ONOFFDERAD

Two-year report │ 2016 - 2018

Online and offline interventions
for deradicalisation through
social media

Violence
Prevention Network

Table of Contents

I. Preface

Extremist groups are exploiting the widespread availability of online communication and social networks with increasing frequency. They use these channels to disseminate ideological propaganda, network with young people and recruit them for their causes. As the internet continues to change the communication habits of younger generations, the field of radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation faces new challenges.

Extremists use social networks to spread their inhuman ideologies, gain new supporters and even recruit new members for their organisations. The need for pedagogic work with young people who exhibit extremist tendencies, commit hate crimes and get caught in a downward spiral of radicalisation has become increasingly apparent over the course of the past years. A growing number of initiatives advocate counter-narratives as the cure for such activities and processes on the internet. Governments and private organisations collect larger and larger amounts of data about the online activities of extremists.

But the insights into online radicalisation processes that are gained in Germany do not result in concrete, pedagogic counteractions. There is a constant risk that incipient radicalisation processes stabilise, causing vulnerable individuals to isolate themselves in the radicalised scene more and more. Such processes of isolation increase the hostile attitude towards governmental and social entities, thus impeding the primary motivation for exiting.

To stop and reverse radicalisation processes at an early stage, it is vital to bridge the gap between existing knowledge and practical, pedagogic measures. Extremist ideologies cannot be countered by academic debate or prohibition alone. Indeed, ideologues expect counter-arguments and easily integrate them into the structure of their ideologeme.

Violence Prevention Network is a long-standing association of experienced specialists in the field of radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation. In 2015, it began to transfer its offline expertise to the online sphere. Its project On|Off DERAD explores opportunities to gain access to the target group in cyberspace. The public visibility of young people at risk of radicalisation has declined considerably since the 1990s. Youth and social outreach work must take modern communication and networking habits of young people into account and incorporate approaches that facilitate online contact.

International radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation experts largely agree that practical deradicalisation processes require personal, offline communication. Online projects cannot replace the traditional approach of building relationships in order to facilitate deradicalisation. But the changing communication and networking habits of the target group force deradicalisation workers to advantage of online channels to make contact. The project we are presenting primarily intends to identify ways of establishing and maintaining social-media contact with young people who are either at risk of radicalisation or who have already been radicalised.

II. Current situation

Extremist and terrorist groups have been disseminating propaganda, spreading their stories and radicalising individuals over the internet since the 1990s. During the early days of the internet, their target audience was limited to members of forums and readers of static websites. Then, the media revolution brought the ascent of YouTube, MySpace and, later, Facebook and Twitter: distributing and finding content has never been faster or easier.[1]

After Twitter and Facebook intensified efforts to delete radical content from their platforms in 2014, many extremists moved to closed channels such as Telegram (the preferred choice of Islamist groups) and Discord (the preferred choice of far-right groups). Nonetheless, most new recruits still make their initial contact with these scenes on Facebook. Many groups still use the popular social network for this very purpose. It allows them to contact interested parties without much effort, keep extremist preachers online around the clock, and address the needs of their target audience directly – qualities that make the internet an invaluable tool for extremist groups seeking to recruit new members.

Researchers have not yet reached a consensus on whether online channels are sufficient for radicalising individuals fully and how online radicalisation really manifests itself. Most agree, however, that the virtual space facilitates extremists' radicalisation efforts by offering a space for effective, anonymous communication and opportunities to form fast and international networks.[2] Existing literature has only been able to point out a correlation between the increasing amount of extremist content online and the increasing number of radicalised individuals.[3] So far, there is no evidence for a causal relationship.

Recent studies emphasise the significance of the internet during the early stages of recruitment. Recruiters delay offline contact until later, when they can deepen the established trust in person.[4]

The advantages of the internet are obvious: interested parties independently search for content, while the extremists can limit their exposure to detection thanks to the assumed anonymity offered online. The likelihood of addressing susceptible individuals is considerably higher than it is during regular "street recruitment" efforts involving the distribution of flyers or CDs in cafés or schools.[5] In addition, "jihobbyists" voluntarily prepare extremist content and share it in their own networks, yielding considerable reach at a low effort.

Digital media and the internet have had a significant impact on the communication habits of children, teenagers and young adults. A study conducted in 2014 by the DIVSI institute has shown that 98% of young Germans are online, and access to smartphones has blurred the boundaries between the online and offline spheres.[6] According to the researchers, access to the online world constitutes a "central aspect of social participation" for young people.[7] This development is increasingly affecting opportunities for pedagogic access. Prensky, who coined the term 'digital natives' in 2001, observed:

"It's [a] very serious [issue], because the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language."[8]

Digital natives[9] are accustomed to fast access to information; their lives are defined by parallel processes and multitasking; they are more likely to think in terms of pictures and diagrams than in terms of lengthy texts. Today's young people function best when they are part of networks. They are used to instant gratification and constant rewards in their virtual environment.[10]

For several years, the young generation of digital natives has been obtaining information through different channels than those used by the "digital immigrants". They are particularly

adept at using search engines and social-media channels to research the meaning of keywords they encounter in their everyday lives. While the first results of a search for "jihad" on the German internet are content provided by Wikipedia and the Federal Agency for Civic Education, a search for "al wala al bara" already yields mostly extremist websites. This effectively enables extremists to redefine relevant terms by way of popular search engines. Uninformed people are particularly easily tempted to delve deeper into extremist ideas. Problematic algorithms on YouTube and similar websites aggravate the issue further by ceaselessly suggesting similar content[11] once a viewer encounters extremist material. This mechanism is particularly powerful on social-media platforms: it creates a filter bubble that can only be exited by way of informed reflection and a conscious effort. Many teenagers looking for answers on such partisan websites lack basic religious education, which leaves them highly sus-

ceptible to radical influences.[12] Questions that would have been asked an imam, a family member or a friend in the past are often researched on the internet today, and extremists are keen to provide answers.

Structural factors prevent both governmental and non-governmental entities in the field of radicalisation prevention from keeping up with the pace set by radical groups. Online prevention cannot consist of attempts to combat the vast volume of extremist propaganda on the internet simply by distributing more information. The effectiveness of counter-narratives is highly disputed among academics and de-radicalisation professionals.[13] What must be investigated instead is the specific needs that drive these young people to engage with extremist content online. Once these factors have been identified, they must be addressed both online and offline.

[1]Brandon, James. 2008. Virtual Caliphate. Centre for Social Cohesion. / Peter R. Neumann. 2013. Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 36, No. 6. p. 434.

[2]Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander and Kaderbhai, Nick. 2017. Perspectives on Online Radicalization. Literature review 2006-2016.

