islamism. Generally, the literature differentiates between three theoretical strands, individual trait theories, ideological theories and rational choice theories. According to individual trait theories, an individual radicalizes based on his or her personality and characteristics shaped by biology, social experiences and psychological traits. This approach deterministically considers concerned individuals to be inescapably moving towards violent radicalization. However, there is little academic evidence to support this approach – individual traits may, however, be necessary prerequisites to the radicalization process. Ideological theories identify ideological requirements of a group or cause to be driving individuals towards extreme action. This approach is often used to explain religious violence, yet given the millions of religious followers and the low prevalence of terrorism, violent radicals must rely on extremely selective interpretations of guiding texts. In this regard, the Internet plays an important facilitating role, as it significantly lowers the barriers to publication, access, and proliferation of such texts. Lastly, rational choice theories regard violent extremism as a consciously chosen strategy of desperate political actors. Such theories seek to identify factors that shape perceptiveness towards radical ideologies and calls to action. (Litter, 2018) Within rational choice literature, scholars differentiate between linear and non-linear radicalization processes. In a linear process, the individual has to pass through several radicalization stages, to reach the final radicalized stage, whereas in a non-linear process, there is no fixed order and the different elements can rather be described as pieces of a puzzle.

Borum suggests a four-stage linear psychological model according to which an individual develops an ideology that justifies terrorism. In the initial stage the individual questions the current status and judges it to be undesirable; ‘it’s not right’. During the second stage, ‘it’s not fair’, the individual compares his or her status to others and concludes it is unjust and the inequality is illegitimate. If a specific other group is blamed for the illegitimate condition of one’s own group then the third stage is reached – ‘it’s your fault’. In the final stage this out-group is dehumanized and vilified, negative stereotypes are generated and violence becomes legitimized because it is directed against an evil group responsible for all perceived discrimination. (Borum, 2003)

Quintain Wiktorowicz identifies four linear processes that lead a person to join an Islamic extremist group: cognitive opening, religious seeking, frame alignment, and socialization. The cognitive opening usually is induced by a personal crisis through which an individual is more perceptive to ideas that were likely to be rejected before the crisis. The latter could be the loss of a job, experience with discrimination or the loss of a significant other. During the religious seeking stage, the persons' perceptiveness is directed towards religion. This religious seeking can bring the individual to consider radical worldviews. (Wiktorowicz, 2004) Applied to right-wing radicalism, a person may seek a system of thought to help explain a confusing and intimidating situation. Wiktorowicz further argues that through discussion and exploration of the Islamist worldview the individual reaches the frame alignment stage, where he or she considers their worldview as coinciding with the radical one – the same of course applies to right-wing radicalization. In the final socializing and joining stage the individual joins the group and adopts the group identity. To maintain ideology and identity, the individual keeps in close contact with other group members and retreats from mainstream society at the same time. This socialization stage can also take place online. (Wiktorowicz, 2004)

Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins develop a non-linear approach to explain the pathways that lead to radicalization, using a puzzle analogy. The pieces of the radicalization puzzle are grievances, networks, ideologies, enabling environments and support structures. The authors further distinguish between radicalization and violent extremism or terrorism. Whereas radicalization entails a cognitive dimension, violent extremism involves a behavioral dimension that can escalate from mere legal activism to participation in terrorism. In the following, the pieces of the radicalization puzzle will be introduced. Thereby the pieces are adapted to right-wing radicalization, instead of the authors' focus, Islamic radicalization. Grievances can be political or economic in nature. (Hafez, Mullins, 2015) For the Greek Golden Dawn movement, economic concerns played a major role, whereas German *Pegida* adherents identified their anxiety over migrant criminality as a common trait and key issue (Litter, 2018). Networks can be preexisting friendship or kinship ties, where trust and commitment are already established, that introduce the individual to radical views. However, this can also happen among strangers in online spaces (Hafez, Mullins, 2015). As Koehler points out, chat rooms are often monitored and potential recruits are lured into private discussions

(Koehler, 2014/2015). Often the group leader encourages a deeper commitment and bridge burning, leading to a spiral of encapsulation in which links to the external non-radical world are cut-off and defection from the group becomes increasingly costly. Ideology comprises a set of beliefs about the world. Usually, political radical movements identify a social condition as the problem, attribute a root cause to it and suggest a course of action to solve the issue. For violent action to be accepted among the group, it is necessary to dehumanize the enemy. Lastly, enabling environment and support structures facilitate radicalization. Today, the Internet and diverse media environment serve this role. Recruiters use the Internet to avoid legal and physical limits and social media can create a sense of belonging and membership in a group or cause. Besides approaches on radicalization more general, there are also specific ones on the dynamics of online radicalization, which will be discussed in the following.

### 3.2 *Online radicalization*

Hinds and Joinson, agree with Eli Pariser, that not only do we shape technology, but it also shapes us – through the decisions made by its designers and through the contents it provides. Therefore the Internet can neither be considered to deterministically *cause* radicalization nor to be a socially neutral tool. Instead, the Internet provides affordances – objects that afford certain types of behavior. Group behavior, filter bubbles, and self-presentation online can all afford a certain type of behavior or transformation that is conducive to the radicalization process. As pointed out above, groups can change behavior due to the fact that individuals feel less accountable for their actions; attitudes can become more extreme due to group polarization, groupthink and an increased inclination to conform. These together may increase the potential for online radicalization. Filter bubbles are related to group polarization: the Internet can fuel filter bubbles and certain opinions become re-circulated and reinforced which can lead to a change in mindset. Moreover, social media services also provide validation of content through other users' positive reactions and sharing – even false information can gain credence if it is shared and supported enough. Radicalization theories all point to grievances and the authors argue that the Internet can facilitate an increased amount of materials that fuel such grievances. Therefore, if a large enough group of people share and support radical content, it is likely that individuals exposed to it adopt such views.

Further, online affirmation can help to confirm identities that are stigmatized in public. Therefore, the combination of in-group homogeneity, filter bubbles, expression of ideas and identities that are usually hidden from the public as well as confirmation and support from others can encourage increased radicalization. Lastly, communication via computers can have an effect on how individuals interact and present themselves online. Recruiters may pose as someone whose identity is more appealing to their subject; private conversations can be used to create intimacy and are very persuasive as outside intervention is impossible. In addition, awareness of an audience (for example Twitter followers or a private group chat) can cause individuals to present themselves more favorably towards this group. Some research suggests that because individuals spend so much time presenting themselves online, they may alter their offline identity as a result of it. Thus, the combination of interactions with similarly minded others and selective self-presentation over time can lead to increased levels of intimacy and make an individual feel more committed to their online identity. Feedback to this identity via likes, comments and tweets can deepen this commitment. Social media, therefore, affords radicalization through group dynamics, filter bubbles and the (deceitful) presentation of the self online. (Hinds and Joinson, 2017)

Stevens and Neumann also agree that the Internet is not the principal driver of the radicalization process, but plays a role in it. While it has a virtual dimension, it is rooted in the real world. They argue that political extremists and those in the process of radicalization use the Internet for the same reasons as the broad majority of the online public. The Internet reduces the cost of communication to the extent that exchange and dissemination of information is free, provides unlimited access to much of the world's knowledge, it is easy to find people and form networks with like-minded individuals despite great geographic distances and has lowered the threshold to engage in risky or embarrassing behavior significantly because it helps to conceal the users' identity. Thus these opportunities that the Web offers can be beneficial to extremist causes. Three of the former are especially problematic in the context of radicalization: the Internet can be used to reinforce ideological messages – which become particularly problematic when the dynamics of the filter bubble come into play – and potential supporters have immediate access to contents that powerfully seek to substantiate extreme political claims. It is also very easy to join groups and integrate into more formal organizations. Furthermore, it is also comparably risk-free to seek like-minded individuals and form a

network with them. Lastly, all these together create an environment which normalizes otherwise unacceptable views and behaviors. The authors conclude that the Internet, therefore, can intensify and accelerate radicalization. However, face-to-face interaction remains pivotal because online communication cannot replace ties of friendship and kinship that form intense personal loyalties. (Stevens and Neumann, 2009) While this conclusion is relevant for counter-terrorism and counter-violent-extremism efforts, the offline connections between radicals are not subject of this paper – although they represent an important piece of the overall radicalization picture.

In his contribution to the CTC Sentinel, Berger analyzes ISIS' online recruiting behavior and discovers a common four-step approach that is applied by recruiters or supporters to radicalize targets: first contact, create micro-community, shift to private conversation, identify and encourage pro-Islamic State action suitable for the target. In the first contact stage recruiters sift through online communities that can be both radical and mainstream, to find receptive individuals. Islamic State recruiters and supporters also establish communication with potentially disenfranchised people to address and confirm their grievances – which can have a radicalizing effect, as pointed out by Hinds and Joinson. When the first contact is established a micro-community is created around the target. Thereby, the recruiter creates a large number of posts in order for the recruit to find conversation at any time. After a certain time, the recruiter tries to discourage the target to trust other Muslims with mainstream beliefs. Once a relationship starts to develop, some communication is moved to private spaces where the actual recruitment work begins. However, Berger too argues that offline physical outreach has not been abolished and still takes place as well. When the target has been sufficiently turned, the recruiter will try to identify the most likely action the target is willing to undertake and encourage implementation. (Berger, 2015)

While Berger's approach refers to Islamic State recruiting, the pattern he describes is commonly described in offline radicalization processes too: an individual is targeted or seeks guidance, a small group forms and increasingly isolates and decides on a course of action to support the cause. With or without targeted recruiting, it is not farfetched to assume that this process may as well happen online in the right-wing radical milieu: individuals discover social media networks that confirm their grievances and support their opinions. They slowly become trapped in a filter bubble and establish a network of like-minded users. In order to talk more privately or to avoid the deletion of their

accounts, they move to private spaces that further isolate them from competing opinions. There they may develop strategies for online as well as offline activism.

In his study on online radicalization centered on interviews with former German right-wing extremists, Koehler finds that the interviewees' radicalization process was shaped or even enabled through the Internet. In his study, he seeks to find out how the Internet and elements connected to it influence individual radicalization processes. Thereby he conceptualizes radicalization as the pluralization of political concepts according to a specific ideology. He argues that the best concept to depict how the Internet influences the radicalization process is the 'contrast society'. (Koehler, 2014/15)

Contrast societies serve as the guiding principle in this research because they allow for the illustration of right-wing networks within wider society and their interactions with it. Therefore, the next section elaborates on Koehler's contrast societies in detail.

### 3.3 *The German right as a contrast society*

Koehler developed an approach that addresses radical social movements' embedment into the larger society, which he calls contrast society. This concept synergizes Social Movement Theory and Counterculture Theory and highlights the dynamics of interaction between a radical group and its surrounding society. (Koehler, 2014) Thereby, the Internet is a driving force in establishing and fostering the development of radical contrast societies (Koehler, 2014/15). This concept is therefore ideal for the purpose of this research, as it synergizes the dynamics of the Internet and its enabling structures as well as the filter bubble and radicalization processes.

Koehler defines contrast societies as follows:

*“Contrast Societies can be understood as the mechanisms involved within the social system (including infrastructure and ideology) of interaction between Radical Social Movements and their surrounding societies. This mechanism starts with the Radical Social Movement's goal to redirect the Target Society towards the (ideologically) desired direction and change it into the ideologically purified version of the Target Society. This includes the alternative societal environments created as well as the ideological niches within the positive Target Society already influenced. Thus, these Contrast Societies are the habitats of*

*ideologies incompatible with their Target Societies' dominant ideologies"*  
(Koehler, 2014 pp. 30, 31)

Contrast societies rely on a dynamic exchange between the radical movement and its surrounding environment through ideology and infrastructure in order to create an ideologically purified society. Therefore, ideological concepts have to be transported into individual worldviews. The Internet thereby serves as the main facilitator as it combines the ideological pillar with the infrastructure of the radical social movement. This way, newcomers to the movement learn the ideology, language, topics, and behavior first online, before they engage in offline activities. (Koehler, 2014/15)

The target society can be either positive, to be won over, convinced or controlled, or negative, to be fought and destroyed. For the German right-wing, the population is regarded as a positive target for most parts of society are seen not as hostile but blindfolded. While some radical contrast societies differentiate between target and surrounding society, for the German neo-Nazis they are mostly congruent. The military or police, however, are considered institutions of the enemy state and to be infiltrated. In addition, efforts are being made to win over individuals within these institutions. Foreigners, Jews, and left-wing activists are considered enemies. The German neo-Nazis view the target society as a social and political battleground that is to be won over in order to re-erect the German Reich, whereby the geographical area of pre- WWII Germany is the core territory. To accomplish this, the far-right generally seeks to take over Germany legally by elections.

The German right-wing connects to society through infrastructure and ideology. Visible elements of the former can be events like concerts, rallies, celebrations, study groups and even illegal actions such as terrorism or intimidation or attack of enemies. All these events serve an important function in networking and bonding that are necessary to maintain a collective identity. Infrastructure also has an economic dimension in order to finance operations and maintain independence from official institutions like social ministries. Lastly, for the formation of a collective identity, there is corporate design – all visual aspects related to the movement. Together, these infrastructural pillars connect the movement with the target society by establishing visibility, influence and promoting the far-right way of life.

Ideology is like a clustered set of political concepts, or macroscopic structural arrangements that assign meaning to political concepts such as freedom, equality,



democracy, justice, power, and rights. This ideology identifies issues of interest, provides a legitimate vocabulary, a set of enemy definitions and a vision for the future.

It is also important to note, that radical groups do not exist in a vacuum and have therefore to interact with their surroundings continuously, not only online but also offline. Thereby they try to appeal to the general public by claiming new topics that are of general concern. If some parts of the target society accept elements of the radical ideology this is considered a success for the group.

Because these groups are still embedded in general society and subject to its rules and laws some of its elements are impossible to openly display and live without a revolution. In Germany certain National Socialist symbols and elements of its ideology are illegal (biological racism for example). Therefore some sub-groups seek to establish alternative social environments where they can live out those illegal elements of their ideology. German neo-Nazis try to establish National Liberated Zones, which usually are small villages or areas where they control the economic and societal infrastructure in order to construct an ideologically purified society.

