



## **“Brother, Who Still Believes the Newspaper?”**

Media as enemy and point of reference in the  
communication of Islamist online actors

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By Niklas Brinkmüller, Benedikt Büchsenschütz and  
Margareta Wetchy

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## Preface to the expanded, updated edition of the publication series **“Brother, Who Still Believes the Newspaper?”**

This article was first published in the summer of 2023, before the events on 7th October and the resulting escalation of the Middle East conflict, which brought suffering to many civilians in the region. In addition to its massive impact on global politics and society as a whole, these events also continue to influence actors in the sphere of Islamist extremism and their relationship with (mass) media. To that extent, the expanded new edition of the article provides updates to the overall societal situation in Germany and references by Islamist accounts, which appear to make sense based on the developments in recent months.

The watershed moment caused by 7 October 2023 and the ongoing violent escalation in Gaza, Israel, Lebanon and the West Bank (as of November 2024) have led to an increased prevalence of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim narratives in both analogue and digital spaces.

## 1. Introduction

“Brother, Who Still Believes the Newspaper?” The *Nasheed* “Medienhetze” (Media Incitement) by singers *Mo Deen* and *Redlion* start with that question. This sentence symbolises the positioning of many online actors<sup>1</sup> from the sphere of Islamist extremism<sup>2</sup> towards mass media. The *nasheed* goes on to say: “I don’t believe a word they say; Read the press, the media is inciting; When it comes to Islam, the crooks show up right away; So many lies that my ears bleed; We talk about peace, they talk about murder; It seems to me that lying is their sport; But I won’t keep quiet, I’ve sworn to that” (Mo Deen and Redlion 2022, min.: 0:15).

The narrative of the “fake news media” with hostile intentions can be found in the communication of various Islamist online actors. However, the media is not used exclusively as a bogeyman. A closer look reveals a more nuanced picture. An ambivalent relationship between actors from the Islamist scene and the mass media can be observed in social media. Reporting in general as well as individual headlines of articles are used as evidence to show that the media (and consequently also the majority society that consumes them) are Islamophobic.<sup>3</sup> Differences in the type and quality of reporting, such as between the tabloid press and “quality media”, are often ignored. By contrast, individual media reports or excerpts are used as sources for their own narratives, provided they are congruent with their own position. Similarly, the reach associated with reporting or requests for interviews by (traditional) media is sometimes even desired. These observations raise the following questions:

How do actors from the sphere of Islamist extremism refer to mass media? What framing of the media and journalists do they adopt and what role do they ascribe to them? What linguistic and staging techniques do they use? And can the reference be identified within the scope of their general communication strategy?

This publication is dedicated to these questions with the goal of shedding light on the communication patterns of Islamist actors in social media in relation to mass media and journalists. Understanding how communication takes place appears to be a relevant option to facilitate prevention and counselling work and to counteract the messages conveyed. In this respect, analysing the communicative means and strategies does not just serve to gain insights. Ideally, it also offers ideas and starting points for countering extremist content and narratives.<sup>4</sup>

The initial state of research provides an overview of current studies and publications that deal with extremist content in social media, its linguistic characteristics, the impact of media reports in the context of radicalisation processes as well as media education concepts in the prevention landscape. The various types of reference to the mass media are then broken down and addressed. A few examples are presented to show how the media is portrayed as a hostile actor with an anti-Muslim agenda. Additional examples are used to illustrate and discuss the reference to media reports, imitation of journalistic formats and the use of media reach. Finally, the findings are put into context in relation to the communication strategy of extremist online actors, highlighting potential implications for dealing with these actors and their content.

In this context, differentiation is paramount. Addressing certain topics, grievances or power relations is not problematic or even extremist. In light of the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism and islamophobia, including in the context of media reporting (UEM 2023, 170 et seq.), it is particularly crucial to address and criticise this idea. The way in which topics are framed, conclusions are drawn and consequences (of actions) are presented, possibly based on demonstrable, perceived or imagined grievances, are the key factors that set the tone of the communicative message.