[3]Conway, Maura. 2017. Determining the role of the internet in violent extremism and terrorism: Six suggestions for progressing research. In: Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 40, No. 1. p. 1 / Weimann, Gabriel and Hoffmann, Bruc. 2006. Terror on the Internet: the new arena, the new challenges. United States Institute of Peace Press. / Von Behr, Ines et al. 2013. Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism. RAND. p. 17.

[4]Aly, Anne et al. [2017]. Introduction to the special issue: Terrorist online propaganda and radicalization. In: Studies in Conflict and Terrorism [40], No. [1]. pp. [1]–[9] / Windsor, Leah. [2018]. The Language of Radicalization: Female Internet Recruitment to Participation in ISIS Activities. In: Terrorism and Political Violence [0], No. [0]. pp. [1]–[33] / Von Behr, Ines et al. [2013]. Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The use of the internet in [15] cases of terrorism and extremism. RAND. p. [76].

[5]Von Behr, Ines et al. [2013]. Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The use of the internet in [15] cases of terrorism and extremism. RAND. p.27.

[6]Deutsches Instituts für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet, „Kinder, Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene in der digitalen Welt", 2014: 11.

[7]ibid.

[8]Prensky, M. [2001]. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part [1]. In: On the Horizon [9], No. [5]. p. [3]. doi:10.1108/10748121111107708

[9]Prensky, M. [2001]. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part [1]. In: On the Horizon [9], No. 5.

[10]ibid: pp. 3–4.

[11]Gendron, Angela. 2017. The Call to Jihad: Charismatic Preachers and the Internet. In: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 40, No. 1. pp. 44–61.

[12]Dziri, Bacem and Kiefer, Michael. 2018. Baqiyya im Lego-Islam. In: Lasset uns in sha'a Allah ein Plan machen. Springer Fachmedien. Wiesbaden. p. 56.

[13]Bean, Hamilton and Edgar, Amanda Nell. 2017. A genosonic analysis of ISIL and US counter-extremism video messages. In: Media, War & Conflict. p. 329. doi:10.1177/1750635217694124; McDowell-Smith, Allison; Speckhard, Anne and Yayla, Ahmet S. Beating ISIS in the digital space: Focus testing ISIS defector counter-narrative videos with American college students. In: Journal of Deradicalization 10, Spring 2017. pp. 50–76.

III. Project approach

On|Off DERAD

The model project On|Off DERAD (Online and Offline Deradicalisation Interventions through Social Media) was launched in April 2016. Its plan was to use Facebook, a social network belonging to the US company Facebook Inc., to reach out to teenagers and young adults who are at risk of radicalisation or already undergoing a process of radicalisation. By initially offering them the opportunity of a virtual conversation, the deradicalisation workers would facilitate the establishment of direct, offline contact at a later stage. The envisioned working relationship would promote critical engagement with extremism and ideology. It aimed to help those affected initiate steps to distance themselves from incipient radicalisation processes or exit radicalisation processes that have already taken place. These steps must take place before the radical ideologies become so deeply entrenched that they lead to social isolation or violent acts. This model project is predominantly funded by the European Union (Innerer Sicherheitsfond).

Modification to the project approach

When the project was developed and submitted in the spring of 2015, it relied on three key functions of the Facebook network: its then newly developed "social graph search", with which the deradicalisation workers planned to identify vulnerable users, and two then newly configured messenger chat functions called "message request" and "pay per message".

By the time the project was ready for launch in April 2016, however, Facebook had altered these functions considera-

bly. The German version of the "social graph search", which had been scheduled for release in 2015, was discontinued after the beta stage. Unfortunately, targeting German-speaking Facebook users by way of an English-language search engine is nigh impossible, not only for linguistic reasons. To complicate matters further, the system lacked a logical, comprehensible pattern for operationalising linked search queries.

The "message request" function, which allows users to message other users who are not on their list of friends, no longer permitted company profiles to send messages to the inbox of private users. Instead, such messages are now sent to a notification folder, which most users ignore. This problem could not be circumvented by having individuals address the target group personally, as legal and security concerns ruled out the option of disclosing employees' names to their target contacts. Using pseudonyms to set up "fake accounts" would have constituted a breach of the terms and conditions of Facebook and risked deletion or closure of the offending account and all indirectly linked accounts.

Facebook further abandoned its "pay per message" feature, which would have allowed company profiles to send messages to the inbox of a private profile for a fee.

Due to these circumstances, we have had to modify the project approach of On|Off DERAD. Rather than identifying vulnerable Facebook users technologically and contacting them through a private communication channel, the project now uses technological tools to identify target groups containing a large number of people at risk of radicalisation.

Timing interventions

For the initial contacting phase, deradicalisation workers were originally supposed to address general questions young people frequently ask about their everyday lives. In order to minimise waste circulation and adjust the communication offers to the target group's needs as accurately as possible, it would have been useful to determine in advance at which point of the radicalisation process the target group would be most likely to encounter the project content.

Were the target contacts teenagers and young adults about to be radicalised or in the very first stages of the radicalisation process? In their search for answers and guidance, such individuals are normally still receptive to communication and information offered outside of the extremist scene. Or were they people in an advanced stage of radicalisation who consciously engage with extremist content but whose doubts and questions have not yet been addressed fully within the extremist scene? Such individuals may still be looking for information and dialogue outside of the scene they have entered.

Social networks tend to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Especially teenagers undergo considerable fluctuation as they form their opinions, and they may go through phases in which they spontaneously make extremist utterances. Due to the relative anonymity and lack of consequences in the social media, many young people use this communication space to explore their own identities and try out different worldviews. This makes it difficult to evaluate the communication habits, profiles and identities of individu-al Facebook users and determine their stage within the radicalisation process.

The advertising system used by Facebook further complicates matters: campaigns can only be targeted at users by means of parameters that the users themselves specify in their accounts for that express purpose. Neither approach yields much insight into radicalisation processes or extremist tendencies.

Considering these circumstances, we have decided to design the content of our posts and advertising campaigns in a more general way and accept the resulting waste circulation and inaccurate definition of the target group.

Phenomena addressed within the project

The On|Off DERAD model project focused on two phenomena in the field of radicalisation: Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism. Its main emphasis was on the former.

Two Facebook pages were created to facilitate communication with this target group: "Generation Dschihad" ["Generation Jihad"] and "Islam-ist".

To address youth at risk of right-wing extremism, we created the page "Jugend fragt" ["The Youth Asks"].