Despite perceived ideological unity, there can, in fact, be inconsistencies that cause friction within the group. There may, for example, be tensions between negative and positive conceptions of the target society: while the police is regarded as an enemy, it is also a valuable target for recruiting efforts. In addition, the need to recruit more people to the cause necessitates intense communication with the target society which may bring unwanted influences into the group, risking damage to the ideological core.

Koehler also points out a very important fact regarding movement hierarchy and how it is perceived by the public: the foot soldiers, for example, skinheads, of far-right groups are very visible and perceived to be very dangerous and radicalized. The movement's upper ranks like lawyers and doctors, however, are often perceived as merely conservative or extreme, but not as a threat, though they may be more dangerous to society in the long term. (Koehler, 2014)

Conceptualizing the right-wing online as a contrast society provides a framework on how to assess how members and elements interact with each other and create an alternative reality online as well as how they connect to the wider online population. Twitter is a convenient platform to communicate with a large audience. Especially through the use of hashtags, a larger conversation is established that can solidify existing beliefs and ideology but also reaches the broader Twitter community.

## 4. Analysis

This chapter contains the analysis of the German right-wing. In the first sub-chapter, German right-wing actors and their ideology are introduced. This is followed by an overview of the German online landscape in subchapter 4.2, which contains a section on the political relevance of social media activity, a quick overview of media use in Germany in general as well as an introduction to media use of the right-wing. Subchapter 4.3, on right-wing actors on Twitter seeks to answer the sub-question: “*How does the German right-wing operate on Twitter?*”. Therefore, Twitter accounts of the political parties, movements, and groups introduced in sub-chapter 4.1 are analyzed, to establish how they operate on Twitter. This step also serves the purpose of identifying popular themes in the form of hashtags that will be analyzed in sub-chapter 4.4, to establish how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks.

### 4.1 *German right-wing actors and ideology*

In the West, there are three distinct waves of right-wing and xenophobic mobilization in the postwar era. The immediate postwar period was coined by McCarthyism in the United States, French Poujadism, the Socialist Reich Party in Germany and the Italian Social Movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, this was followed by the American Wallace movement, the National Democratic Party (NPD) in West Germany, Powellism and the National Front in the United Kingdom and the continuation of the Italian Social Movement. During the first two waves, the major actors were a lot more backward oriented and often revered practices, ideas and regimes that are fundamentally opposed to liberal democracy, such as biological racism, segregation in the American South and the dictatorial Third Reich. During the third wave of mobilization, from the 1980s on, right-wing parties, that are distinct from their predecessors, established themselves in most Western democracies. This third wave is coined by a complete renewal of the far-right and its politics of xenophobia and can be discerned as a general modernization shift that occurred during the 1968 leftist movements. This modernization shift also included the transition of Western industrial societies into post-industrial ones,

necessitating the development of new political dynamics. In addition, the period between the 1970s and 1990s saw a new intellectual movement, the New Right, which was a key driving force of ideological renewal. The New Right developed ethnopluralism as a departure from biological racism and white superiority and instead advocated for a segregation of cultures and ethnicities – a global apartheid. It served as a counter model to multiculturalism and defended the legitimacy of a European resistance to cultural mixing. While the New Right as a movement is dead, its ideas have survived and entered the political debate. None of the contemporary right-wing political parties advocate for a return to pre-democratic political orders, they all highlight their support for democratic constitutions and the republican principles, but with a clear focus on defensive ultra-nationalism. (Minkenberg, 2013)

Whereas the general population has increased its acceptance of plurality over the past decades, xenophobia, Islamophobia and chauvinism are still widespread and have recently grown in some population segments. To date, the German far-right has caused 149 deaths since 1989. The number of physical and psychological injuries, however, is much larger. In 2011, 16.873 politically motivated far-right crimes have been documented; most of them (11.475) were propaganda crimes. The latter refer to activities like for example the use of anti-constitutional symbols. There were 1.377 cases of damage to property, 1.065 cases of *Volkshetze* (incitement of the people) and 128 cases of coercion or threat. All in, a right-wing crime is recorded once every hour in Germany. (Schellenberg, 2013)

Victim advice centers, human rights organizations as well as international institutions criticize that there is a discrepancy between government data and data from non-governmental organizations regarding politically motivated right-wing violence and crimes of prejudice. In 2012, the government counted 106 murders since 1990, but various journalists and representatives of victim advice centers have recorded 149 deaths. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation even counts 182 fatalities. In their criticism, aforementioned groups point out that crimes of prejudice are often ignored by officials because the perpetrators cannot be assigned to any right-wing group and the act was consequently not documented as a racist one. In this context, it is worth noting, that the far-right scene also seeks to infiltrate the state's political and security apparatus. There have been studies on racism among German police officers, but research on security

authorities as players in the right-wing scene and their potential role in spreading far-right no-go zones and hegemonies has just begun. (Schellenberg, 2013) Yet, as Koehler points out, the infiltration of the state apparatus is, in fact, part of the wider strategy to take over Germany politically.

### Right-wing actors in Germany

The most influential parties today are the National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD), *Die Rechte* (The Right) and the AfD.

The NPD was founded in 1964 and succeeded to unite several far-right splinter groups. Many of its officials were former Nazis and the party propagated National Socialist, anti-communist and conservative Catholic elements. While it quickly saw its support dwindle, the party overcame political marginalization under the chairmanship of Udo Voigt between 1996 and 2011. Under Voigt, a new and more radical manifesto was worked out. The party is openly anti-establishment and propagates a biological theory of race, race-based policy and the expropriation and deportation of Germans with an immigration background. In 1998, the NPD introduced a three-pillar concept which is designed to liberate it from its role as a party that competes in elections without a significant presence in society. Those strategic campaign pillars were designed for the medium-term political struggle. The first two pillars are the fight for the streets and the fight for the minds; they are based on the assumption that the party will only gain political power if it can mobilize its sympathizers in the streets. These two pillars are synonymous to Koehler's assessment: the streets and minds are a battleground to be won over. In the NPD's approach there is a big discrepancy between its communication with voters in pledges and electoral manifestos, in which it portrays itself relatively moderate, and its internal communication, like educational brochures for cadres, which are a lot more radical. Once the first two pillars have succeeded the party plans to increase its educational activities, train party members and create intellectual networks to achieve the third pillar: the fight for voters and parliaments. This, as Koehler points out, represents the final stage: taking over Germany by elections in order to re-establish the German Reich. In 2004, a fourth pillar was added and which seeks to unite the right-wing scene to win the struggle for an organized will. (Schellenberg, 2013) These pillars draw a very clear picture of the NPD as a contrast society. It seeks to win over the

minds and streets in order to “*redirect the Target Society towards the (ideologically desired direction)*” (Koehler, 2014 p.30). By adding the fourth pillar, Voigt successfully gave members of previously prohibited parties and groups a new home inside the NPD, which caused a further radicalization of the party (Brandstetter, 2016). Ultimately the party seeks to turn Germany into its ideologically purified vision – legally – by means of election.

The NPD has been establishing flourishing ties with the right-wing subculture since the 90s. This rendered the party more radical and while it had previously been composed of aging ex-Nazis, today it actively seeks young people and tries to induce them with leisure activities and free music CDs. Especially the CD *NPD Schulhof* (NPD Schoolyard) which has been issued in several editions is indicative of how much more radical the party has become. The party’s expansion into a movement helps attract young people. This way, ideology, and infrastructure can be used to connect to society. In addition, the movement structure can help to avoid repressive state instruments, as subcultural activities are a lot more difficult to track and monitor.

While it is apparent that the NPD rejects the German constitution, previous attempts to ban the party have failed. Attempts in the early 2000s primarily failed for strategic reasons because German security services had penetrated the NPD and a ban would have driven it underground and penetration under these conditions would have been difficult to maintain. (Schellenberg, 2013) This signifies Sedgwick’s conflict of interest between competing agendas: while the NPD is a threat for the integration agenda, its infiltration is valuable for the security agenda. In addition, as Sedgwick argues, in security terms it may be wise to allow an organization to continue because it offers a less radical alternative to other groups (Sedgwick, 2010). To some extent, the latter backfired because members of banned extremist groups joined the NPD and drove it towards further radicalization. (Schellenberg, 2013) The most recent attempt to ban the party was in 2017. The Federal Constitutional Court declined the Federal States’ request to ban the party because there is no conclusive evidence that there is a noticeable threat to the liberal democratic order. The court argued that the party neither has a general tendency for criminal action, nor control over extremists that are organized in movements (outside the state ‘system’) nor has created any nationally liberated zones in which the state has lost its power. (Lichdi, 2017) Although the party has regularly suffered from repressive measures by the German state, as well as fights between its

radical and more moderate factions and has been subject to internal scandals and public scrutiny after the discovery of the National Socialist Underground (NSU) (Schellenberg, 2013), it remained the most successful German right-wing party until the emergence of the AfD (Steffen, 2017). While during election campaigns both parties use similar parables, the AfD has a much more moderate public image, which cost the NPD votes (Pfahl-Traugber, 2016).

The AfD party was founded in 2013 and with its populism and exaggeration of political crises like the Euro- and migration crises successfully gained support in the population. It portrays itself as an outsider to the system and offers simple answers to complex problems which appeals to its voters. It originally began as a Euro-skeptic party, then turned into an anti-immigration party (Häusler, 2016) and is now increasingly moving to the far-right (Lüdeke, 2018, Fieber, 2017, Ayyadi, 2017). Its members are former members of the established conservative German parties, as well as medium- to far-right parties. The AfD considerably shifted to the right at its 2015 federal party conference when Frauke Petri won the election for party chairmanship against Bernd Lucke, a much more liberal opponent, because she rallied for the party's right-wing's support. This caused the party's more liberal wing under Lucke to split-off and found the Alliance for Progress Party (*Allianz für Fortschritt*). In 2015/16, the AfD successfully used the migration crisis to gain more support and especially its regional associations in Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt moved considerably towards a right-wing nationalist people's party. (Häusler, 2016) In the last years members in leading positions have made increasingly controversial remarks<sup>1</sup>, which at first caused internal discussions, but now remain completely uncommented. This demonstrates that a right-wing ideology has become the norm for the party. (Ayyadi, 2017) Another indication of this is an AfD event in February: there, the not the party, but its audience stunned the public with its chanting of slogans associated with the German extreme-right. This too, showcases that the AfD increasingly attracts right-wing extremists (Lüdeke, 2018). In 2017, a WhatsApp group chat of AfD Thuringia was leaked, which counts as further evidence towards the AfD's classification as a right-wing, as opposed to a populist

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<sup>1</sup> Björn Höcke, head of the AfD Thuringia has repeatedly and publicly made radical statements such as calling Berlin's Holocaust memorial a memorial of shame, the migration crisis a global conspiracy to weaken Europe as well as explicit references revealing his biological racism. Other leading party members have made statements revealing their Islamophobia and contortion of WWII (Ayyadi, 2017).

party. André Poggenburg, head of AfD Saxony-Anhalt, for example, commented phrases like “*Germany for the Germans*” (*Deutschland den Deutschen*), and “*national defense and defense against terrorism. And... expansion of the outer borders?*” (*Landesverteidigung und Terrorabwehr. Und... Erweiterung der Außengrenzen?*) (as cited in Fieber, 2017). Such statements further underline the party’s shift towards the extreme-right. (Fieber, 2017)

*Die Rechte* is a political party that was founded in 2012 by members that had left the right-wing party German People’s Union (*Deutsche Volks Union*) because it merged with the NPD. The party portrays itself ‘as extreme-right’, but not as extreme as the NPD. In fact, however, members of comradeships banned due to their extremeness, occupy high positions within *Die Rechte*. Many of its members are known to authorities for their attempts at intimidation and violent assaults against journalists, police and political opponents. (Schmidt, 2017) It has departments in 13 federal states, whereby North Rhine Westphalia has most members, as members of neo-Nazi groups that were banned in 2012 migrated into the party. The party organizes public events like demonstrations, provides informational points and distributes leaflets. Its main ideological focus is coined by a racist, anti-foreigners and anti-Islam stance. (Die Rechte, 07.2018) During the regional election campaign, it called for the maintenance of the German identity and demanded an end to the German ‘war-guilt-complex’. Ideally, all borders should temporarily be closed and armed guards be positioned and refugees should be detained in a secured area – just like Guantanamo, but without torture (as cited in *Porträt: Die Rechte*, MDR).

Aside from political parties, there is also a heterogeneous network of far-right movements and subcultures in Germany. During the 70s and 80s neo-Nazi *Kampfgruppen* (battle groups) formed in addition to new radical parties. These battle groups participated in paramilitary exercises to prepare for a national revolutionary overthrow of the Federal Republic of Germany. 1992 saw a wave of bans following attacks on asylum seekers. In reaction to this, movement leaders restructured organized neo-Nazism and from this time on, groups have formed without state certification (for example associations). Thus, instead of official networks that may be subject to prosecution, they set up a network of local *Kameradschaften* (neo-Nazi comradeships) that operated autonomously. With this strategy, representatives of the comradeships,

also called *Freie Kräfte* (Free Forces) successfully set themselves apart from other right-wing parties who they accused to be too legalistic and parliamentary. Today the comradeships are the most dynamic German neo-Nazi associations and their organizational structure is exported to other countries. Their members are aggressive right-wing rockers, militant neo-Nazis, and right-wing youths. These groups are often responsible for violent attacks and the establishment of no-go zones. Yet, they only attract public attention when members carry out terrorist activities or when weapons are found. Some comradeships have been banned by the courts, yet the development of right-wing extremism in Germany shows that the same people continuously operate under new structures. Since the failed attempt to ban the NPD, the relationship between the comradeships and the party has improved, because the latter emerged from this test more mature. They now view the NPD as a part of the national resistance and have all joined it. (Schellenberg, 2013) Because movement members are also represented in the NPD and based on the fact that the comradeships act secretly and are difficult to track on public social media, they will not be included in the analysis. For the sake of completion, however, they are included here.