1 The protagonists of the channels that appear in the analysed examples are all male. Therefore, the term “protagonist” is not gender-specific here. For the role of female actors on social media, see: Violence Prevention Network Publication Series (No 11/2023) “The invisible sisters: female actors on TikTok and Instagram in the context of extremism, Salafism, Islamism and activism” ([https://violence-prevention-network.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Violence-Prevention-Network-Schriftenreihe-Heft-11-EN-2.0\\_web.pdf](https://violence-prevention-network.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Violence-Prevention-Network-Schriftenreihe-Heft-11-EN-2.0_web.pdf)) by Margareta Wetchy and Meike Krämer.

2 The selection of accounts and sample posts discussed in this publication series is limited to German-language accounts and based on impressions from social media monitoring *KN:IX plus* (<https://kn-ix.de/knixplus/>) in which the three authors are involved. With the exception of *Mo Deen* and *Redlion*, all of the accounts and actors discussed (*Abul Baraa*, *Botschaft des Islam*, *Generation Islam*, *Hassan Dabbagh*, *Muslim Interaktiv*, *Pierre Vogel* and *Realität Islam*) are currently considered to be relevant to the field.

3 The relevance and various facets of anti-Muslim sentiment in Germany, including in media coverage, are highlighted in the report by the Independent Expert Group on Islamophobia (*Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Muslimfeindlichkeit*, or UEM) entitled “Muslimfeindlichkeit – Eine deutsche Bilanz” [Islamophobia – The Current State in Germany] (2023). <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2023/06/dik-uem.html>

4 As exemplified by Dr Götz Nordbruch, recognising and addressing structural discrimination is an important part of approaching prevention work: <https://www.ufuq.de/aktuelles/woke-islamist/>. In this respect, addressing islamophobia in society and the media as well as awareness of its instrumentalisation by Islamist actors appears to be paramount to being able to respond appropriately.

## 2. State of research

Analysing extremist content online and how it relates to media reports is part of dealing with the diverse phenomena of extremist online activities.<sup>5</sup> The following section presents selected studies that deal with online extremism from different perspectives, including studies on narratives and mechanisms of online propaganda, on the use of language in extremist posts as well as on prevention measures and projects in the field of media education.

Central to this publication is the examination of narratives and methods used for extremist propaganda. Sybille Reinke de Buitrago (2022) analyses narratives of German-speaking, Islamist and right-wing extremist actors on *YouTube*. She goes on to describe the effect of statements in combination with images that are presented in an emotional way. Islamist videos are particularly notable for depicting the victimisation of Muslims in the “West” on the one hand and moral superiority over the “damned” West on the other, making them appealing to people who are searching for identity and belonging. Reinke de Buitrago points to the creation of new meanings and semantic contexts through extremist propaganda, which commits the in-group to the group’s goals. She describes a key propaganda method that makes use of the instrumentalisation of contradictions (e.g. Western military operations in predominantly Islamic countries while simultaneously upholding values such as human rights).

Bähr (2019) uses the cases of nine Islamists to analyse, among other things, the impact that jihadist propaganda videos can have.<sup>6</sup> Although this edition only focuses on online Islamist content, the observations on radicalisation processes can also provide valuable insights on the jihadist movement. Bähr traces how violent videos and reports of Western military operations in Muslim countries lead to processes of alienation and moral outrage and subsequently trigger identity crises among young people<sup>7</sup>:

“The emotionalisation [generated by the videos] helps the jihadists to make their target group aware of the crimes shown in the videos and to portray them as co-conspirators for the committed

atrocities” (2019, 322). Bähr points out that propaganda videos can be partly responsible for a radicalisation process. However, their impact depends on how significant they are to the individual and whether they can identify with the portrayed victims: “Accordingly, radicalisation is not only influenced by the potential impact of such key events disseminated by the media, but also by individual, situational evaluation processes of the presented images, which depend on the personality structure of the recipient (2019, 325).”