All three pages worked on the same principle: they encouraged their respective target group to interact with the deradicalisation workers through posts about various relevant topics. Further communication would then be established on the basis of these initial interactions.
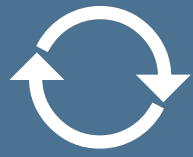
Facebook page "Generation Dschihad":

Facebook page "Islam-ist":


Facebook page "Jugend fragt":

IV. Project implementation

Facebook page "Generation Dschihad"

The Facebook page "Generation Dschihad" was online between July 2016 and December 2016. It was designed to resemble Facebook pages that disseminate extremist propaganda. Its posts addressed the target group directly. They discussed the supposed promises of the so-called Islamic State and utilised imagery of armed combat.

Sample post:
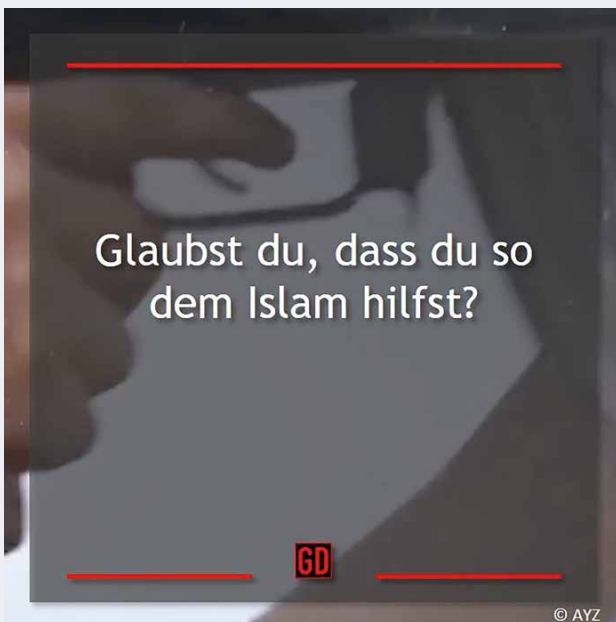
To prevent deletion or closure of the page or its posts, we spoke to Facebook ahead of time and informed the company about the planned pedagogic pilot project. Posts were sent to the Facebook Politics & Government Team in Berlin prior to publication. Unfortunately, the page was repeatedly closed nonetheless; individual posts and comments disappeared temporarily, and Facebook did not publish our adverts.

In the autumn of 2016, we agreed with Facebook that the various pages of our organisation would be protected technologically, but the communication issues and campaign problems continued.

In late 2016, it became apparent that the Facebook page designed to address the phenomenon of Islamist extremism would have to be modified considerably. This was partly due to the technical uncertainties of the "Generation Dschihad" page. Over the course of the project, we also realised that the format had a potential for adverse effects: it could conceivably intensify the radicalisation of the target group. This insight made it clear that our communication with the target group needed to be restructured in both approach and content.

The period during which the Facebook page was live further coincided with a change in the internet consumption habits of the target group, which moved away from popular websites run by radical German individuals and increasingly turned to large information portals. These platforms presented themselves as trustworthy guides who addressed religious, political and social questions that are relevant to teenagers and young adults. Their operators consistently expanded their various communication channels. Youths started using platforms such as ask.fm or reddit.com to communicate. They searched for answers to concrete questions about their lives and social environments on Google.

For these reasons, the communication strategy pursued through "Generation Dschihad" was discontinued along with the Facebook page in December, 2016.

Facebook page "Islam-ist":

Between late 2016 and early 2017, we launched the Facebook page "Islam-ist" to replace "Generation Dschihad". The new page approached its target group through posts in five categories: knowledge, gender, everyday life, religiousness and current affairs.

These categories were developed on the basis of experiences gained by the deradicalisation workers and during additional internet research. Posts on the page focused on questions and topics that are often instrumentalised by extremist groups in their attempts to redefine standard religious practice and turn their own views into commonly accepted theological interpretations.

They frequently referred to glossary entries and longer FAQ items published on the website www.islam-ist.de. Although this website was not a direct part of the On|Off DERAD project, it accompanied the activities of the "Islam-ist" Facebook page within the scope of a project partnership. It offered detailed information about the topics raised on Facebook.

"Current affairs" category

The Facebook page regularly published news-like posts about current events in between its contributions to the individual topics, which were discussed more extensively and over a longer period of time. This included different aspects of life in Germany as well as international conflicts and events. Most posts linked to articles, publications and quotes from other media sources. They frequently addressed issues that were also discussed on Salafist platforms: forced migration, war in Yemen, children in war, suicide attacks, the Rohingya, Shia v. Sunni, 9/11, etc.

Sample post:

"Religiousness" category

This diverse, extensive category focused on the Islamic identity and ethical questions governing everyday life. It included specific holidays and important parts of the Islamic year, such as Ramadan and the Hajj. It also addressed questions relating to everyday life of Muslims in a democratic society such as Germany: am I allowed to vote? Are Islam and democracy compatible?

Sample posts:

"Everyday life" category

Posts in this category discussed topics relating to the immediate social environment of their young readers. For example: dealing with prejudice, discrimination or one's family.

Sample posts:

Islam-ist
28. Juli 2017 · 🌐

#MuslimVoices
"Ich fahre Zug aus Holland nach Süddeutschland. Im Zug gibt es eine Polizeikontrolle. Ratet mal wer als einziger in unserem Waggon kontrolliert wurde..."

👍 Gefällt mir   💬 Kommentieren   ➤ Teilen

Islam-ist
9. August 2017 · 🌐

#MuslimVoices
"Einmal kam ein Bruder zu mir, ich war grade fertig mit meinem Mittag Gebet und sagte mir, du betest falsch. Er sagte so wie ich bete wird mein Gebet nicht angenommen, weil meine Hände zu sehr auf Brusthöhe waren. Ich meinte, bei uns betet man so. Er hat mich auch nicht in Ruhe gelassen und die ganz Zeit auf mich eingeredet."

👍 Gefällt mir   💬 Kommentieren   ➤ Teilen

"Gender" category

This category focused on gender equality and the role of women in Islam. Some of the questions were formulated by the project team. Most of the posts, however, were quotes selected during online research. They were rephrased and published under the heading of "Muslim Voices" to represent authentic ideas expressed by the community.

Sample posts:

Islam-ist
28. August 2017 · 🌐

#MuslimVoices "Ich bin ein Mann und habe einen Freund. Meine Eltern unterstützen mich dabei."

#MuslimVoices

👍 Gefällt mir   💬 Kommentieren   ➤ Teilen

Islam-ist
21. August 2017 · 🌐

#MuslimVoices "Ich bin ein Mädchen und habe drei Brüder und ich bin das einzige Kind, was sich im Haushalt beteiligen muss. Ich habe keine Lust mehr den Prinzen hinterher zu putzen."