The Identitarian Movement (*Identitäre Bewegung*, IB) represents a new, modern far-right and primarily seeks to attract youths. It was founded as an association in 2014, inspired by the French *Bloc Identitaire*. It has 400 to 500 members that are organized in 15 regional associations. The movement tries to distinguish itself from the traditional far-right and adopts guerrilla tactics that are usually associated with the left, like fastening banners to the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The movement films campaigns like this and then spreads the material on social media. Members hand out brochures and stickers and online the movement sells its music, posters, and accessories. This way, a corporate identity is created, constituting a visual aspect of contrast societies. Overall, the Identitarians portray themselves as modern and cool, but intellectual at the same time. Some extremism experts believe that it is this mixture makes rebellious youths easily susceptible to radicalization, especially due to the fact that the leftist scene has become less shocking than the far-right scene. The Identitarians have been watched by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitutions since August 2016, due to their radicalization and anti-asylum stance and their general rejection of democratic values like equal rights, pluralism and human rights (Simon, 2018). In Austria, some of the movement's key figures face trial in court for forming a criminal association and



incitement. This demonstrates that the Identitarians are indeed on the far-end of the right-wing spectrum. In addition, in the course of the investigation, a video surfaced which showed the Austrian movement's leader say that trolling and hating are standard online maneuvers (Identitäre vor Gericht, 2018). This is shocking, yet unsurprising and an aspect of the movement's online 'strategy' that will be assessed in the following sub-chapters.

Reconquista Germanica (RG) is an online community that was responsible for various right-wing social media campaigns during the 2017 federal elections. This alone makes it an interesting subject for analysis. Because it is a very new phenomenon and its organization is very secretive, not much is known about it. To avoid repetition and not take away from the social network analysis, RG will not be discussed in detail here.

When introducing the actors in Germany's far-right scene, the NSU also needs to be mentioned. In 2011, the German police accidentally uncovered a far-right terrorist cell when looking for thieves. When they tracked two suspects Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt to their mobile home, they shot themselves to avoid custody. Their accomplice Beate Zschäpe was taken into custody shortly after, when she tried to set fire to their shared apartment to destroy evidence. The trio has been active for around one decade and killed at least ten people, carried out bomb attacks and robbed at least fifteen banks and one food discounter. The money taken there was used to finance activities like the production of an anti-Semitic Monopoly game (Progromoly) and a film that glorifies violence. The investigation into the case has uncovered that militant right-wing extremism does not involve autonomous individuals but in fact a complex network. A 2007 audio tape recorded a conversation between two prominent neo-Nazis discussing the situation of Zschäpe, Mundlos, and Böhnhardt with another person. Also, some of the acts committed by the trio were known to the extreme right-wing community. The right-wing music group *Gigi und die braunen Stadtmusikanten* (Gigi and the Brown Town Musicians) published a CD in 2010 that contains a song called *Döner Killer* (Kebab Killer), which praises the NSU's crimes. The extreme right community also integrated signs and symbols into their lives, like clothing with the phrase *Killerdöner nach Thüringer Art* (Killer Kebab the Thuringian way) and the Pink Panther character and song, which both featured in the NSU's film. (Schellenberg, 2013)

Of course, there are more right radical actors in Germany, though introducing them all goes beyond the limits of this paper. In addition, many are positioned on the verge of right-wing extremism and operate in grey zones. It can, therefore, be difficult to clearly distinguish between right-wing and right-wing extremist actors.

### Right-wing Ideology

In order to provide an overview of the right-wing's ideology and visions, this section introduces the NPD's ideology in detail. While there are many far-right organizations in Germany, the NPD is one of the oldest and, due to the fact that it is a party with a political program, its ideology and goals are easily accessible.

In line with Koehler's argument, that certain elements of the far-right ideology cannot be openly expressed, the party does not talk about National Socialist ideology or issues that fall under the penal code, openly. A revision of its political lexicon as well as statements and brochures, however, reveals its close ideological affiliation with the Hitler regime. The NPD and comradeships seek to overcome the 'system'. Popular terms like 'system', 'system parties', 'system press' and 'system politicians' have first been used by the NSDAP. In order to overcome the system, they seek to reestablish the German Reich. It is argued that the German Reich never ceased to exist, but instead has been incapable of action since the arrest of Hitler's successor Dönitz by the British occupying power. Therefore, the Federal Republic of Germany is forced upon the country by the occupiers. In addition, the Germans were never allowed a plebiscite about the German Basic Law, which therefore lacks legitimacy. This mindset signifies the party's rejection of the German political system and clearly states its goal: to overcome the Federal Republic of Germany. (Van Hüllen, 2008)

As mentioned, the party regards 'the system' as its enemy; this includes political institutions, core values of democracy (which are decried as human rights ideology and the Western community of ideology), the principle of open societies with international contacts and relations ('multiculti', globalism, one world system), free market economy and world trade and sometimes specific political actors (system politicians). Especially the United States, its political system, multicultural and tolerant society, its economic system and military potential provides an ideal enemy for the right-wing scene. In addition, the US is blamed much more than the Soviets, for conquering the NS regime. Thereby the party profits from a continued subliminal anti-Americanism in the old

federal states (pre-1990 Germany) that continues despite successful democratization. It is believed, that to establish world dominance, the US relies on its financial establishment, whose key players are Jews, or people that are associated with Zionism or Israel.

The core of the right-wing's worldview is anti-Semitism. Due to its culpability, this cannot be publicly expressed, yet becomes clear when digging deeper into the ideology. The NPD avoids antisemitic statements and instead favors suggestive hints and secondary Antisemitism (Jews abuse the Holocaust's memory to trap Germans in their guilt and derive more and more material benefits from it). (Van Hüllen, 2008)

Conspiracy theories are directly connected to the enemy image: due to the fact that the latter is more often an emotional construct than real observable individuals or groups, they are difficult to prove. The enemy, therefore, remains anonymous and operates in secret, hiding behind reality as we see it and working on a global, evil plan. Traditionally, many conspiracy theories in far-right circles involve the United States and Jews. The September 11 attacks, for example, are considered to be an inside job, in order to allow the US control over oil resources in the Middle East. (Van Hüllen, 2008)

A conception of the true-to-life idea of man (*lebensrichtiges Menschenbild*) serves as the basis for the NPD's far-right racial ideology. In a Darwinist fashion, man struggles for survival, whereby the strong win and the weak perish. This struggle between strong groups, people, nations, and races against weaker ones – which are generally considered inferior and unlivable – is the core of the far-right idea of man. Willingness to admit to this philosophy varies among the far-right groups. While the NPD avoids addressing the inhumane foundation of its political philosophy, the comradeships openly display their beliefs. The NPD does, however, accuse other political parties of following a wrong idea of man, which defines man as naturally good and equal. (Van Hüllen, 2008) These views find expression in a profound xenophobia and in Germany specifically Islamophobia and hostility towards non-conservative lifestyles, such as same-sex partnerships, partnerships without marriage and/ or children and women in careers.

The NPD's disregard for human rights makes it a threat to Germany's free liberal order, especially if the far-right expands its influence in society. The true-to-life image of man finds political expression in the people's community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). Folklore and culture are considered to be the foundation of human dignity. Language, culture, and customs are central tenets of human identity. The people's community is therefore

based on shared ancestry and aims at creating an ethnically homogenous population. 'Others' are therefore ostracized. Also, the people's community is more important than the individual. Because folklore and culture make up human dignity, a foreigner who lives in Germany is not only not a member of the people's community; he or she also has no human dignity. This finds expression in the demands to return refugees to their home countries and the rejection of immigration on the whole. In the right-wing's mindset, this is the only way to serve the greater good and to have a healthy people's community. Just as Koehler points out, all foreigners are enemies. Because this is an integral part of the radical right as a contrast society, evidence of it on Twitter will be analyzed later. In addition, the people's community is all-encompassing and contribution is compulsory. Deducting from the NPD's demand to transform prisons into work camps, contribution also includes forced labor. The NPD's members believe that they alone comprehend the interests of the people's community which signifies its dictatorial ambitions. Human rights are considered instruments of globalization that ought to help the United States attain world dominance. (Van Hüllen, 2008) The liberal regime and its left-wing activists – as pointed out by Koehler - are often blamed for society's ills. Evidence of this will be included in the Twitter analysis in chapter 4.3 and 4.4.

In the past, the right-wing has made references to the occidental culture and Christianity. Today, however, the NPD and comradeships are atheists with a neo-pagan vision of society. The fact that pagan-Germanic sagas are set in a world of struggle against nature and violence and state building and trade were non-existent relates historic Germanic paganism closely to neo-Nazism and its visions for society. In addition, Christian values like peace and altruism are diametrically opposed to neo-Nazism. Nonetheless, the NPD does not include neo-pagan elements in its official party program; they are however available for purchase in its online warehouse (*Deutsches Warenhaus*). The warehouse also sells a lot WWII military literature – since the spread of NS literature is punishable, the armed forces (*Wehrmacht*) and the armed wing of the SS (*Waffen-SS*) are glorified extensively in these books. (Van Hüllen, 2008) Such economic infrastructure provides the scene with important funds and also provides visible elements that help to shape identity. There is, in fact, a wide range of neo-Nazi apparel, music, and symbols that are designed to appeal to susceptible youths. Far-right groups sponsor different events like concerts that are supposed to attract young

supporters – they are an important element of the far-right’s infrastructure. At such events, hate towards foreigners as well as the system of the Federal Republic of Germany is shouted and *Sieg Heil* chanting and Hitler salutes are common. Popular bands include *Die Lunikoff Verschwörung* (The Lunikoff Conspiracy), *Faustrecht* (Fist Law) and *Feuer & Flamme* (Fire & Flame).

The appearance of the classic neo-Nazi has changed too: the current fashion is rich in symbols that unambiguously communicate a message to insiders, while outsiders remain unaware. Typical far-right apparel is made up of dark shirts and hoodies with obscure far-right names, such as Thor Steinar and Consdable as well as symbols and codes, like the number 88, indicating HH, which stands for *Heil Hitler*. (Schellenberg, 2013)

## 4.2 *Mapping the online landscape*

This sub-chapter seeks to provide an overview of relevant aspects of Germany’s online landscape, to serve as a background to the subsequent analyses. It starts with a section on the political significance of social media activity in order to clarify the potential of social media activity to have real-world consequences, as well as these processes’ dynamics. This is followed by a section on media use in Germany. Lastly, the far-right’s media use is analyzed.

### Political Significance of Social Media Activity

Studies have shown that social media activity affects offline political participation. In her 2015 article, Shelly Boulianne conducts a meta-data analysis of current research on the relationship between social media use and political participation. Her meta-analysis assesses the results of 36 studies, from mostly well-established democracies, but also new ones (Chile and Singapore) and formal ones (Columbia, Egypt, and Tunisia) as well as China. She finds that there is an overall positive relationship between the use of social media and participation in civic and political life. However, regarding political dissent in the form of right-wing extremism, the studies the author relied on for the meta-analysis do not differentiate clearly enough between different types of participation, like participation in a demonstration and voting. Therefore Boulianne concludes that it is difficult to isolate the relationship between social media and protest.

(Boulianne, 2015) It nonetheless confirms that there is a correlation between social media activity and political participation.

Kahne and Bowyer demonstrate that especially a high number of weak ties on social media correlate with offline political action. This is due to the fact, that individuals with large social networks are more likely to be exposed to political content and discussion. Thereby the authors distinguish between friendship directed activity (using social media to communicate with friends and family) and interest directed activity (using social media for ones' personal interests). They found out that friendship directed activity promotes later engagement in online participatory politics and interest directed online activity promotes offline political activity. (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018) Especially the latter contributes significant support for the approach taken in this paper: the German right-wing uses social media to address issues of public concern like immigration, pedophilia and animal welfare to gain supporters. If engagement with personal interests on social media does promote offline political activity, then social media uses and abuses by the right-wing carry political significance, for it draws others towards its ideology, encourages offline participation and may ultimately affect public opinion and electoral behavior.

In his study on social media and protest behavior Valenzuela assesses protest behavior and the use of social media as a news source, for political opinion expression, for joining causes and to gain mobilizing information. In their function as news outlets, social media become venues for interpersonal discussion, as well as reflection and learning, which motivate to participate. Opinion expression on social media similarly leads to political engagement as political discussions do (Valenzuela, 2013). This is an important insight because it demonstrates that mere opinion expression is sufficient to trigger political engagement. Carefully chosen political facts and elaborate discussions are thus not necessary to convince people to engage in politics. For policy-makers this implies that there is indeed a wide range of option to engage citizens. However, it also demonstrates how easy it can be for the right-wing to reach out to others.

The author finds a positive relationship between the frequency of social media use and protest behavior: frequent users are almost eleven times more likely to participate in demonstrations than non-users. Heavy users are seven to nine times more likely to express their demands to authorities and in the mass media. In addition, the probability of attending a demonstration increases from 4 percent to 33 percent across the whole

spectrum of the frequency of social media use. Valenzuela concludes that social media serves as a tool for, instead of a cause of, political action. (Valenzuela, 2013) Regarding the present research, this is an important baseline assumption: it underlines the potential influence that the right-wing has on social media.

### *Media use in Germany*

An annual report on the changing environment of news across countries finds that although echo chambers and filter bubbles are real, users of social media on average experience more diversity than nonusers. In order to establish a more nuanced understanding of polarization, the authors mapped the respondents' political beliefs on a left-right spectrum, together with the news they consume. The mid-point on the spectrum represents the respondents' mid-point of political opinion and the size of each bubble the volume of consumption of each brand. Figure 2 below shows Germany's audience map for the top online news brands, and Figure 3, the same for the United States.

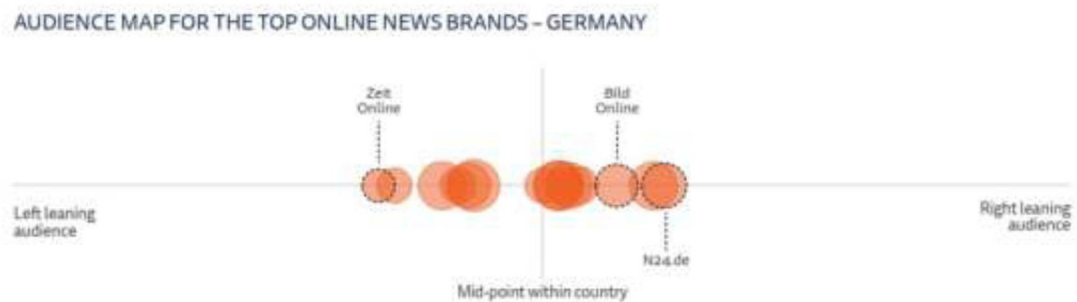


Figure 2: Audience map for top online news brands – Germany (Newman et al., 2017, p. 21)

What becomes evident is the great contrast between the two: while the US graph shows a deeply polarized media landscape, reflecting a very polarized society, the media brands in Germany are clustered around the center. In general, German media can be described as corporatist and does not sufficiently challenge economic and political elites. During the height of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, this became an issue of contempt for many right-wing groups: they revived the term *Lügenpresse* (lying press) from the Nazi era to highlight the perceived left-wing bias and suppression of debate.