Based on a comprehensive survey<sup>8</sup> of young people between the ages of 14 and 19, Reinemann et al. (2019, 77 et seq.) examined in one of their sub-studies how and why young people come into contact with extremism and how their exposure to extremism correlates with other characteristics. Reinemann et al. (2019, 146) conclude from the results that young people mostly come into contact with extremism via social media and mass media and that simply recognising extremist strategies does not ensure immunity to their propaganda. According to the study, recognising extremist content is particularly effective as a preventative measure if it is combined with trust in democracy and state institutions as well as “social acceptance and integration” (2019, 146). The authors further point to the importance of reporting, which can have a preventative effect or reinforce extremist propaganda. The study also raises the question of whether young people who state that they have little contact with extremist content simply do not recognise it.

Struck et al. (2022) take a closer look at the functions of extremist propaganda, distinguishing between propaganda that “[...] primarily serves the conveyance of extremist, ideologised messages [...]” and propaganda that is “[...] characterised by spontaneous, affective reactions to such messages and their exchange” (2022, 175).

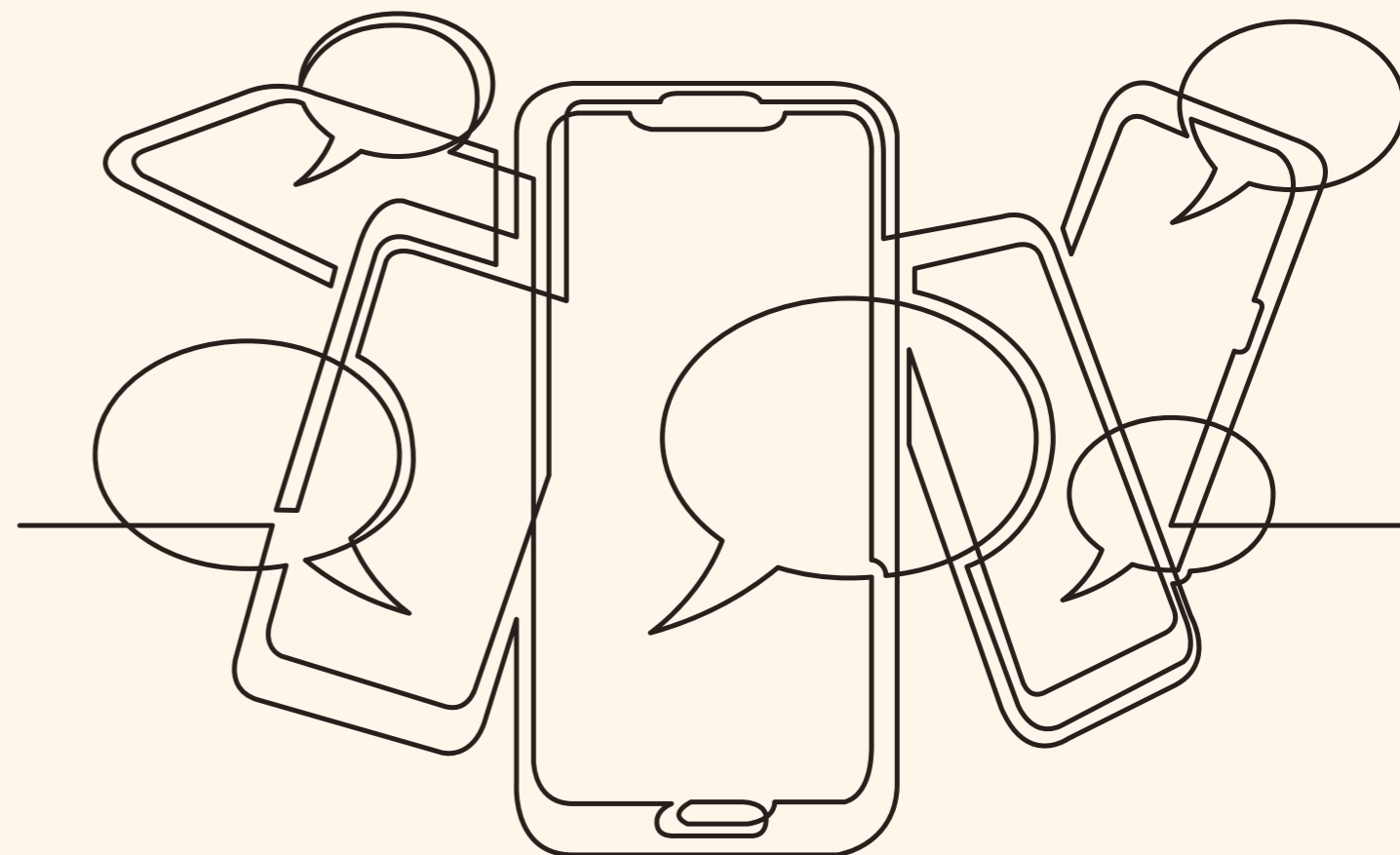
Like Bähr, Struck et al. point out that extremist communication is only effective if it is perceived by the audience as “[...] meaningful and relevant [...]” (2022, 176), for example because it is correlated to their reality through previous experiences.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that online ecosystems and online content of Islamist actors are generally on the rise and becoming more diverse and hybrid can be seen in current studies, such as Comerford et al. (2021), a publication by the *Landes-Demokratiezentrum Niedersachsen* (State Democracy Centre of Lower Saxony, 2022) or the Q2 report of the *Monitoring der Peripherie des religiös begründeten Extremismus* (Monitoring of the Periphery of Religious-Based Extremism, or PrE) by *modus I zad* (2023), which also points to the contacts between influencers and Islamist actors (2023, 6). O’Connors’ analysis of hate speech on *TikTok* presents the broad range of extremist content on the platform (2021).