Islam-ist
7. August 2017 · 🌐

#MuslimVoices "Wir Frauen müssen hinter den Männern beten. Ich finde das ungerecht, dass wir in den Moscheen immer in kleineren Räumen beten müssen."

"Knowledge" category

This category focuses on fundamental questions about Islam, which are frequently instrumentalised in extremist discourse. They include correct Islamic behaviour with regard to sports, music, nasheed, haram and halal and Ramadan, for example. The category also discussed important concepts such as the Sunnah, the five pillars of Islam, zakat, sawm, takfir, kufr and bid'ah. Especially these last terms are of crucial importance to the identity and isolation of people who are undergoing processes of radicalisation.

Sample posts:

Islam-ist
10. Mai 2017 · ⊕

11. Mai 2017: Lailat al-Barā'a: Die Nacht der Vergebung

In dieser Nacht sollen die Gebete um Vergebung von Muslimen besonderes Gehör finden. Es wird den Verstorbenen gedacht und auch für die Vergebung der Sünden der Mitmenschen gebetet. Diese Nacht ist eine spirituelle Vorbereitung auf den Fastenmonat Ramadan, der zwei Wochen später beginnt.

👍 Gefällt mir　　💬 Kommentieren　　↪ Teilen

Islam-ist hat 3 neue Fotos hinzugefügt.
10. Juni 2017 · ⊕

„Wie fastest du?"- Iftar bei unserem Team!

👍 Gefällt mir　　💬 Kommentieren　　↪ Teilen

Facebook page "Jugend fragt":

In the field of right-wing extremism, we created the Facebook page "Jugend fragt" ["The Youth Asks"], which was live between August 2016 and March 2017.

Its title was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, to limit the target group explicitly to teenagers and young adults and minimise the interference of other groups in ongoing, public discussions. Secondly, to emphasise that the Facebook page did not intend merely to broadcast other, alternative or new truths. In order to initiate contact, the deradicalisation workers avoided striking a condescending, judgemental or counterproductively confrontational tone.

The posts of the Facebook page asked the target group questions about refugees and asylum, ideology and nationalism. They referred to current social and political events and topics elicited during school workshops that had been carried out within the scope of other projects.

Sample posts:

Identifiability of the organisation

The identifiability of the project organiser, Violence Prevention Network e. V, was a considerable obstacle for the implementation of the project in the field of right-wing extremism.

Section 5(1) of the German Telemedia Act (TMG) stipulates that all media publications, including Facebook pages, must provide a legal notice containing details about the publisher. This made it relatively easy to identify the organisation behind the various Facebook pages. The users of the "Generation Dschihad" and "Islam-ist" pages did not raise this issue, neither in public posts nor during private conversations with the project team. This confirmed our assumption that teenagers and young adults would find this aspect of our online activities relatively uninteresting. Users of the "Jugend fragt" page, on the other hand, soon took an unexpected interest in the operators of the page and researched accordingly.

This clearly highlighted the intense distrust held by large swathes of the population towards the media in general and governmental institutions working in the field of violence and (right-wing) extremism in particular. Users who found about the organisation behind the Facebook page publicly "warned" others about its identity.

The legal and security concerns previously discussed in this report ruled out the option of disclosing the names of our employees to establish contact with individual users. This would also have contradicted the fundamental principles of the organisation. The target group must have confidence in the transparency of the project in order to establish a trusting working relationship with its employees. Deradicalisation workers involved in the project were deliberately kept anonymous to protect them from likely hostility, but this also limited the openness and trust of the target group towards the project. This, in turn, complicated its goal of initiating personal dialogue. Using nicknames could have resulted in working relationships based on falsehoods, which cannot feasibly constitute the basis of a constructive, pedagogic debate.

In addition, disclosing the identity of the organisation in the legal notice could have unintentionally and indirectly stigma-

tised the actual target group and further obstructed direct contact. Members of the target group generally do not consider themselves extremists or at risk of radicalisation; most of them have not (yet) committed acts of violence. Openly naming an organisation whose website contains information about work with violent extremists could easily scare the target group off and prevent the establishment of direct contact.

The approach of publishing relatively provocative posts to encourage users to initiate contact was undermined further by the rapidly changing communicative habits of the target group. Over the course of the project, we found it difficult to compose texts that were controversial enough to attract the attention of the target group and stand out among a plethora of populist and extremist messages without compromising our own legal situation.

These events and considerations ultimately caused the Facebook page "Jugend fragt" to dormant since March 2017.

V. Facts and figures

The On|Off DERAD pilot project helped us evaluate suitable content strategies that will allow us to maximise our contact with the target groups and optimise our interaction with them. We used the parameter of reach to quantify the first factor (maximal contact with the target groups). Reach refers to the number of individual users who were shown the published content within a certain period of time. Interactions were determined by the amount of comments, likes, shares and clicks the content attracted.

The project used another parameter to determine the most efficient approach: the engagement rate. In the context of social networks, this indicator measures the intensity of user engagement with published content. We used the engagement rate to evaluate how our target group interacted with the content in question.

For evaluation purposes, the individual focal topics of the project were partly divided into categories and published as regular posts and sponsored posts (funded by advertising). This was motivated by the desire to examine the effect of ad-funded measures in the evaluation and derive actions from the results.

Evaluation of "Generation Dschihad"