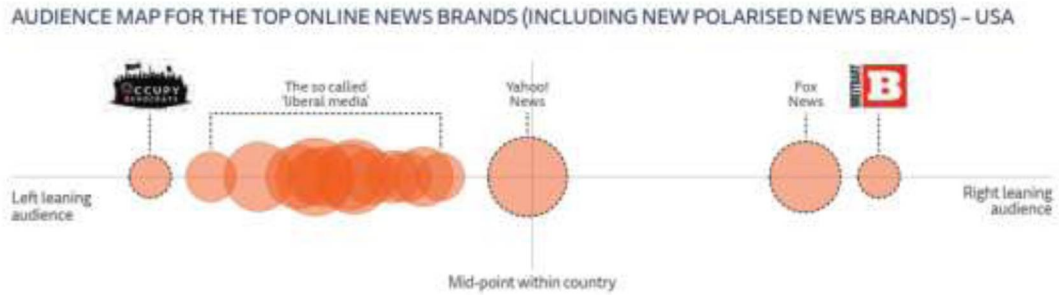


Figure 3: Audience map for top online news brands – USA (Newman et al., 2017, p. 20)

Nonetheless, 42 percent of German respondents claim they believe news media is reliable in helping them to distinguish fact from fiction. Newman et al. also find, that a significant number of people across all countries curate their social feeds and follow or add users for news and one in five blocks others based on the news they have posted. To date, Germany is one of the countries with the toughest hate speech laws and is looking to make them even tougher in the age of social media. This was motivated by fears that false information or incitement may influence last year's election campaign. (Newman et al., 2017) Despite these efforts, however, the right-wing succeeded to hijack part of the political online debate. They organized on a private online platform that they label Reconquista Germanica and organized there to target for example a discussion on television between Merkel and her opponent Schulz on social media and succeeded in creating trending hashtags like #nichtmeinekanzlerin (not my chancellor). This happened with the help of sometimes thousands of activists, as well as bots. (Gensing and Kampf, 2018) The Reconquista Germanica phenomenon will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent subchapters. It appears, however, that the right-wing scene dynamically adapts to the changing media environment – just as it adapted to the changing offline landscape, as pointed out earlier.

### Media use by the right-wing

For radical movements, groups and also individuals, the Internet provides a space for ideological development and advancement. Many perceive it to be an open and anonymous space and are online more radical than offline. Due to its openness, everyone can participate and contribute to the ideology. Thereby, the broader movement is shaped by a plurality of thoughts and ideas, from which each individual can pick whichever strand suits him or her best and actively shape ideology. This can provide individuals with the feeling that they make crucial contributions and at the same time



can convey the feeling that the movement gains critical mass and inspire them to increase their involvement. Due to the perceived feeling of security and importance to the cause, individuals may be driven towards further radicalization. This effect can be witnessed in right-wing clothing brands: the Internet is an important retailer space for right-wing merchandise like clothing and music, which provide the movement with important funds. Such brands have been shown to be in a race to the radical bottom: they have to be the most radical in order to convince customers and gain their loyalty, which has the side effect of encouraging more radicalism in their customers.

While there are some ‘Computer-Nazis’ that are only active online, most take their activities to the next level. Therefore, “*the Internet can be seen like a permanent gateway to offline political activism*” (Koehler, 2014/15 p. 128). It is thus not separated from the real world, but dynamically connected to it. This dynamic interconnectedness can give activists and potential recruits an opportunity to convince themselves of the movement’s strength and to commit to the cause. Due to the former, the Internet often poses as a gateway into a radical movement. Often, group members monitor chat forums on social media and step in at the right moment to lure people into discussions. (Koehler, 2014/15)

The right-wing scene has used the Internet since the 1990s. The first websites were not very appealing and mostly text-based. With the turn of the century, a new generation of right-wing extremists took to the Internet and created Web pages bearing obvious Nazi symbols, often illegal ones, denied the Holocaust and called for violence against foreigners. Those pages were aimed at reaching members of the scene. At the same time, the Internet was used for extensive networking and exchange of information. In the following years, the number of far-right websites increased and the contents became more and more professional. Today, right-wing websites are tailored to appeal to teenagers. Social media has added a further dimension to the far-right’s online presence: hate speech can easily reach millions of people and thus, the use of social media is an important component of the scene’s strategy. With the help of the Internet, the far-right scene has modernized significantly. Teenagers have turned into their most important target population and they are easily approachable on social media and video platforms. In 2010, 25 percent of teenagers between 12 and 19 years have encountered right-wing contents on the Web. (Glaser 2012) The NPD’s news site German Voice (*Deutsche*

*Stimme*) for example published a detailed article on how to create profiles on social media that portray the user as friendly and open and appealing to outsiders. Ultimately this aims to make the NPD visible outside of far-right groups and portray it as the party that citizens can vote for safely (Lang, Müller, Rafael and Wolf, 2010).

How exactly social media is used by the right-wing will be established in the subsequent chapters.

### 4.3 *The German right-wing on Twitter*

This subchapter seeks to establish how the German right-wing operates on Twitter. Therefore, in the following, prominent right-wing parties and groups on Twitter are analyzed. To diversify the analysis, important or controversial members' Twitter accounts are also included and if any popular or specifically promising content surfaces, this too will be included.

#### AfD on Twitter

The AfD has an official Twitter account (120.000 followers), as well as accounts for the federal states, its parliamentary group (19.100 followers) and the federal parliamentary groups and its magazine AfD Kompakt (15.200 followers). In the federal elections 2017, the party was most successful in Saxony, where it gained 27 percent of the vote. Yet, *afd\_sachsen* has merely 272 followers and five tweets. The Saxonian parliamentary group (*afd\_slt*) has almost 5.100 followers and 2.400 tweets. Its Thuringian account, where it received 22.7 percent of the vote is more popular with almost 5.000 followers and 8.000 tweets. (Rohleder and Naumann, 2017) Geographic voting behavior, therefore, does not overlap with geographic Twitter activity. Yet in Saxony for example, the AfD was particularly popular in small rural municipalities. Rathmannsdorf, for example, has only 1.000 inhabitants and 46.2 percent voted for AfD (Zeisling, 2017). This may be based on the comparably old population: the average age there is 50 years (Freistaat Saxe, 2011), one of the eldest in Saxony.

Afd tweets around 16 tweets per day on average, mostly inflammatory banners and appeals that criticize for example the media, the German *Bundeswehr*, immigration politics, and Merkel. An example can be seen in Figure 4. The image shows Osama bin Laden's bodyguard Sami A. who was deported to Tunisia, despite an administrative

court's ruling that he shall remain in Germany because he may be subject to torture. Sami A. was deported nonetheless because the court's ruling was communicated to the Office for Migration and Refugees when he was already on the plane to Tunisia. The affected administrative court voiced that his deportation was illicit. Thus, the federal government made efforts to return him. to Germany to rectify the satiation. (Diehl and Gathman, 2018)



Figure 4: image example from afd, Alternative für Deutschland (afd), 14.07.2018, tweet

According to the AfD's interpretation of events, however, the return of bin Laden's bodyguard is unacceptable. The image it tweeted shows bin Laden and the German flag. The red banner on the top reads: "*how the rule of law goes down the drain*" and the white writing translates to: "*return of bin Laden's bodyguard has been ordered*". This case provides a significant example of how parties like the AfD manipulate facts to further their agenda. Although hosting Osama bin Laden's bodyguard is unpleasant, his deportation was illegal and represents a violation of the rule of law. The AfD, however, argues the opposite and claims his return would be just that.

AfD mostly retweets the AfD in parliament, afdimbundestag (281 times), Alice Weidel (266 times), Jörg Meuthen (189), the party's official speaker and Georg Pazderski, deputy speaker and chair of AfD Berlin and the party's press office as well as AfD Kompakt (111 times each). To spread the word on issues the party wants to put on the agenda, afd asks its followers to retweet certain topics to increase visibility. In fact, some of its most retweeted tweets are a call for compulsory age tests for underage refugees (905 retweets and 1.296 favorites) and a tweet that calls for resistance to an EU-tax (866 retweets and 1.296 favorites). The first tweet also included a link to Facebook, where it got 2.045 likes and was shared 2.792 times.

The account's followers appear to be rather diverse. Many accounts do not give away any information on their users' political orientation. Others can be easily identified as far-right, however, a survey of afd's 120.000 followers is very difficult. As it is a reasonably large political party it attracts the attention of all types of users, from supporters and voters to the opposition, journalists, and left-wing activists. Browsing through afd's followers, acewrex86 attracted attention due to his tweet containing a link to a private server on the Discord social network, called *Ritterkreuzorden*. In his tweet, acewrex86 invites all patriots, AfD and NPD members as well as the Right to join him there. The account only has 70 followers, so this tweet will probably not reach many but it represents an attempt to relocate the conversation to a more private place. Following the link, one gets directed to the aims and rules of the server. The stated goal is to return patriotism to the German population in order to help the AfD achieve electoral victories in the federal states as well as in the federal election 2021 and to help make Germany a more sovereign nation again in the long-term. The members' status is classified using military ranks. When users post a lot and appear trustworthy enough, they get promoted to higher ranks which automatically unlocks new discussion groups on the server. At the time of writing *Ritterkreuzorden* had only 63 members and is therefore rather small. However, on Discord, this group can network more freely and privately than on public spaces like Twitter. Therefore it can be assumed that there is a tendency for superficial networks to form on Twitter, that then migrate to more private places like on Discord.

Afd follows 767 accounts, many of them AfD functionaries, as well as journalists and news sites. Some accounts, however, are more 'shady' like dunkeldenk. He has a German flag as well as two crossed swords in his username and in his bio he voices support for Brexit, AfD, and Trump. He tweets and retweets inflammatory content from various German and international users like refugee crime rates and fear of the deep state and Islam. None of the contents are particularly extreme; however, they unambiguously identify the user as a member of the far-right spectrum. The link included in dunkeldenk's bio leads to a more conclusive picture: it leads to the user's profile on Gab. Gab is an American based social network created as an alternative to Twitter and promotes itself as the Free Speech Social Network and has become a popular alternative for people who have been banned from Twitter. Andrew Torba, the founder of Gab believes there is a general trend towards limiting freedom of expression but claims to be no supporter of the alt-right. Gab's logo, a frog, however, bears an

interesting resemblance to Pepe the frog, who is a popular meme in the far-right scene. Torba claims though that the frog represents a biblical reference to the plague of frogs in Exodus and signifies releasing the frogs on Silicon Valley to expose the corruption and censorship there. (Yates, 2016) While dunkeldenk's Twitter profile is more moderate – possibly to not get banned – he does not hold back on his Gab account. An example is given in Figure 5.



Figure 5: dunkeldenk on Gab, 15.07.2018

He also reposts various posts by users who seek to reach out to their community because they were banned on Twitter and hope their followers will follow them to Gab. The fact that such posts are reposted on Gab signifies that much of the community is in fact already using the platform. The AfD itself also has various accounts on Gab, but none of them are in use.

Another interesting fact that came up during a brief survey of dunkeldenk's followers is the red cross many use in their names, together with the acronym QDF, as can be seen in a screenshot taken of his followers in Figure 6. This appears to be protest-behavior by the far-right scene on Twitter's new quality filters; QFD stands for Quality Filter Discrimination. Because Twitter has come increasingly under pressure to respond to fake accounts and hate speech it has introduced new quality filters in mid-2018. They render certain accounts' contents invisible if they are not clearly identifiable as ill-natured. (Heuzeroth, 2018) Protest in the form of red crosses and QFD can, therefore, be seen on many right-wing Twitter profiles. A more thorough analysis #QFD will be done in the subsequent sub-chapter.





Figure 6: dunkeldenk's followers

Returning to accounts whom afd follows, it can be observed that most are other party members. Their followers however, appear to be a lot more homogenous, than the official AfD's account. While the latter mainly tweets and retweets political contents of its popular members in high positions, its individual members also share more local contents and retweet non-Afd users. In fact, many party members' as well as local AfD groups' Twitter names bear the red cross and #QFD. AfD Heidelberg for example has included both in its name and bio. Its followers appear a lot more extreme in their views than the followers of AfD's official accounts that do not protest the quality filters.

Most official AfD accounts use Twitter for populist appeals to their followers regarding current political news. Thereby the party seeks to take any chance it can get to undermine the current government and its policies. Especially the AfD's official account reaches a large number of followers whom it seeks to convince with its inflammatory tweets. While the entire AfD's Twitter network is huge, it can be

summarized that the followers of individuals appear to be much more radical and active on Twitter, than the followers of accounts like the AfD's parliamentary groups. In addition, some official accounts have adopted emblems of the right-wing online culture, such as the red crosses and #QFD hashtags that seems to connect the far-right scene on Twitter. Therefore, the AfD's overall Twitter presence succeeds to appeal to a broad public but general, albeit populist messages, as well as to the more radical community through its regional and individual accounts.

### NPD on Twitter

The NPD does not have one official Twitter account, but a variety, like for example NPD Federal Organization (npdde), accounts for the Federal States and some cities. Npdde has almost 5.000 followers and tweets 4.7 times per day. There is no interaction with other users, save for Ronny Zasowk (ronnyzasowk), the party's chair, which npdde has retweeted once. The hashtags used are also very general and do not offer any insights. Zasowk, on the other hand, is more active. He has 1.600 followers and tweets two times per day. He frequently interacts with Martin Sellner (martin\_sellner), co-chair of the Identitarian Movement Austria and a user called Heinrich Krug (heinrich\_krug). A hashtag he often uses is #MerkelMussWeg (Merkel has to go), which is analyzed in the next chapter because it represents the far-right revisionist ambitions. His followers are a mixture of mostly German, but also some Dutch and American right-wing to right extreme users.