<sup>6</sup> According to Bähr, five of the nine Islamists distributed propaganda videos on the internet and published material on websites or social media that focused on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or showed victims of wars (Bähr 2019, 326).

<sup>7</sup> Bähr devotes a section to individual psychological factors (e.g. traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence), which can also aid radicalisation. This aspect, as well as that of “relative deprivation”, must not be ignored by the presentation above, which focuses on the power of online propaganda (Bähr 2019, 201 et seq.). Influential leaders, group dynamics, propaganda on the internet and online communities are also among the factors that aid complex radicalisation processes, according to Bähr (2019, 323–324).

<sup>8</sup> As part of the study, the market research institute IconKids (Munich) surveyed 1,061 young people between the ages of 14 and 19 about their media usage behaviour, their contact with online extremist content and how they deal with the dangers of extremism. Among other things, the study also tested young people’s political and media literacy (Reinemann et al. 2019, 77 et seq.).



The authors highlight the intrinsic intent behind extremist content. In their opinion, it consists of correlating and emphasising relevance for the individual and for a group: “[the goal of propaganda is] to influence individual and social knowledge systems and interpretative patterns, but through intrinsic conviction rather than coercion” (2022, 176).

In their review of relevant studies, Williams and Tzani (2022) describe the impact of language on the radicalisation process. To this end, they sort studies into categories of “linguistic behaviour”, which in turn are split into key topics (e.g. recruitment language, in-group positivity, conflict language). By analysing the studies, the authors come to the conclusion that the key purpose of extremist language online is to create positive associations with the in-group and negative associations with the out-group. Moreover, the targeted use of language incites conflict with those who are perceived as enemies of the in-group (2022, 1; 11).

Katharina Neumann (2018) analyses the influence of media reporting (on Islamist actors as well as on Islam and Muslims) in certain phases of radicalisation. She comes to the conclusion “[...] that media perceptions of discrimination can provide a breeding ground for radicalisation processes—not only in combination with various discriminatory primary experiences, but also on their own” (2018, 275). Neumann points out that any and all reports that refer to Islam in any way are received by relevant groups, but that people pay most attention to reports about their own group (2018, 276). Both types of content trigger consternation within the audience – an effect that is utilised by extremist groups in a very targeted manner. Neumann also comes to the conclusion that some young people’s entry into the scene can be triggered by media reports that make the group appear “dangerous”, which makes them attractive to young people (2018, 280).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As the influence of media reports on young people in radicalisation processes appears to be significant, Neumann adds recommendations for action for journalists to her report (2018, 284 et seq.).