The Facebook page "Generation Dschihad" was live between July 2016 and December 2016. It reached 53,163 users and attracted 2,228 interactions, which corresponds to an engagement rate of 4.19%.
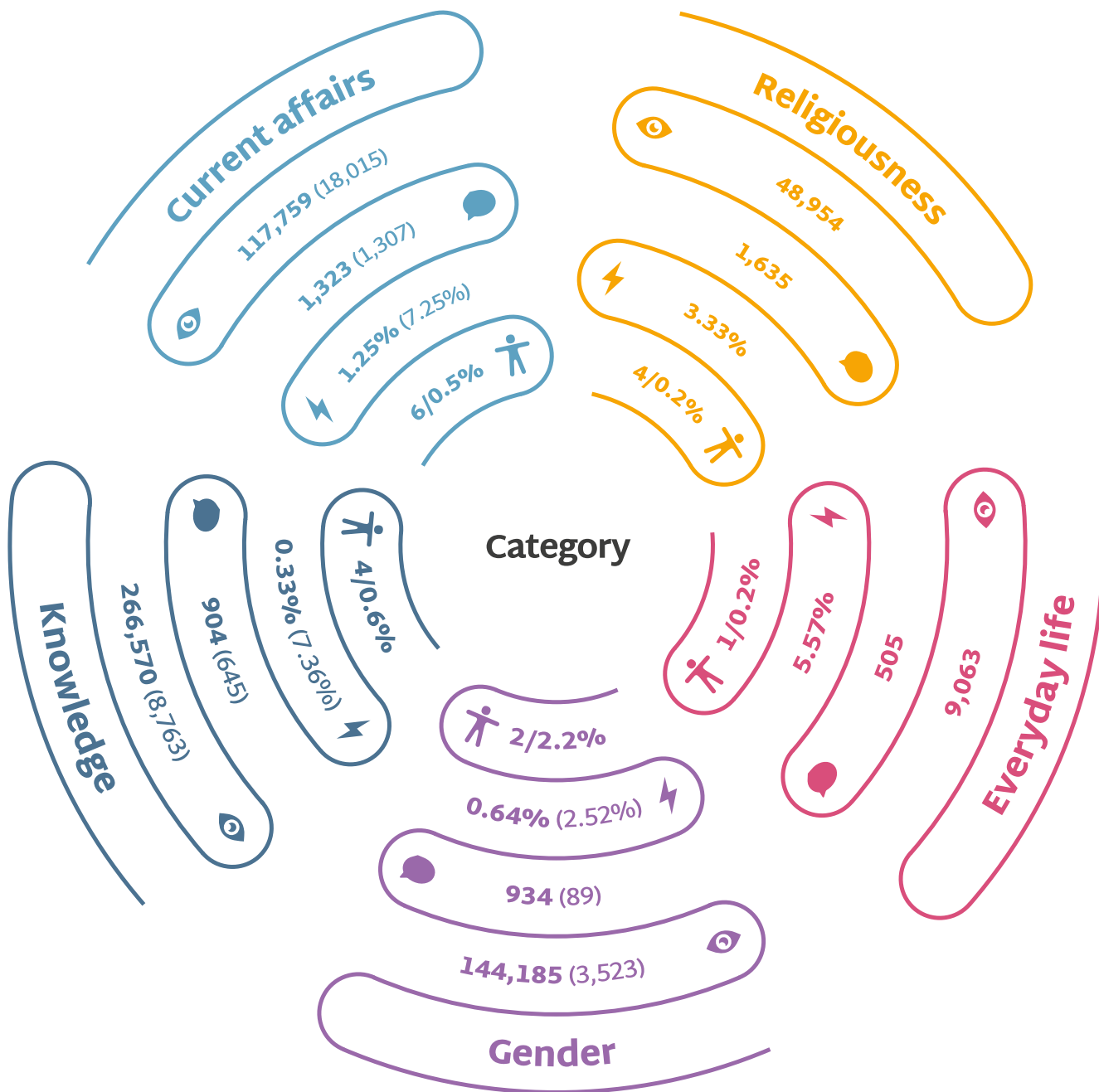
This relatively high engagement rate is partially due to the effect of combining texts and images. Emotively phrased posts depicting the vision of a so-called Islamic State appealed to the target group both cognitively and emotionally. As a result, awareness of the page spread quickly, which generated a high rate of interaction and, in turn, a high engagement rate

Evaluation of "Islam-ist"

The Facebook page "Islam-ist" was designed as a successor page of "Generation Dschihad". It drew from experiences and insights gained during the runtime of its predecessor. Experience had shown that emotively phrased posts which address their target group directly can quickly generate awareness among the target group and encourage interaction. This knowledge was taken into consideration when composing posts for the "Islam-ist" Facebook channel. To counteract the potential side effect of intensified radicalisation, the posts focused on the lived realities of young people. They were phrased in a way that encouraged the target group to engage with the content cognitively.

Between December 2016 and December 2017, the "Islam-ist" Facebook page reached 586,531 Facebook users. Its advertising campaigns targeted people aged 13 to 30. During this period, the Facebook page recorded 5,279 interactions, which corresponds to an engagement rate of 0.9%. Subtracting the sponsored posts and focusing on the established community, the posts have achieved a reach of 76,222 people and generated 3,868 interactions – an engagement rate of 5.07%.

Divided by topics, the results are as follows:

Current affairs
117,759 (18,015)
1,323 (1,307)
1.25% (7.25%)
6/0.5%

Religiousness
48,954
1,635
3.33%
4/0.2%

Knowledge
266,570 (8,763)
904 (645)
0.33% (7.36%)
4/0.6%

Category

Everyday life
1/0.2%
5.57%
505
9,063

Gender
2/2.2%
0.64% (2.52%)
934 (89)
144,185 (3,523)

The data gained from evaluating the phenomenon of Islamist extremism suggests that social media project involving emotively phrased posts in the categories of knowledge, current affairs and everyday life generate the most interactions and achieve the highest reach within the target groups. Increasing the reach can raise more awareness among radicalised users, who primarily engage with topics in the categories of gender and current affairs.

Ad-funded ("sponsored") measures should focus on "like campaigns" or similar measures that increase the organic reach and fan base of the Facebook page. This is more effective than concentrating on content, as it generates sustainable and stable growth for the community, which further raises the profile of the offer among the target group.