Npdde's tweets depict the situation in Germany bleak and threatening: there is, for example, a tweet about the Rabat-Process declaration that accuses the German government of having signed a deal that would allow for targeted mass-immigration to Europe by non-European immigrants. Also, refugees are branded as illegal immigrants and a recent ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court that declared the broadcasting fees constitutional is decried as 'system-judges' supporting 'system-journalists'. The NPD too rejects Germany's efforts to return Sami A. to Germany. It tweets: "*this state is politically sick, morally degenerate and only pursues one goal: to harm the German people!!! In what other country would the judiciary insist on returning a foreign terrorist back to the host country???*" (npdde, 16.06.2018) The NPD claims that the established parties (system-parties) are trying to mobilize their last reserves to gain

votes by allowing mentally handicapped to vote, in order to portray the established parties in a harder situation than they really are in.

The regional NPD accounts are similar: NPD NRW has 2.149 followers and is not interactive, however, its third most used hashtag is #asylflut, portraying a negative and threatening image of the refugee crisis. NPD Thuringia provides mostly local information and updates on family events, concerts, and demonstrations and rather encourages offline meetings instead of online discourse. NPD Brandenburg is even less active, with no interaction at all and non-telling hashtags like #merkel.

While the NPD is the oldest right-wing political party in Germany and well connected to various movements, its Twitter accounts do not reveal much. This could be due to the fact that the party is very well connected to sub-cultural groups that are more appealing to youths. Also, advertising and recruiting may be conducted on other channels than on Twitter. This seems especially plausible because the party has to find a difficult balance between appealing to its supporters and not confirming the image of a party that is openly hostile to the German constitution – which may scare off potential supporters.

### Die Rechte

While The Right may not be the most popular party among voters, it appears to be well networked on Twitter. Its main Twitter account *Die Rechte Bund* (dierechtebund) only has 188 followers and eight likes. *Die Rechte Bund* tweets almost two times per day and has the most interaction with GesaSanivel, whom only has 338 followers but 27.200 likes and tweets anti-right-wing content. One interesting hashtag dierechtebund uses frequently is #remigration, which will be included in the hashtag analysis later on. One of *Die Rechte Bund's* most recent and popular tweets concerns the summoning of Ursula Haverbeck to court. She is an 89-year-old holocaust denier and currently serves a sentencing for incitement of the people. She is summoned to appear in a Hamburg court in September – which is a 250km journey from her current prison in Bielefeld. Rumors have spread that her transport to Hamburg will take a few days, due to the fact that it supposedly will be a collective transport with multiple prisoners. The far-right scene and *Die Rechte Bund* decry it as a death-ride, cruelty and a multiple-day-odyssey. Although prisoners affected by their health – due to age for example – are transported individually, the right-wing scene uses her transport to Hamburg to rally support for



their cause. (Bexte, 2018) *Die Rechte Bund* also accuses a local radio station of spreading fake news because it broadcasted that the number of asylum seekers in the region has decreased by a third (Radio Erft, 2018) *Die Rechte Bund* claims that this is fake news (dierechtebund, 17.07.2018), but does not provide any evidence of it. Like other right-wing political Twitter accounts, *Die Rechte Bund* too twists reality and creates its own facts.

The vast majority of its followers are immediately identifiable as right-wing. There are few profiles without pictures, banners, and bios – most of them have also no tweets or just a few. Thus, in contrast to for example the AfD, *Die Rechte* appears to have only followers that actually share its opinions.

There are also various regional Twitter accounts. The account with the largest amount of followers is *Die Rechte Dortmund* (dortmundsrechte), with 2.319 followers. This account is a lot more active on Twitter. Together with the NPD, the Right is represented in Dortmund's city council – this group has a Twitter account (npddrimratdo) that *Die Rechte Dortmund* has retweeted 71 times. Another user that was retweeted 69 times is *Aktionsgruppe Dortmund* (aktionsgruppedo), a non-partisan organization of right-wing activists in Dortmund. *Die Rechte Dortmund* also makes extensive use of hashtags: #dortmundecho was used 331 times. The latter appears to be a re-invention of *Deutschland Echo*. On its Twitter feed, there is a lot of content about demonstrations, protest activities, repeated advertisement for a store that sells various propaganda materials and updates on members of the scene who are in court or jail. Overall, the Right's Dortmund account appears to seek to mobilize its followers to engage in offline action. *Aktionsgruppe Dortmund* appears to follow the same objective.

Among *Die Rechte Dortmund's* followers are a number of accounts with red crosses, and QFDs in their names, as well as accounts with various symbols and pictures associated with the far-right. A quick look at some followers' profiles reveals a very different perception of the current political situation as well as societal issues. One follower, whiteuropeeu, for example, retweets White Genocide Info: “#DIVERSITY means chasing down the LAST WHITE PERSON. #WhiteGenocide #StandUpForEurope #ItsOkayToBeWhite” (wginfonetorg, 13.05.2018). This tweet is not an exception; the user tweets inflammatory, racist content like for example a picture with a large Muslim family and a caption that reads: “many Muslims take on a second or third wife and us Germans take on a second or third job to finance their lives” (whiteuropeeu,

08.05.2018). This twisting of facts and attribution of blame can be seen across *Die Rechte Dortmund's* followers. Wolf4641, for example, retweets ronaldglaeser, that police in Hamburg spend their time controlling cars in diesel-car-free zones while there are rape and murder in the streets (ronaldglaeser, 23.07.2018). Salveduce, whose name reminds of the 'Heil Hitler' parole, frequently includes links to a news site called *Politikversagen* (the failure of politics) that lists alleged crimes committed by foreigners in Germany. Another follower (janandrus45) is very active on Twitter and tweets 19 times per day. His tweets contain racist, nationalist and homophobic content, like for example: "*neither Obama, nor the EU, but Victor Gorban deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. There are 8% white people in this world and he does everything for the white race to survive. He protects us from the deadly enemies that are amongst us*" (janandrus45, 22.07.2018).

The analysis of the Right party's Twitter activity and environment shows that news contents are manipulated or presented incompletely in order to mobilize the scene and potential new supporters. It appears that any content that challenges the Right's world-view is declared fake and a lie. This way the party consolidates its own positions, delegitimizes the established parties, news, and societal norms and may gain new supporters through its populist appeals.

### Identitarian Movement on Twitter

The official Twitter account of the Identitarian Movement (ibdeutschland) has 19.400 followers. The NPD federal association (npdde) on the other hand has just below 5.000. This difference may be due to different images of the groups, as described elsewhere, and the fact that the Identitarian's target group is youths, who use social media more than elder generations.

Among the most retweeted and mentioned is patricklenart, official speaker of the movement. This is not surprising. Other accounts that are most retweeted are other IB accounts, as well as junge\_freiheit, the Young Freedom newspaper, \_laut\_gedacht\_ a right-wing YouTube channel, with 20.000 followers on YouTube and 3.200 followers on Twitter, that discusses current political issues satirically. Another one is a right-wing association from Brandenburg, zukunft\_heimat that holds common far-right visions in order to create a better future. Lastly, there is 120\_dezibel, an all-women protest movement that seeks to draw attention to the harm German immigration policy is

causing German women. Most used hashtags include #ibd (IB Germany), #identitär (Identitarian), #deraustausch (the exchange), #defendeuropa and #remigration.

The account's most retweeted tweet accuses the German media of not covering the whole picture regarding Syria: *“what the German main-stream media conceals: the Syrian government has repeatedly asked all Syrians to return back home. The time for #remigration has come”* (ibdeutschland, 10.07.2018). Whether this is true or not, the situation for Syria's civil population remains dire and hardly warrants safe conditions for families to return. Nonetheless, the movement portrays the situation in simple terms that may convince an un-reflected audience and claims that Syrian refugees are overstaying their welcome in Germany. In fact, the tweet's comments suggest that exactly this is the case. This particular tweet received 569 retweets and 950 likes. The most liked tweet by IB states: *“Nobody asked us when companies, politicians, and the leftist media instigated a process that destroys our home. We are the youth, that doesn't believe your lies anymore. We turned off the TV to do the thinking ourselves”* (ibdeutschland, 22.01.2018). This tweet received 546 retweets and 1.197 likes. Here too, IB accuses the German media of untruthfulness. In addition, by not addressing what exactly is supposedly destroying their homes, its followers can project their grievances onto the message. This way, IB directly speaks to each individual follower and identifies the perpetrator at the same time. Thereby, it does not matter who exactly is to blame for what – that matters is that the IB provides answers and ‘hears’ the peoples' concerns. The comment section is supportive and agrees with the statement – IB's strategy seems to work.

The Movement's tweets are conspiratory, nationalist and xenophobic. IB claims that the ‘great exchange’ (#DerGroßeAustausch) – meaning an increase in the non-German population – is neither a secret nor a conspiracy (ibdeutschland, 21.07.2018) Calling the immigration crisis ‘the great exchange’ implies that it was planned. In addition, claiming that this is a fact and not a conspiracy theory, lends the movement more credibility. Besides tweets like this, ibdeutschland shares details on informational events, music videos with Nazi-rap, laut\_gedacht's videos on current political issues and advertises for a project called Defend Europe. The latter is a project of the international Identitarian Movement. The link in Defend Europe's Twitter bio directs to

the French movement's Web presence, which shows a powerful two-minute propaganda video that advertises for the movement<sup>2</sup>. For the Defend Europe mission, members from different European countries get together to counter the rescue of migrants at sea, which they label human trafficking. With chartered ships, they patrol the Mediterranean and return migrants back to the African continent (Mission: Defend Europe).

The review of IB's tweets and references to other accounts show that the IB acts very professionally and effectively online as well as offline. It targets young people and on its Twitter account, it connects politics with music, offline events, and sensational campaigns. This tactic is very successful. In addition, the IB also works on an app, called Patriot Peer that seeks to connect the movement's members. Through the app, members shall be able to locate one another and communicate. Thus, the app will be a permanent link between the online and offline. In addition, users can collect points for participation in political activities – through this function the movement seeks to encourage participation in flash-mobs and other activities. The movement specifically seeks to channel anger into resistance using the app. Experts fear that this will further lower the threshold to partake in racist hate speech and right-wing violence in the offline world. The app's release has however been delayed for several months, due to the Austrian leaders' trial in court. The German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation, as well as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, also watch the developments closely. (Gürgen, 2018)

With 19.400 followers it is difficult to get a concise picture of who follows ibdeutschland. There are followers that use the red cross and QFDs in their names and bios, as well as many whose pictures and bios are self-explanatory. Also the reviewed accounts without any pictures or descriptions tweet right-wing content. However, of course, there are also followers who openly oppose the movement and its ideas.

Ibdeutschland follows 199 accounts, many of them other IB accounts, like local German ones, as well as English, Irish, French and Spanish accounts. Einprozent.de is also affiliated with the movement. On its website, einprozent calls itself the first serious lobby group for German national interests and seeks to unite the resistance against the system. It has 10.000 followers and most current tweets concern a team of movement

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<sup>2</sup> The video can be watched here: <https://generationidentitaire.org/presentation-eng/>

members who traveled to Malta to film a documentary about the so-called ‘trafficker-NGOs’ that rescue migrants at sea.

The IB’s large Twitter network and professional online presence provide vast data for analysis. Due to the limitations of this paper, a more detailed analysis of the Identitarian Movement is not possible. What this brief overview has shown, however, is that the Identitarian Movement is extremely successful in promoting its beliefs, gaining support and instrumentalizing current political issues and especially the refugee crisis for its cause. Its approach is professional and it employs means on different levels like campaigns in cities, demonstrations, flash-mobs, a vast online presence, youth-specific music, entertainment, soon an app and involvement in actual political issues, like immigration via the Mediterranean Sea. The message it spreads on Twitter is clear: the leftist media, corporate establishment, and system government lead the country purposefully towards national ruin. The movement employs half-truths and convincing-looking media to not appear conspiratory, but trustworthy. The reality it portrays online is bleak and needs organizations like the IB to get back on the right track.

### Reconquista Germanica on Twitter

Reconquista Germanica (RG) is a channel on the social network ‘Discord’. Discord is designed as a platform for gamers and provides a chat app, message boards as well as video chats. Users can create groups that are called servers at Discord. The RG server was founded in 2017 by a YouTuber, whose channel is also called RG. Its founder aims to create the largest patriotic Discord server in Germany and thus, provide a ‘home’ for all far-right online activists. Members on this server organize to influence debates on social media. Reconquista Germanica members were responsible for the social media manipulations during the 2017 German elections. (Ayyadi, 2018)

At the end of 2017, a journalist, Julia Ebner, observed the server undercover for six months. The server was founded in the summer of 2017 in order to support the AfD during the federal elections. On the server, it is stated: “*we are in a state of war, in an information war*” (Ebner, 2018). There, radical online activists coordinate hashtags and targets for their campaigns with the aim of manipulating social media algorithms and dictate the online discourse. With hashtags like #TrauDichDeutschland (dare it Germany) and #MerkelMussWeg (Merkel has to go), they managed to reach the top trending hashtags on social media in the week prior to the elections. Their online

organization is inspired by military-style structures. At the time of writing the server has 7.000 members. Online campaigns are called virtual battlefields, sniper missions or massive air bombardment. Users who participate are promoted to higher ranks on the server which ultimately shall be reflected in offline society too. (Ebner, 2018)

Reconquista Germanica's Twitter profile is called Reconquista Discord (discord\_recon) and has 1.389 followers on Twitter. The account tweets 0.89 times per day and most often retweets a user called darksideofkek (10 times) and AfD politician André Poggenburg (9 times). Altrightleak is mentioned 13 times, followed by Martin Sellner of the Austrian Identitarian Movement with 9 times. The most often used hashtag is #reconquistagermanica.

Figure 7 shows an RG advertizing picture bearing the movement's logo together with a bayonet that shoots a wifi signal instead of bullets and the words: "*we are many*". It is a martial call to action and the means are social media.



Figure 7: Reconquista Germanica poster (discord\_recon, 06.03.2018)

Many of its recent tweets concern Reconquista Internet (RI). The latter is a campaign by the German TV host Jan Böhmerrmann. He opened a Discord server called Reconquista

Internet in which he calls upon everyone to overwhelm RG members with love. A list of around 1.000 Twitter accounts was published, who had joined RG campaigns with at least two tweets or are in a Twitter network with at least ten right-wing users. While Böhmermann's satirical project was intended to be just that, it accidentally morphed into a civic movement. The RI server has 62.000 members and even public figures and politicians have referred to #ReconquistaInternet to express their support. On the server, both online and offline events are discussed. For example, the words "*hang on friendly Dresden, you are not alone! #ReconquistaInternet*" (Wichmann, 2018) were projected onto Dresden's Frauenkirche. Dresden is known country-wide for its right-wing populism and regular demonstrations on Monday by AfD supporters. (Wichmann, 2018) Reconquista Discord of course only tweets satirical content about RI and questions the project and its goals.