Reach

Interactions

Engagement Rate

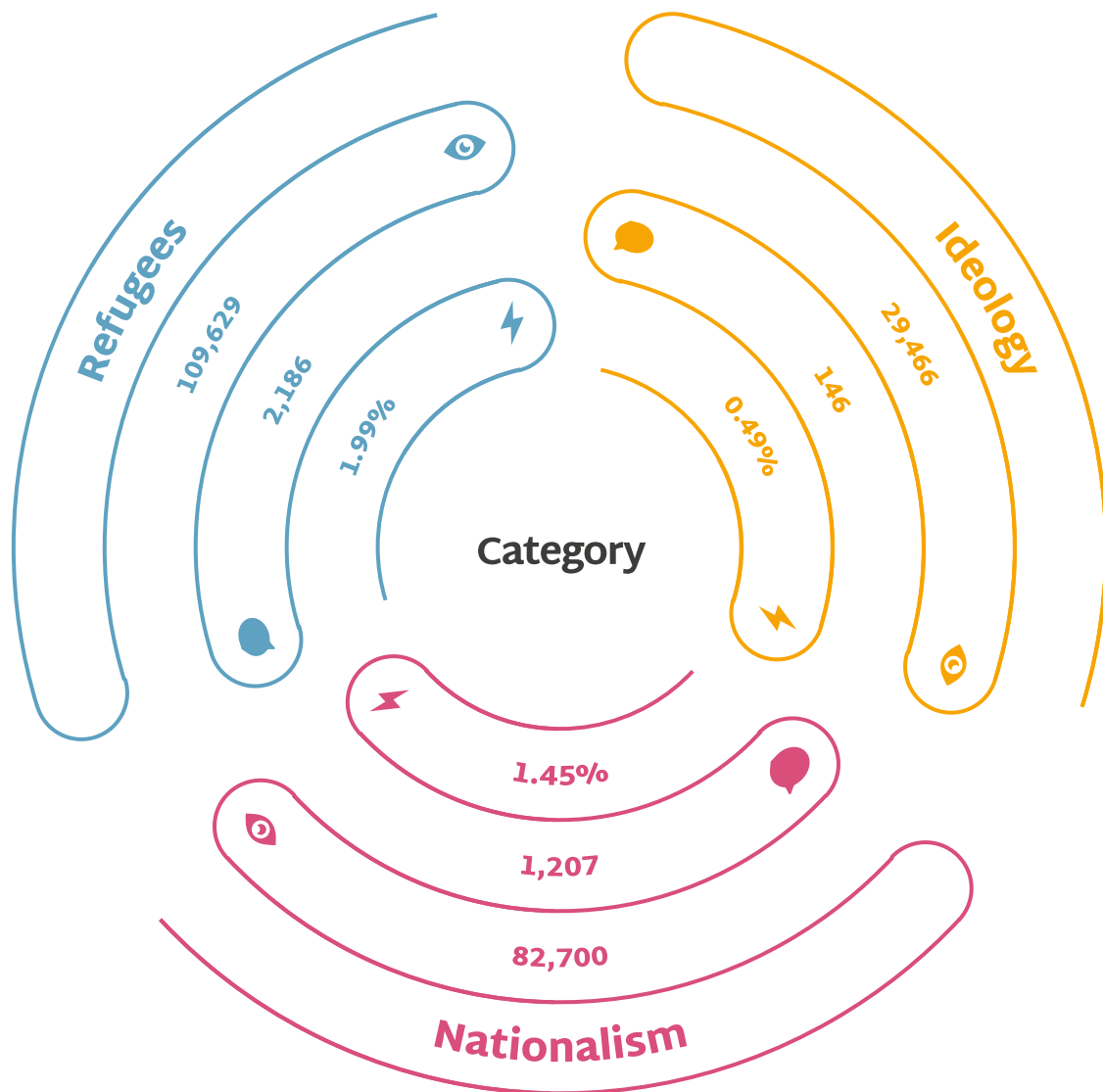**Users assumed to be at an advanced stage of radicalisation[14]**

(…)   **Without sponsored posts, focusing on the established community**

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[14]This assumption was based on an analysis and evaluation of the users' comments and Facebook profiles. Various indicators were taken into consideration, such as extremist / dichotomous patterns of argumentation, reactions to opinions contradicting Islamist extremism, opinions about democracy and elections, appeal to extremist authorities to support own arguments, acceptance of other faiths.

Evaluation of „Jugend fragt"

Divided by topics, the results of the posts are as follows:

Refugees
109,629
2,186
1.99%

Ideology
29,466
146
0.49%

Category

Nationalism
82,700
1,207
1.45%

Between August 2016 and March 2017, the "Jugend fragt" Facebook page reached 221,795 Facebook users. Its advertising campaigns targeted people aged 13 to 30. This project also drew from the experiences gained during the "Generation Dschihad" project: its posts were phrased in a provocative manner and addressed the target group directly.

They focused on interculturalism and day-to-day events through the topics of asylum and refugees (cf. "current affairs" category above), on the incipient extremist worldview through discussions of ideological aspects (cf. "religiousness"), and on manifest views about everyday topics (cf. "everyday life"). During this period, the Facebook page recorded 3,540 interactions, which corresponds to an engagement rate of 1.59%.

Reach

Interactions

Engagement Rate

VI. Conclusion

Challenges during the project

Personality, community, justice

The pedagogues on the project team frequently mention three central aspects that make extremist scenes attractive to their members: Personality, community and a claim to justice.

Members of extremist scenes have been leveraging these three characteristics in the social media highly professionally for a long time. Future online projects will need to produce credible medial responses to the need for personality, community and justice. This is a challenging task: can we use charismatic ambassadors who are similarly convincing as the radicalising extremists and idols of extremist pop culture? Not only will these individuals require a great deal of moral courage, they will also need to be protected against hostility from the extremist scene due to their exposure. Does it make sense to respond directly to the presence of extremist idols or would it be more expedient to rely on a multitude of authentic voices representing a wide range of views and approaches, including controversial ones? Can we create credible offers of social community that provide personal support and solidarity to people going through a life crisis?

Extremist communities offer support and community in many different places, allowing those in need to experience a spontaneous feeling of security. This often makes it easy to succumb entirely to the rules of this new environment.

How can we support people who struggle with life in our individualistic society by offering less authoritative forms of community that promise obvious benefits?

The experiences we have gained during the project show that online offers must meet two main criteria to meet this challenge. They must be holistic – for example, by offering help and advice with all problems faced by the target group within, for instance, a theological framework. And they must be easily accessible and available at any time. High visibility is crucial, as teenagers tend to view the first available offer and simply accept its content in times of doubt. Casting a wide net will help us implement preventative measures at an early stage of the radicalisation process. As soon as an individual comes into contact with a group and starts identifying with them, opportunities to offer an alternative community start dwindling.

Topic selection

Both in the political and the Islamic-theological spheres, selecting the right topics requires great prudence. Can a government-funded project really offer a credible forum for free discussion of all topics for which the Islamist scene criticises the West? These topics include the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Syrian conflict and the situations in Turkey, Egypt and Islamic Central Asia. How neutrally can one engage with the views of Islamic scholars and extremist interpretations thereof? Where is the fine line between deradicalisation work and practising da'wah (proselytisation for Islam) with public funds? Do certain positions, phrasings and topics deter the

target group from engaging with the channel and effectively "contaminate" the project? Do some topics provoke a back-fire effect[15] and intensify radicalisation?

Users in this field are interested in a wide range of topics. They range from theological debates and political commentary to "humorous" memes and simple "trolling"[16]. This makes it essential to select shared content diligently. Legal, ethical and moral limitations often prevent us from instrumentalising topics in the same way that extremist groups do. In most cases, content remains available online, which makes it likely that users interact with it in future. Certain measures, especially (but not only) counter-narratives, can achieve the opposite of their intended effect. They often intensify the radicalisation process by putting target individuals in a position in which they feel the need to justify themselves. Besides legal and ethical standards, the greatest challenge in selecting adequate topics is to present the content promptly in an attractive way that appeals to the target group.

Argumentation and approach

Religious lines of argument on many Islamist portals typically refer to the major sources of Islamic doctrine: the Qu'ran and Sunnah. In the social media, this often ends in a theological game of ping pong: participants cite sources and references to oppose others' opinions and prove their own views about the suras, hadiths and fatwas.