RG retweeted ludwigtagel, who posted pictures of flyers and stickers showing Pepe the frog, a popular far-right meme, bearing RG logos, to be handed out at Leipzig's annual book fair – which had 271.000 visitors. A far-right publisher's picture (verlag\_antonios) from its stand at the fair with a lot of interested people was also retweeted. Darksideofkek is an account that tweets around five times per day and has almost 1.500 followers. The user mostly posts satirical content and Reconquista Discord retweeted content regarding Reconquista Internet. In fact, Reconquista Discord appears to be engaged in a heavy counter-campaign against RI. The movement also appears to be well connected to the Identitarians; one tweet shares a link to a live stream from a right-wing demonstration in Bottrop, which also einprozent.de has shared. Thus, the members seem to overlap.

Alrightleak is a user who appears to be a member of the RG discord server and leaks its content. The account has 4.320 followers and the tweets contain screenshots from discussions on the RG server. Most recently the RG community tried to find out Böhmermann's residential address to harass him at home. Photos from him outside his house were compared to satellite pictures, and users tried to find useful information on his social media profiles and suggested following him around until he returns home. A part of this conversation can be seen in Figure 8.



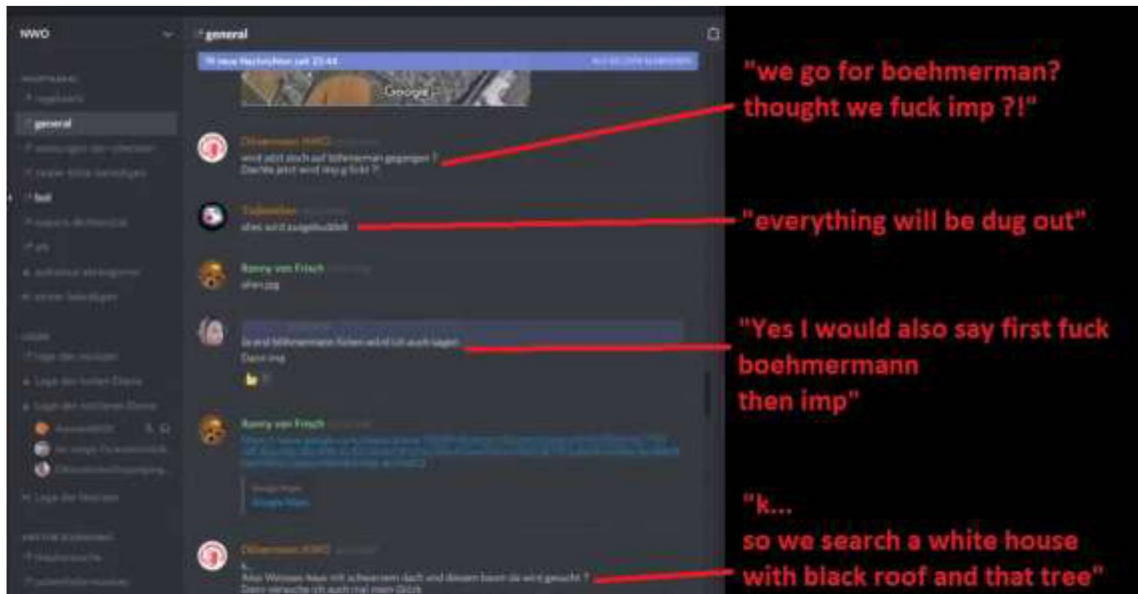


Figure 8: Screenshot of discussion on RG's server (alrightleak, 30.06.2018)

Such content is systematically ridiculed by RG's Twitter account and called lies and fake news. Generally, criticism directed at RG or the right-wing movement, in general, is ridiculed and rejected as insubstantial. Also, complex issues are oversimplified, like for example a retweet of Poggenburg that contains the cartoon depicted in Figure 9. The left section takes place in Germany and shows women demonstrating Islamization. A journalist calls them right-wing radicals. The right section depicts women demonstrating for their rights in Iran – and the same journalist calls them brave feminists.



Figure 9: cartoon retweeted by RD (poggenburgandre, 10.02.2018)



The cartoon's message is that both groups protest Islam, whereby it is acceptable if Muslim women do it, and unacceptable from German women. Of course, reality is more complex and the women in Iran did not protest Islam, but a government that curtails their personal rights.

Reconquista Germanica's Twitter profile and news reports about its Discord server demonstrate that it is a right-wing organization that appears to connect a large number of people of the right-wing spectrum in closed discussion groups. Judging from the successful campaigns during the German federal elections, the organization of online events is successful. Eber's report suggests that on the server, an alternative reality is constructed, that ultimately shall be translated into the real world too and the organization's members are organized in a military manner with structures that allow for promotion and advancement in the ranks. The screenshots taken by *alrightleak* also suggest that members may even be willing to use violence against ideological opponents. The intense reactions to Reconquista Internet reveal the extent to which the right-wing ideology has solidified among members. As explained in sub-chapter 3.1, the retreat into private discussions can further radicalize individuals, as it solidifies and affirms existing beliefs.

Returning to the sub-question, "*How does the German right-wing operate on Twitter?*", this sub-chapter has shown that while the actors vary in their use of Twitter, they all share certain strategies: all groups, parties, and organizations portray an alternative reality in which the government, the media and sometimes even economic giants at best have lost focus on the truly important matters and at worst have conspired to instigate dangerous processes like immigration, that will cause the downfall of German society. Especially the German government under Merkel is considered representative for all the ills that have befallen the country. Current political issues and studies are misrepresented and lack comprehensive contexts. They are used to confirm right-wing opinions and legitimize whichever course of action each organization suggests. On their Twitter profiles, the accounts analyzed provide simple solutions to complex issues, which appeal to their followers and potential new supporters, as they convey the message that the group in question is the only one in possession of the true facts and the right answers.

Many of the groups analyzed here are political parties, and also RG seeks to increase support for the AfD – thus the general trend, as Koehler predicts – is to take over Germany legally by elections. In line with his argumentation, foreigners and the left-wing are considered enemies, whereby the accounts analyzed label any opposition leftist. Competing opinions generally are decried as leftist and unfounded, misguided or ill-natured. While the IB is very good at using Twitter to connect infrastructure and ideology, others like *Die Rechte* or NPD do not seem to exhaust the potential that Twitter offers. However, as is the case for the NPD, they likely rely on other structures and possibly more private forms of communication. Whereas more private chat rooms can facilitate further radicalization, they rarely risk drawing newcomers in. Despite these differences in the use of Twitter, they all address similar issues like strong disapproval of Merkel, hostility towards asylum seekers, Islam, and immigrant criminality. The respective hashtags for themes that many accounts use are #Merkelmussweg (MerkelHasToGo), #remigration, #NoIslam, #ReconquistaGermanica and #Kandelistüberall (Kandeliseverywhere) as well as #QFD. While this sub-chapter has already provided insight into how the contrast society is portrayed on Twitter, the following hashtag analysis will provide more detailed insights.

#### 4.4 *Right-wing Twitter networks as a contrast society*

In the next paragraphs, the following hashtags will be analyzed using NodeXL, Gephi and Keyhole data analysis: #QFD, #MerkelMussWeg, #NoIslam, #remigration, #ReconquistaGermanica and #Kandelistueberall.

##### **#QDF**

Figure 10 shows a visualization of the #QFD network. To learn more about the dynamics of this hashtag that is popular among the German right-wing, the components of the network are analyzed in this section.

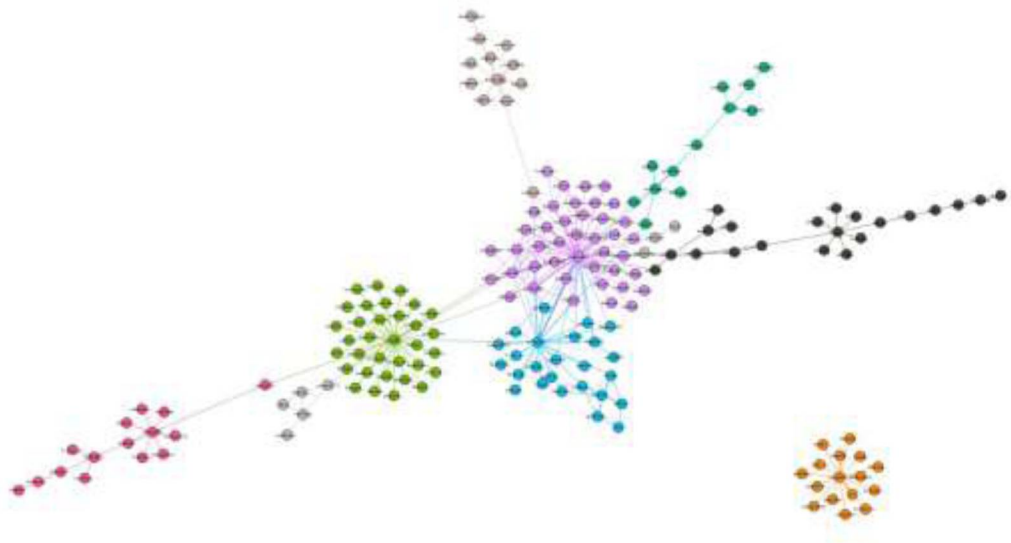


Figure 10: #QFD on Twitter

The central node in the purple cluster is netzdenunziant. In his tweet, he replies to another user, who tested a theory he developed about reversing the shadowban, as the scene calls the filtering of certain contents. Somebody developed a tool where users can check if they are indeed shadow-banned. Netzdenunziant believes that the ban will be reversed if one gains a significant number of new followers, who are not associated with one's network, which is shadow-banned. Because many right-wing Twitter users are connected, it is easier for Twitter to identify accounts and apply its quality filters to them. Thus, on the one hand, large networks of like-minded people may be useful for networking, on the other hand, it sabotages visibility for some right-wing networks. In the post that netzdenunziant comments on, a user verifies his theory by getting a large group of Arab bots to follow her account, which diversified her followers enough to lift the shadow-ban. Netzdenunziant is also on Gab. One of his posts there concerns a campaign called ShadowbanTwitter. #ShadowbanTwitter in Gab produced a large discussion on a campaign for the entire far-right scene to shun Twitter for a few days in May 2018. The campaign seems to originate in the United States, where usworkers4trump initiated it to protest Twitter's so-called censoring. The possibly original post is displayed in Figure 11.



Figure 11: Shadow ban campaign on Twitter (usworkers4trump, 23.05.2018)

With over 9.000 followers usworkers4trump is likely to have attracted the attention of the German right-wing, especially because the account posts ideologically affiliated content. The other clusters in the network are also right-wing accounts and similarly concerned with Twitter’s quality filters. Only the unconnected orange cluster in the bottom right corner is an article about Twitter’s filters by a news website.

#QFD reached 4.342.753 people on Twitter, originating from 648 users. However, only 5.794 users engaged with the hashtag. A lot the of associated hashtags are English, as can be seen in Figure 12.

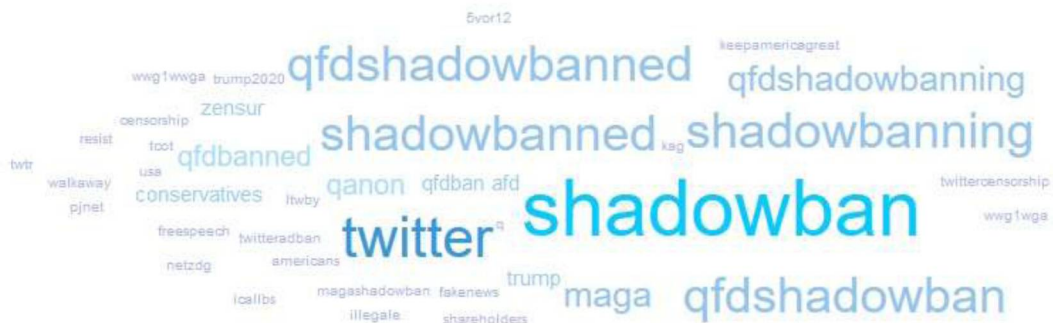


Figure 12: hashtags frequently used together with #QFD (Keyhole, #QFD)

In fact, whereas 8.53 percent of the hashtag originates in Germany, it is mostly used in the United States with 82.12 percent. Thus, the red crosses together with #QFD appears to be a trend in the German right-wing scene that renders right-wing Twitter accounts easily identifiable.

### #MerkelMussWeg

The hashtag #MerkelMussWeg is popular among the right-wing online. The core of the network is visualized in Figure 13. The network has a modularity measure of 0.657, meaning there are groups of users that talk to each other, and but not exclusively. At the center of the large purple cluster is djjem. This user shared a video and in the tweet called Merkel a terrorist (djjem, 24.07.2018), that has received 73 reactions. The green cluster is paprika\_im\_blut's tweet of a picture of his car in the United States that sports a "*Merkel Muss Weg*" bumper sticker (paprika\_im\_blut, 02.09.2017). The comments reveal that other users feel assured in their own political opinion: support from such a distance strengthens their own beliefs and if even Germans abroad care, they have to be right.