Is it sensible to take up this practice and expand the extremely selective sources and arguments used by extremist websites to include a more representative range of reference material? This would highlight the wide range of different interpretations produced over centuries through methods to which the target audience is accustomed.

Could we go even further and point out innovative, recent discussions among Muslim intellectuals and scholars that involve critical, hermeneutic approaches to the Qu'ran and Sunnah? Here, the greatest challenge lies in taking into account the wide theological variety of Islamic traditions, legal schools of thought, philosophies and methods. How can we convey this plurality of views to the target group? There is also a risk of upsetting the non-extremist, pious sensibilities of regular Muslims with theological debates about their faith and traditions.

Right-wing groups, too, are adopting increasingly sophisticated approaches and lines of argument as a result of "media training" and debating tools offered within the scene.[17] Personnel shortages and time constraints make it extremely challenging and expensive for online projects to disrupting these coherent narratives, especially if they are brought forward within the context of coordinated campaigns.

Expectations

As a result of the communication and argumentation strategies employed by extremists in the social media, the young target group now has certain expectations about acceptable answers to questions that are relevant to their own lives. Many of them ask for a clear yes or no, an unambiguous prohibition or permission in response to their questions. They expect their questions to be answered in specific for-

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[15]Facts that contradict an opinion tend to reinforce it.
[16]Deliberate disturbance of online communication, usually achieved by way of emotionally provocative contributions that trigger negative reactions from as many participants as possible

[17]cf. e.g. http://d-gen.de/²⁰¹⁷/¹⁰/art-of-redpilling/.

mats, employing specific lines of argument that are based on traditional methods and heavily utilised by the extremist spectrum. This effectively elevates the project team to a theological authority or instance expected to relieve the askers of the burden of decision-making. Communication becomes a balancing act: the deradicalisation workers must fulfil the expectations of the target group while simultaneously showing them that answers can also be found through different, equally valid methods. This discrepancy between the target group's expectations and the availability of funds, time and staff, on the one hand, and basic pedagogic principles, on the other, constitutes a challenge for any online project.

Language, comprehension and communication

Comments and questions left on the page are frequently written in poorly comprehensible, incorrect German. Many written contributions are grammatically, orthographically and logically unclear. Project members engaging with these questions and comments must ask very careful questions to clarify ambiguities. The extent to which linguistic expression should be adapted to the habits of the target group remains an outstanding issue. Authentic expression easily reveals to the target individual that the person on the other end of the line does not belong to the same scene as they do. This can affect or even terminate the dialogue. On the other hand, some users seemed to appreciate the opportunity of speaking to someone outside their scene who could offer a different viewpoint: in many cases, the dialogue was continued. Working with young employees who have close insights into the scene has allowed us to compose posts in line with the linguistic habits of the target group. This has proven to be a promising

option over the course of the project. During conversations, for example, the deradicalisation workers used common Arabic theological terms that are frequently used in the scene. At the same time, they paid close attention to writing grammatically and orthographically correct answers that were easily comprehensible. The scene's characteristically religious style of writing was not used.

Unlike our interactions with users who are interested in Islam, our Facebook communication with right-wing audiences escalated often and easily. The project workers posted contributions about current topics that were known to be particularly emotionally charged for the target group, combining them with deliberately balanced, thoughtful questions. These were rapidly met with rude, pejorative and exclusionary responses. It is likely that these extreme outbursts were fuelled by the anonymity of the internet and the authors' belief that they were speaking on behalf of a large, equally minded community. This created a visceral atmosphere awash with diffuse fears, half-truths and falsehoods, inflammatory comments and seemingly irreconcilable social and political divisions. Establishing a trust-based online dialogue was nigh impossible.

Who is writing and why?

The inability to identify individuals remains problematic in the online sphere. Parties involved in a dialogue never know for sure whether those with whom they are interacting are who they claim to be. This makes trust-based work considerably more difficult. It also complicates the process of determining an individual's intrinsic motivation for entering into the conversation in the first place.

These uncertainties applied to our work with both groups. Even users who appeared to be at high risk of radicalisation often exhibited very complex attitudes in their profiles. Many showed an interest in humanist topics, suggesting an intricate ambivalence that made the profiles in question difficult to interpret. Contacting these individuals could help us understand their attitudes better. This approach risks suspicion, however, as both scenes propagate a multitude of conspiracy theories about governmental manipulation and surveillance.

Reaching target groups with ad-funded measures

The ad-funded Facebook measures increased the reach of our posts selectively but did not improve interaction rates. Sponsored posts that promoted specific content from the aforementioned categories received fewer reactions than campaigns designed specifically to attract new followers.

This also prompted us to examine to what extent ad-funded measures influence the engagement rate on Facebook. We used sponsored posts for some categories and regular, non-sponsored posts for others to determine whether the former would significantly boost the engagement rate for the corresponding categories.

The comparison did not yield a clear result for this project. We compared the two categories with the highest engagement rates among both the sponsored and the non-sponsored categories. The "knowledge" category (engagement rate of 7.36%, sponsored) recorded a significant improvement of 24% compared to the "everyday life category" (en-

gagement rate of 5.57%, non-sponsored). The categories of "gender" (2.52%, sponsored) and "religiousness" (3.33%, non-sponsored), on the other hand, recorded a lowered engagement rate. Extensive qualitative and quantitative research is required to determine the impact of sponsored measures unambiguously.

Divergence of online and offline measures

Measures in the fields of radicalisation prevention and de-radicalisation need to take the considerable differences between online and offline communication into account, as they can influence pedagogic processes. This includes the manner in which conversations are conducted, chances of understanding one another, the identity of the other party, the competitive situation and the required resources.

Spontaneity and transience

Not only does online communication make it more difficult to establish initial contact, it is also discontinued more often. Due to the fast pace and assumed anonymity of online channels, targeted individuals can easily a) ignore attempts at communication or b) stop responding or even block the contact if a conversation is perceived to be unpleasant or uninteresting. To facilitate long-term success, we need to establish durable, resilient, trust-based relationships online.

Uncertainty regarding identities

Online profiles can give away a lot of information about their owners, but some consist of virtually unusable, even mis-

leading information. First impressions of a user are shaped by information the person divulges deliberately or unintentionally. Further complicating factors include the limited options of the medium itself and the users' own knowledge and skill in expressing themselves within the possibilities offered by the respective platform. This makes it difficult to determine the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of a target person in any detail. Many Facebook users who belong to this scene create "fake profiles" for the purpose of "trolling" or to protect their own identity.

Offline communication involves direct, face-to-face contact. The entire impact of non-verbal and verbal communication immediately comes into play, laying the foundation for trust, mutual affection and a willingness to engage in dialogue – even if the first contact is brief.