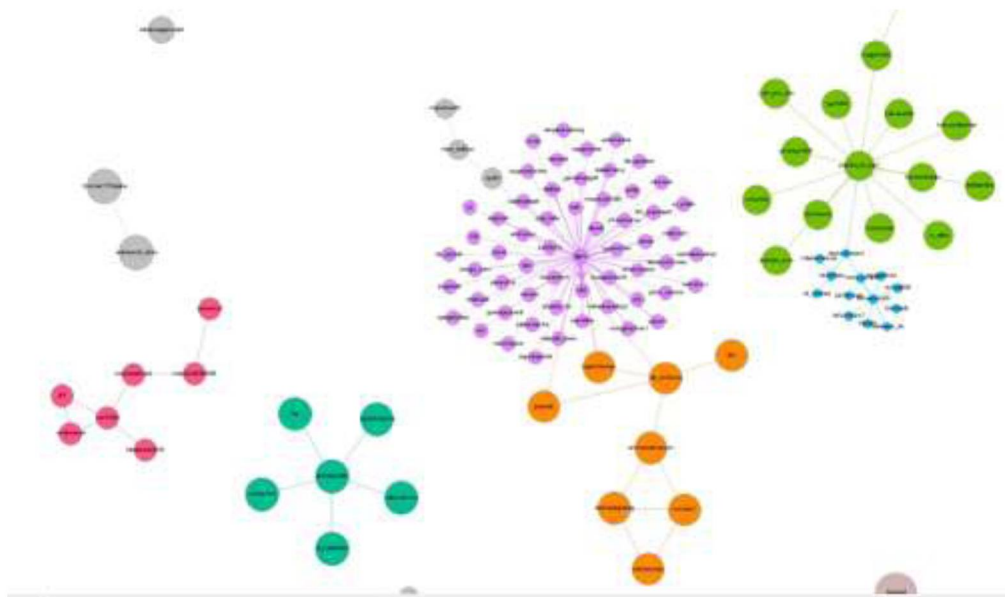


Figure 13: Network #MerkelMussWeg

The tweet in the center of the blue cluster shares a news link about an alleged bomb builder, whose wife allegedly wanted to test ricin on a hamster. The user, 66freedom66, used this headline to comment that there are too many 'sick' people in this world and put Merkel in the hashtags (66freedom66, 24.07.2018). This is an excellent example of how non-political news are instrumentalized to criticize the current political system.





language tweets. The network has a high modularity measure of 0.783 with a few large communities in the center. The large purple group is clustered around multiple tweets by karinazurich. On her account, she frequently uses hashtags like #grüneversenken (sink the Greens) and #linkeversenken (sink the Left). In one of her tweets in the purple cluster, she quotes a news headline that states the Turkish community wants the entire management of the German football federation to resign. These demands are based on the German national player Özil, who resigned from the team because he felt discriminated against. Karinazurich comments that she wants everyone who has constant demands to move to a country where they do not have to make demand all the time – implying that the Turkish community should leave (karinazurich, 23.07.2018). The reactions in the comments are supportive and many try to relativize the racism accusations regarding Özil's departure from the national team. In fact, some even consider this issue an instigated opportunity for a left-wing campaign. This again demonstrates a blurred perception of reality.

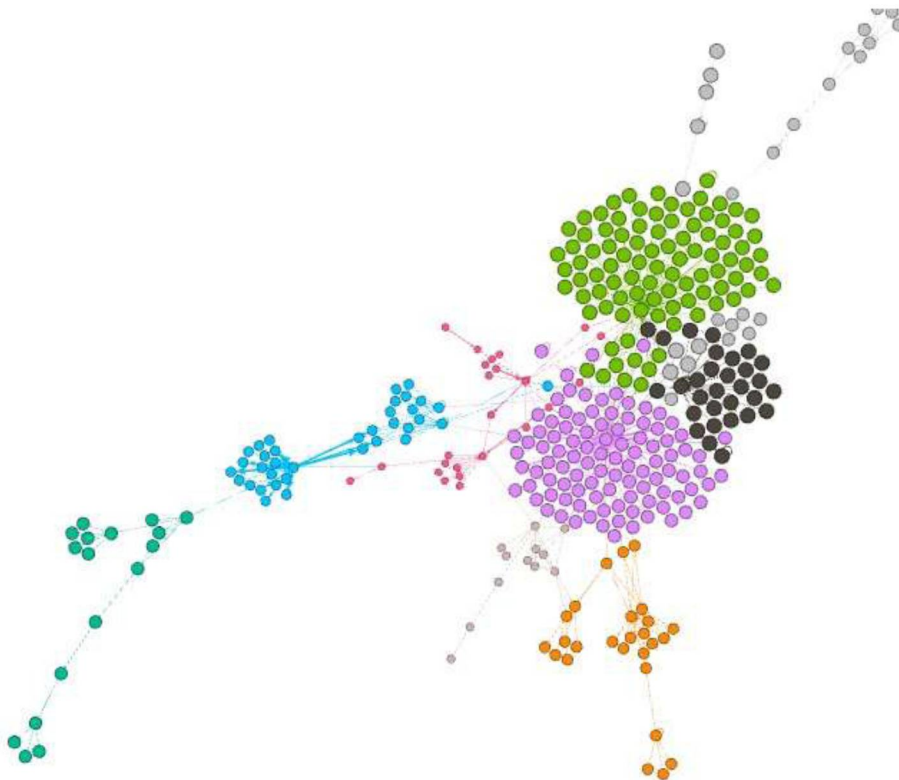


Figure 15: #remigration

The green cluster is a survey-style tweet in which kardasiapat asks whether the construction of mosques should be completely illegal, using #Özil #AfD #Islamisierung (Islamization) #Remigration #NoAsyl #FestungEurope (FortressEurope)

#EuropaGegenIslam (EuropeAgainstIslam) #Islamverbot (#BanIslam) (kardasiapat, 23.07.2018). At the time of writing, 791 users have voted, 92 percent voted in favor of a ban on the construction of mosques. In the replies, many express their wish to take it further and ban Islam altogether. At best, users comment that Islam does not belong to Germany, at worst they call it not a religion, but a totalitarian ideology and mosques are considered military barracks. This tweet expresses the deep-seated Islamophobia that many in the right-wing scene share.

In the blue cluster, users are gathered around a tweet by ahoihanseat, who cites a 2010 Merkel quote in which she stated that ‘multiculti’ has failed (ahoihanseat, 24.07.2018). While this may have held true in 2010 and in whichever context the German chancellor has said this, the situation in 2018 is very different and by no means comparable. Citing public authorities out of context and using the message as a justification for their own political philosophies appears to be a popular choice and represents not only a lack of personal reflection but also the alternate reality which is constructed online.

A regional AfD account, AfD Ilmkreis Gotha (afd\_ok\_gth) is the central node in the orange cluster. The AfD group tweeted a picture from a topic that was discussed in the Thuringian regional parliament. While afd\_ok\_gth refers to an attempted gang rape by a group of underage refugees, the document states: *“the group of youths followed the woman and circled her. Then one grabbed her wrist and prompted her to come with them. The woman kicked the man, who loosened his grip and she ran away.”* (afd\_ok\_gth, 18.07.2018). While this situation was certainly unpleasant for the affected woman it does not warrant the label ‘attempted rape’. Nonetheless – and despite the fact that the situation is clearly described in the attached picture – afd\_ok\_gth calls it that, seeking to stir up hatred.

Lastly, the black group is clustered around im\_tod. This account tweets content that uses irony to criticize German politics and justifies her political views by denouncing whoever competes with her beliefs. One of the tweets that are represented in the network reads: *“January 2015 until June 2018: 86.977 Afghan applications for asylum were denied, deported were: 347 Source: Welt (BAMF statistic).”* (der\_tod, 20.07.2018). She does use real data, which appears to be deliberately included in the tweet, however the information is presented without context in order to serve her purpose. In fact, many denied asylum applications get revised for different reasons. In



addition, German immigration authorities are overwhelmed and processing times take very long.

#remigration has reached 409.767 users in the past month; thereby 393 users have used the hashtag and 910 have interacted with it. However, because it is an English language word, its use is not restricted to German-speaking countries alone. A closer assessment reveals more: the hashtags associated with it are mostly German, as can be seen in Figure 16.



Figure 16: hashtags frequently used together with #remigration (Keyhole, #remigration)

Thus, while #remigration is not German, a lot of the tweets appear to be German. The two most influential users according to keyhole are Romain Espiro, a member of the Identitarian Movement in France and karinazurich.

## #NoIslam

For #NoIslam again all non-German tweets were removed from the dataset. The network has a modularity of 0.632 and is visualized in Figure 17.



Figure 17: #NoIslam

The large purple cluster is grouped around André Poggenburg's tweet: *"Slowly something is happening! "Islam does not belong to Germany" – because it is a religion that opposes our values and constitution. We do not want to have any Islamic cultural landmarks and symbols of power here. #AfDwirkt #NoIslam"* (poggenburgandre, 23.07.2018). Attached to the tweet is an article by COMPACT magazine about a plebiscite against the construction of a mosque in Kaufbeuren. The article is written in an inflammatory tone and calls demonstrators against the referendum's result left-wing-plastered and was shared 1.600 times (Elsässer, 2018). Poggenburg's tweet received 325 retweets, 932 likes and was replied 98 times. Many of the replies support Poggenburg, while only some remain critical. Thereby, for them, Merkel's government is emblematic for everything that is wrong in society and everyone who disagrees is automatically branded a misguided do-gooder or fascist. Islam is generally portrayed as intolerant;

some call it an ideology and bossert\_heinz even tweets that there is no need for new mosques since there are enough pigsties (bossert\_heinz, 23.07.2018)

Several tweets by Ahoihanseat are at the center of the blue cluster. Most of them express his support for the referendum in Kaufbeuren. All his tweets are replies to others and without much interaction themselves. Because this user has come up two times in the hashtag analysis, a closer look at his profile may be more telling. His tweets portray the German political system as pretense-democracy, whereby the political establishment does not listen to the people and governs how they think it is right. The fact that the referendum has received a lot of disapproval is explained by Germany's ill-functioning democracy that does not respect the opinion of the people. The perils and merits of referendums is a broad topic itself. However, the discourse here demonstrates a deep suspicion of the German government and the democratic system. In fact, a core demand of the NPD and AfD are more referendums, because they take away power from 'corrupt' politicians and bring it back to the people. The events in Kaufbeuren certainly add fuel to this debate. The public disapproval is explained by the failure of the system and the inability of others to recognize the real dangers.

The pink cluster is centered around pinkcrazypony's tweet about the increased number of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Germany. Referring to the referendum in Kaufbeuren, which brought tears to the eyes of the local city councilor, he asks her: "[...] *Where are the councilors tears now? [...] Oh..I forgot she is pro Islam [...]*" (pinkcrazypony, 24.07.2018) Attached to this tweet are hashtags like #NoIslam, but also #NeinzurKinderehe (NotoChildMarriage). Pinkcrazypony cites a newly published study by Terre des Femmes. A closer look at the study shows, however, that this increase is based on an increase in women and girls from Eritrea, Somalia, and Iraq, who come to Germany. They either are already victims of FGM upon arrival, or the procedure is performed during visits back home – to date, there are no known cases of the procedure taking place in Germany (58.000 Frauen in Deutschland, 2018). These facts, however, are neither included in pinkcrazypony's tweet, nor in the news link attached to it. This way, the numbers can convey the message that FGM is being performed in Germany – which can stir up hatred and certainly serves as justification for users which radical political opinions. Although child marriage has nothing to do with the content of his tweet, the user added #NeinzurKinderehe. Occupation of topics like child protection is a strategy of the right-wing to lure others into their spheres. This tweet demonstrates how

parts of a truth are used to justify existing beliefs, stir up hatred and at the same time create a reputable impression through the reference to news pages.

The black cluster refers to several tweets that reply to or mention the main AfD account in their tweets. Because in this case there are a variety of different tweets, it will be too much to analyze them all – especially because AfD is analyzed in great detail above. The hashtags in all the tweets, however, reveal the general sentiment as in all other tweets analyzed here: a deep suspicion towards the government (hashtags against Merkel as well as the popular parties) and hostility towards Islam (#noasyl, #nosharia, #remigration, #stopmoscheebau (stop building mosques)).

The small light green cluster is clustered around karinazurich. She shared a link about threats made by Islamists to the British right-wing activist Tommy Robinson, who currently is in prison, and his wife (karinazurich, 21.07.2018). This tweet has not had much interaction. One user replied with a picture that shows Robinson, together with the demand to set him free, calling him a political prisoner (palindrome\_666, 21.07.2018). Robinson is a journalist and became an icon of the right-wing scene after he was sentenced to 13 months in prison. The right-wing claims that his sentence is unjust and accuses the British government of just getting rid of an unpleasant critic. They claim he just made video recordings in front of the court, upon which he was detained and imprisoned because he disturbed the public peace. In fact, however, Robinson videotaped a process in court – which is not allowed – and received a suspended sentence of three months, together with a warning that he will face trial if he unduly publishes process details again. Thus, he knew the outcome when he live-streamed the process, which included the names of underage accused – a matter in which the rules are specifically strict. His sentence was therefore not unjustified, but an assertion of the rule of law. (Konietzny, 2018) This again demonstrates how the right-wing interpretation of public events lacks full detail. The imprisonment of Tommy Robinson is instrumentalized to rally support along the entire right-wing spectrum internationally. This, on the one hand, spreads the message of an arbitrary and oppressive government and on the other, provides the right-wing with an issue to unite for and establish a feeling of cohesion and mass.



Figure 19 shows #ReconquistaGermanica. The network has a modularity measure of 0.541. The largest node is dirmunsul. His Twitter profile identifies him as a member of the far-right. He has 277 followers and shared an RG video that has received a number of reactions. The other nodes in the purple network are mentioned or tweeted to dirmunsul's tweet. He has also to André Poggenburg, as well as another large node in the blue cluster, rmichael2000, who appears to be members of the far-right scene too, though not very influential. Robert30521605 is an account in the green cluster he has mentioned. While this account only has 160, he has received almost 1500 likes and tweets a lot of his own content. Robert30521605 uses #ReconquistaGermanica a lot in his tweets and appears to be very involved in the network. Other nodes in the green cluster are Twitter accounts of the Left Party and various far-right private accounts, none of them with a considerable number of followers or likes.

In the blue cluster is André Poggenburg as well as Austria's vice chancellor Hans Christian Strache, who belongs to the populist *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party Austria). The most active account in this cluster is @seppdahte. He only joined in January 2018 and has almost 2500 tweets and almost as many likes. He retweets RG content and also appeared in the #NPD cluster. Twitonomy analysis data shows that #ReconquistaGermanica is in fact this user's most used hashtag. Heiligerevolte (holy insurrection) is the center of the dark grey cluster. With almost 900 followers and 7.600 likes, the account has a comparably large outreach.

While #ReconquistaGermanica is used by both sides of the political spectrum – largely due to the RI campaign, the hashtags most associated with it place it in the context of the right-wing scene, as can be seen in Figure 20.



Figure 20: hashtags frequently used together with #ReconquistaGermanica (Keyhole #Reconquista Germanica)

Overall, the enormous public attention that RG has drawn creates the perception of a large and very influential movement. In addition, all criticism is ridiculed and refuted by members of the movement. Criticism may unite members even further against competing opinions. In private discussion on the Discord server members support each others' opinions which can reinforce and amplify radical beliefs – as altrightleak's screenshots have shown. It is therefore conceivable that the overall situation gives members the feeling the movement has reached a critical mass, which may radicalize some further and also serves as a justification for more offline action.

### #Kandelistueberall

#Kandelistueberall (Kandel is everywhere) originated with the murder of the 15-year-old Mia in Kandel, Germany by her ex-boyfriend, who is an Afghan refugee, in December 2017. Since then, Kandel has become the stage for right-wing movements to protest the government's immigration policy. In addition, "*Kandel ist überall*" demonstrations have taken place throughout Germany (Wenz, 2018).



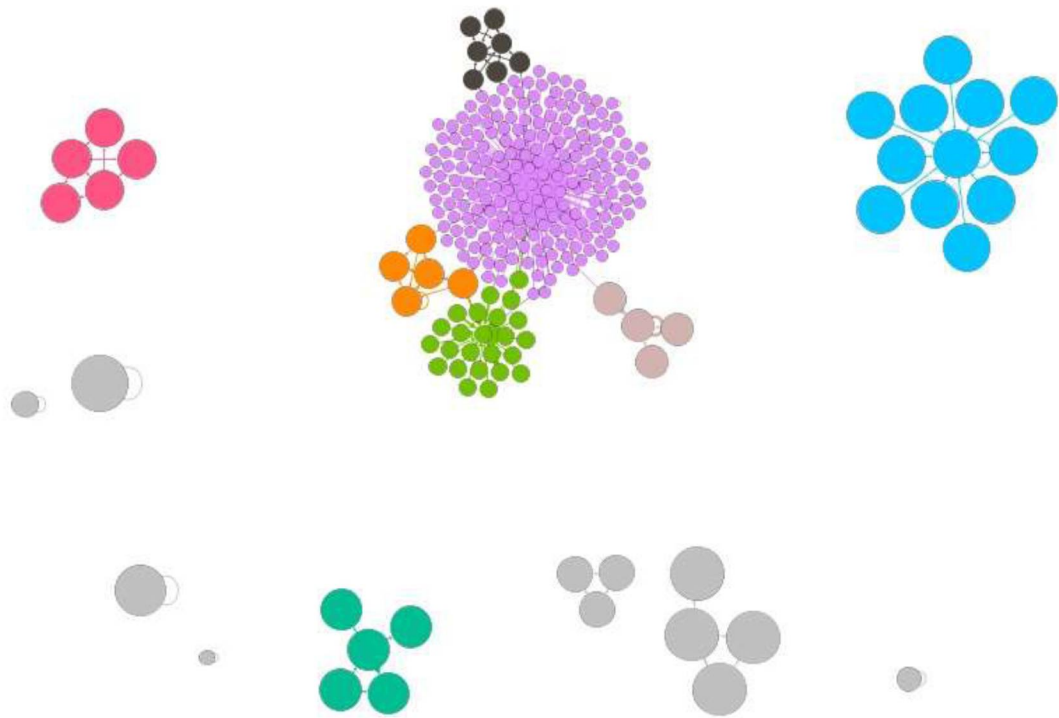


Figure 21: #Kandelistueberall

The network in Figure 21: #Kandelistueberall has a modularity measure of 0.351. This means, that there are many connections between the different clusters. This is the lowest measure of any of the networks analyzed thus far. At the center of the large purple cluster are several tweets by the Kandel movement's Twitter account, kandelueberall. Because there are many tweets in this cluster, only the ones with most interaction are analyzed here. One of them is an invitation to follow the movement on the App Telegram, to get updates about the movement, or on Facebook, but the tweet notes that the latter may be more difficult because the pages' administrators appear to get blocked regularly. There are only 206 subscribers to the Telegram group, whereas the Twitter account has 1.449 followers, but a shift to more constraint-free media has also been observed elsewhere in this research. Another tweet contains a similar message: one of the movement's founders introduces herself and invites followers to join her on the movement's official Telegram channel, in addition to inviting everyone to join a large right-wing demonstration in the city of Mainz (kandelueberall, 19.07.2018). The reactions to this tweet are mostly negative: while one user shares his frustration that kandelueberall is shadow-banned, all other replies mock the movement. One last popular tweet concerns the search for an Afghan youth who allegedly tried to kill



someone. While in the tweet it is stated the police seeks him because he killed someone, he in fact ‘only’ tried to do so – an issue that the only reply to this tweet also points out. (kandelistueberall, 19.07.2018) The tweet received 64 retweets and 46 likes. While kandelueberall is the largest cluster in the network, it does not provide much information about the right-wing’s contrast society.

The green group is clustered around a tweet by official\_pegida, the official account of the Pegida movement (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West). This tweet contains just hashtags (#MerkelMussWeg, #Trump, and #Bannon) and has several pictures attached to it that contain information on upcoming Pegida demonstrations.

The central tweet in the orange cluster by hugenotte3 is no longer available in Germany. Accessing the page with a foreign VPN shows the tweet: *“And again an Afghan, 20 years young. With a knife on his way to an honor killing. This vermin need to leave our country. I’m done with stories like this. #Kandelistueberall #AfDwirkt #faz #sz #welt #bild”* (Hugenotte3, 20.07.2018). This tweet refers to kandelueberall’s tweet about the attempted murder by an Afghan youth. It received eight likes and three retweets. This tweet expresses a lot of hatred towards immigrants. Anger about an attempted murder is justified, however, gross generalizations are not. Tweets like this show how easily individuals draw conclusions from single acts and condemn an entire community because of it.

The light blue cluster on the right is assembled around a tweet realjohr, who retweeted AfD speaker Malte Kaufmann. In the latter’s original tweet he complained that ecclesiastic groups and trade unions have incited the people against the right, and shame everyone who does not support ‘multiculti’ as fear mongers. Realjohr criticizes this and tweets that AfD and criminals have incited the people and everything constitutional is condemned as filthy-left-wing (realjohr, 22.07.2018). Because this tweet is critical of the Kandel movement the blue cluster is also not connected to the others. The same holds true for the other clusters along the fringes.

Lastly, the black cluster in the top is a tweet with a Young Freedom cartoon. It shows two groups of demonstrators: on the right side are AfD supporters who mourn the killed girls, on the other is the press, the Green party and left-wing activists who blame the Minister of Interior, Horst Seehofer, for the drowned refugees and point accusingly at the other group (nunu\_balloon, 19.07.2018) This again is a good example of the over-

simplification of facts: refugee crimes are isolated cases and the dire situation of the refugees at sea has nothing to do with the tragic murder of German women.

Although #Kandelistueberall appears to be not as prominent as other hashtags analyzed, it has reached 100.000 users, whereby only 266 users have tweeted about it. Of those 100.000 however, only 459 have engaged with #Kandelistueberall. The most influential account is, as the social network graphic also shows, kandelueberall.

The hashtag analysis of re-occurring hashtags used by the accounts analyzed previously has solidified sub-chapter 4.3's impression of the right-wing as a contrast society. For most hashtags analyzed the modularity measure is very high, signaling that while there are many connections between the users in clusters, they do not connect much to other clusters. This is also visualized in the graphics created on Gephi. This can be counted towards evidence for a filter bubble, in which the German right-wing is conversing. A definite conclusion on whether there is, in fact, a filter bubble or not requires a much more detailed analysis of Twitter networks. However, given that social media like Twitter is programmed in a way that users see content that affirms their opinions, it is not far-fetched to assume that there is indeed a filter bubble. Given the fact that a very different picture of Germany's current political and domestic situation is created on Twitter, coupled with the host of users who spread and add to propagandistic contents and the likely existence of a right-wing filter bubble, a right-wing contrast society has clearly been established on Twitter networks.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has sought to explore how the German right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks. Therefore, a detailed overview of the relevant right-wing actors and their ideology was given, so as to identify whose Twitter accounts to include in the social network analysis in chapter 4.3 and to identify radicalizing themes for the subsequent hashtag analysis in chapter 4.4. Influential actors in the German right-wing scene are parties like the Alternative for Germany, NPD, and *Die Rechte*, in addition to movements such as the Identitarians and Reconquista Germanica. These five were analyzed to establish how they operate on Twitter. In addition, this way, radicalizing themes in the form of hashtags were identified and analyzed to gain a more nuanced understanding of how the right-wing as a contrast society is portrayed on Twitter networks. The analyzed hashtags are #QFD, #MerkelMussWeg, #NoIslam, #remigration, #ReconquistaGermanica and #Kandelistueberall. They all reflect strong disapproval of Merkel, hostility towards asylum seekers, Islam, immigrant criminality and accusations of censorship. Taken together, these two analyses have revealed that a very different picture of Germany's current political and domestic situation is created on Twitter. While the organizations and parties differ in their use of Twitter – and not all exhaust its full potential – they all share certain strategies: all groups, parties, and organizations portray an alternative reality in which the government, the media and sometimes even economic giants at best have lost focus on the truly important matters and at worst have conspired to instigate dangerous processes that will cause the downfall of German society. Especially the German government under Merkel is considered representative for all the ills that have befallen the country. Current political issues and studies are misrepresented and lack comprehensive context. They are used to confirm right-wing opinions and legitimize whichever course of action each organization suggests. On their Twitter profiles, the accounts analyzed provide simple solutions to complex issues, which appeal to their followers and potential new supporters, as they convey the message that the group in question is the only one in possession of the true facts and the right answers.

Koehler's suggestion that the German right-wing seeks to take over Germany legally by elections was also confirmed: while for the parties, electoral victories are an obvious goal, also Reconquista Germanica and the Identitarians seek to mobilize support for right-wing parties.

Across all accounts analyzed – be they official party accounts or followers – a fierce opposition to any competing beliefs was recorded. Even if facts are clearly provided, there is a general refusal to acknowledge them. In addition, current political news, scientific findings, and statistics are quoted selectively: this way reputable sources are quoted which renders the message more convincing and provides ‘facts’ that confirm the right-wing’s worldview. Challenges to this worldview are not acknowledged and most of the time met with outright hostility. In fact, competing opinions of individuals, parties, groups, and organizations are discarded as unfounded, misguided, threatening and even criminal – a plurality of thought is clearly rejected.

Especially the younger AfD and Identitarian Movement use Twitter much more effectively. The various AfD’s accounts speak to a large spectrum of voters and each age group and political ideology from conservative to right-wing appears to be addressed by the different official accounts. Coupled with large follower numbers and the plethora of affiliated accounts, AfD has a huge reach on Twitter. The Identitarian Movement very successfully engages youths with a large range of contents that appeal to younger individuals and creates the impression that every single person is important for the greater movement. The IB is specifically successful in synergizing online and offline activities, by mixing politics with spare time activities. Especially large and visible campaigns like the vessels in front of the African coasts and the pending release of its app, that will further blur the line between online and offline activism, demonstrate its effectiveness.

The hashtag analyses’ results indicate at the possible existence of a right-wing filter bubble. The modularity rate for all analyzed hashtags was high. This means that while there are many connections between the users in clusters, they do not connect much to other clusters. A definite conclusion on whether there is, in fact, a filter bubble or not requires a much more detailed analysis of Twitter networks, as well as networks on other social media. Due to the limitations of this format, this research only focused on Twitter. A detailed analysis of for example Facebook and YouTube channels will add to the results significantly. Also, future research should deepen the Twitter analysis to confirm the right-wing filter bubble.

Nonetheless, given that social media like Twitter is programmed in a way that users see content that affirms their opinions, it is not far-fetched to assume that there is indeed a right-wing filter bubble.

Based on the fact that a very different picture of Germany's current political and domestic situation is portrayed on Twitter, coupled with the likely existence of a right-wing filter bubble, a right-wing contrast society has clearly been established on Twitter networks. The reality portrayed online is threatening: the government sanctions mass immigration to Germany – at best due to ignorance, at worst intentional, to serve a greater purpose that will cause the downfall of German society. Thereby the media has conspired with the government, sometimes large corporations and the left-wing against the good of the German people. The right-wing online community is portrayed as the resistance to the evil forces in power and right-wing parties are the only ones who see the situation for what it is and offer the only plausible solution to return Germany into a more desirable state. This coincides with Koehler's definition of the contrast society's goal: because the right-wing cannot live out its ideology in mainstream society, it seeks out niches where it establishes a contrast society that is maintained and nurtured until the misled population has been brought back on the right path and Germany can be remodeled into the ideological ideal. A more extreme implementation of this can be seen on the *Reconquista Germanica*, as well as the *Ritterkreuzorden* server, where efforts are being made to structure online communications as close as possible according to an ideal, military-style society.

In the broader societal context, the blatant disregard of obvious facts and figures is worrying. If the right-wing is indeed as unreasonable and easy to convince with populist appeals, the moderate parties face a great challenge in gaining back the voters it has lost to the right. The Identitarian Movement's international success, its right-wing lobby group *EinProzent* and Bannon's political foundation all imply that the right-wing will expand its international networks, coordinate its future campaigns a lot better and gain more supporters. In fact, with more international ties, potential ideological and monetary support and increased professionalism, the European right-wing will become more socially acceptable in the years to come. Subsequently, right-wing demands for a halt on immigration, a greater emphasis on sovereign principles and a reversal of the

European integration process will be hard to ignore. Ultimately these trends may jeopardize the European project that has kept the continent at peace for the last decades. To counter these trends and curb online hate speech and incitement, a new strategy against the right-wing's only activities needs to be devised. In addition, politics need to address issues that the right-wing so easily instrumentalizes to gain supporters, like for example the stark demographic change in Eastern Germany as well as improving employment perspectives for youths and invest more in infrastructures that allow for affordable housing and makes family planning and a career more agreeable with each other.

Finding an appropriate balance between free speech and the censorship of illegal contents is an exceedingly difficult task – yet one that needs to be tackled. Many attempts to control hate speech and provide alternative counter-narratives feed into the right-wing's propaganda and are used to further the radical agenda. It is therefore important that such campaigns are carefully considered before their execution. Ultimately an inclusive narrative needs to be established that addresses liberal as well as conservative concerns in a respectful and cooperative manner. Countering the right-wing narrative can be a daunting task, but it is every society's responsibility to do its utmost best to create a better future for the generations to come.

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