Lack of community

Presenting a community that is attractive to people at risk of radicalisation is difficult for a private organisation with limited resources, even if this organisation is perceived as authentic. People from extremist scenes often spend 16–18 hours online every day, which allows them to offer a considerably higher response rate. Truly professional online prevention teams discuss and rephrase their answers collaboratively. While this method yields accurate and pedagogically useful messages, it also means that responding takes a certain amount of time. Extremist individuals, on the other hand, can easily reply to inquiries within minutes using simplistic messages: the prevalent narrative and the dichotomous worldview of their scene do not require difficult explanations. This immediate atten-

tion instils a feeling of being cared for and looked after in the target individual.

Competitive structures online

Unlike preventive programmes in the offline sphere, online content must stand out among a multitude of competing groups and their various offers in order to be noticed. Extremist groups are among the pioneers of social media. They recognised at an early stage that the internet offers plenty of opportunities to disseminate their messages. By taking advantage of these opportunities, they have successfully established themselves as a presence in many fields.

Extremist content is easy to find; it draws from a large pool of material from global sources. It is permanently expanded or updated and republished. International governmental organisations, associations and activists support these efforts by translating extremist content. This gives extremists access to transnational networks, immense financial and logistic support and a vast quantity of tested materials for their websites and social-media activities. Some extremist websites employ professional editors, film crews and volunteer activists who constantly create up-to-date content, some of it exclusive. These efforts result in a high level of dynamism, which is characteristic of well-kept websites and popular social-media platforms. Extremist organisations, activists and local communities continuously and rapidly produce new content, exerting both bottom-up and top-down influence. They strategically utilise the entire spectrum of social-media platforms in a coordinated approach. New trends are immediately recognised and examined for their potential as

propaganda vessels. Systematic manipulation simulates the existence of vast networks and widespread agreement. Not only does this convey the image of a large and loyal community, it also boosts visibility in search engine.

Online structures are part of the problem

The structures of social networks are not just an opportunity for contacting the target group. They are also part of the problem. Operators of social-media platforms are businesses with commercial interests. They design their conditions and offers in a way that reaches as many consumers as possible. Their algorithms (and certain criteria that remain business secrets) decide which search results and offers are displayed to which audiences, and they even influence how this content is perceived. Critical prevention programmes stand in direct competition with the dominant way in which the extremist scene presents itself. As a result, it is difficult to even come across offers that do not correspond to mainstream trends as calculated by the algorithms. Anyone conducting specialist research online will find that important information does not appear on the first pages of search results. It must be extracted deliberately by submitting concrete search queries.

This poses another severe problem for young people searching for answers online: they only find biased information because the search engines are supposedly tailored to their own interests. This ultimately creates filter bubbles or echo chambers[18] if the affected individuals do not develop critical media literacy and use search queries that circumvent these algorithms.

Quality of interpersonal communication

Audience anonymity causes considerable uncertainty: users of social networks never know to whom they are really talking. There is a large spectrum of ways in which people present themselves on the internet. It ranges from a very open presence that gives away a lot about the person to deliberate, cunning deception or provocation: are their gender and age true? Has a single person written a certain post or was it an entire group?

[18]The term "echo chamber" describes a phenomenon caused by users of social networks primarily interacting with others who share their views. The constant mutual agreement amplifies their own views and gradually removes contrary information from perception.

The effects of individual statements can also be ambiguous, as non-verbal cues and vocal pitch are not available to grant insights into their intent. Is it a joke? Is it serious; is it meant to provoke? Does the added emoji correspond to the intended meaning of the statement? A lot depends on individual ability to express oneself in writing. There is also significant uncertainty regarding the target group.

Establishing trust and approaching the target group authentically is even more difficult in online prevention programmes than it is offline. This is especially true for projects such as this, which cannot offer personality or community – both key factors in conveying trust and reputation. Initial contact is very transient and casual; the audience is free to terminate it at any point. Long-term presence and consistent high quality are crucial for standing out and asserting oneself against competing, extremist offers.

VII. Recommendations

As discussed above, the changing communicative habits of our young target group and the radicalisation efforts of extremists poses diverse obstacles to successful prevention and deradicalisation work.

Finding a suitable (medial) way to access the target group is crucial. Due to the fast-paced scene and continuous development of new communication media, we are faced with the challenge of timing our interventions in a way that allows us to address young people who may be at risk of radicalisation before the existing communication channels close and the vulnerable individuals can no longer be engaged in conversation. This requires a degree of flexibility and promptness that is often incompatible with the conditions and directives within governmental and private organisations in the field of radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation operate.

In order to take the actual communicative structures and life situations of the target group into account effectively, we recommend working closely with young people who have insights into the scene and representatives of the peer group when developing and discussing topics. No other field of youth work is more reliant on insights into technological developments. At the same time, those living outside of these rapidly changing communication structures struggle to relate to the speed with which they develop. This requires a whole new approach to coaching and counselling that goes beyond professions and age boundaries.

One-dimensional online strategies do not correspond to the consumption and communication habits of young people. The target group is more likely to respond positively to a combination of different social-media channels and messenger services (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Blogspot, Soundcloud, WhatsApp, Telegram etc.) with an authentic website that provides extensive, high-quality content for different communication channels.

Professional pedagogues specialising in preventive measures should be involved in campaign, topic and content planning as early as possible. Instead of focusing on awareness-building only, online-based offers must be designed to meet the needs of their users and, as such, address the factors that cause them to engage with extremist groups online.

In the field of radicalisation prevention as in all other types of internet-based work, published content plays a decisive role in campaign success. Projects must be planned with sufficient personnel and financial resources to facilitate the continuous development and production of appropriate content. Videos should be the preferred channel: they are the medium of choice of the target group and convey information and emotions more appealingly than written words alone.

Due to the principles of social media, it is very hard to establish adequate reach within a short period of time. Establishing an active community of many thousand participants organically can take several years. This is especially true for pages dealing with complex topics that are aimed at a specific target group. Integrating and involving institutions, students, youth associations or youth organisations in the fields of online work can be helpful. In this context, it is important to "tolerate" opinions and viewpoints that may contradict the beliefs of the other project members. This approach includes potential partnerships with celebrities, organisations, clubs and associations with links to the scene, people who have exited the scene, victims, family members of radicalised people, and influencers.

Publications in the social media must be made continuously and regularly. If the target group is not constantly "courted", they will not believe that they are being taken seriously. Responses to comments must be immediate. Long delays can convey the impression that contact with the target group is only sought during office hours. Users who feel that they are the subject of professional third-party research naturally reject attempts to be contacted. When it comes to responding to comments, pedagogic work must not stop at the end of the business day.

Contact/Legal notice