## Co-radicalisation

Co-radicalisation, also known as reciprocal radicalisation, describes the process in which two or more groups or individuals reinforce each other's extreme views and enter into a spiral of escalation. This often happens in response to behaviour that is perceived as defamatory, stigmatising or prejudiced. State institutions, security agencies or the media often add fuel to the fire in conjunction with political or religious groups. Events that are perceived as a threat and initiate each other can reinforce or trigger radicalisation processes (Logvinov 2017; Meiering et al. 2018); for example, when right-wing extremist groups specifically instrumentalise events such as Islamist attacks to justify and spread their own anti-Muslim positions (McGarry 2018; Paul 2018).

Figenschou und Ihlebæk (2019) analyse how right-wing extremist "alternative media"<sup>10</sup> outlets criticise established mass media and how they boost their own authority. They show that "alternative media" outlets are perceived to be fundamentally biased, partisan or deceitful journalists who are too far removed from "ordinary people" (2019, 1228). By contrast, "alternative media" outlets claim to report "independently", "honestly" and "critically" (2019, 1229). The study identifies five roles that far-right "alternative media" outlets use to present themselves as reputable sources or to gain authority as legitimate "media critics": as insiders, as experts, as victims, as ("ordinary") citizens and as activists<sup>11</sup>. Articles that utilise the victim role are thus based on personal, negative experiences with conventional mass media. As representatives of "ordinary citizens", they draw attention to the concerns of "ordinary people". The authors point out that "alternative media" outlets are not subject to any ethical guidelines or types of external evaluation.

However, journalists are not the only ones who should be aware of these processes and critically reflect on the impact of their reporting. Media education can also help the audience understand the mechanisms of online propaganda.

Bardo Herzig (2022) discusses which concepts and methods of media education are suitable for preventing radicalisation. The

author identifies the required skills to analyse narratives, deal with different points of view and values and understand the logic of algorithms. According to Herzig, media education could help people understand that the abundance of opinions and information can be used as an opportunity to engage with diverse views, so that this abundance does not just lead to uncertainty (2022, 296 f.).

In their article, Schmitt et al. (2020) cite the ability to criticise the media as a building block of media literacy. According to Schmitt et al., a pronounced ability to criticise the media leads to a diminished impact of extremist propaganda. In the CONTRA project presented here, three key aspects of media criticism skills are reinforced: Awareness of, among other things, the existence of extremist content and its manipulative effect; critical reflection on, among other things, extremist content; and reinforcing/representing your personal position by, among other things, promoting the proper capacity for political judgement (2020, 34 f. and 39).

Fielitz and Kahl (2022) compare the (post-)digital strategies of Islamism and right-wing extremism and their respective identity constructions. They attest that groups from both movements engage in identity politics, which does not strive to recruit people to become official members of their groups, "[...] but to reproduce the underlying ideologies by adopting codes, symbols and practices" (2022, 292). In this context, the authors speak of *weak ties*, which describe the followers of groups such as *Generation Islam*. The authors' analysis shows that campaigns by extremist groups are characterised by "[...] attempts to charge political conflict issues with emotion and real-life relevance" (2022, 308). Fielitz and Kahl identify dynamics that currently shape extremist groups and must be taken into account during research: their staging skills<sup>12</sup>, manipulation techniques and the structure of followership, which the authors refer to as "post-digital communication" (2022, 312).

The overview of the current state of research illustrates the strategies and intentions of extremist online propaganda as well as its impact and when it is effective. Other studies focus on the question of which skills can help young people recognise extremist online posts as such and how they can become (more) resistant to their effects. The publications listed above are also dedicated to the debate on the impact media reporting

<sup>10</sup> According to the definition by Holt, Figenschou und Frischlich (2019), "alternative media" outlets are characterised by the fact that they act as a corrective resource to the dominant discourse shaped by the "mainstream" media or perceive themselves as such. This may include the attempt to influence public discourse based on an agenda that is supposedly neglected or marginalised by the mass media (Holt et al. 2019, 862).

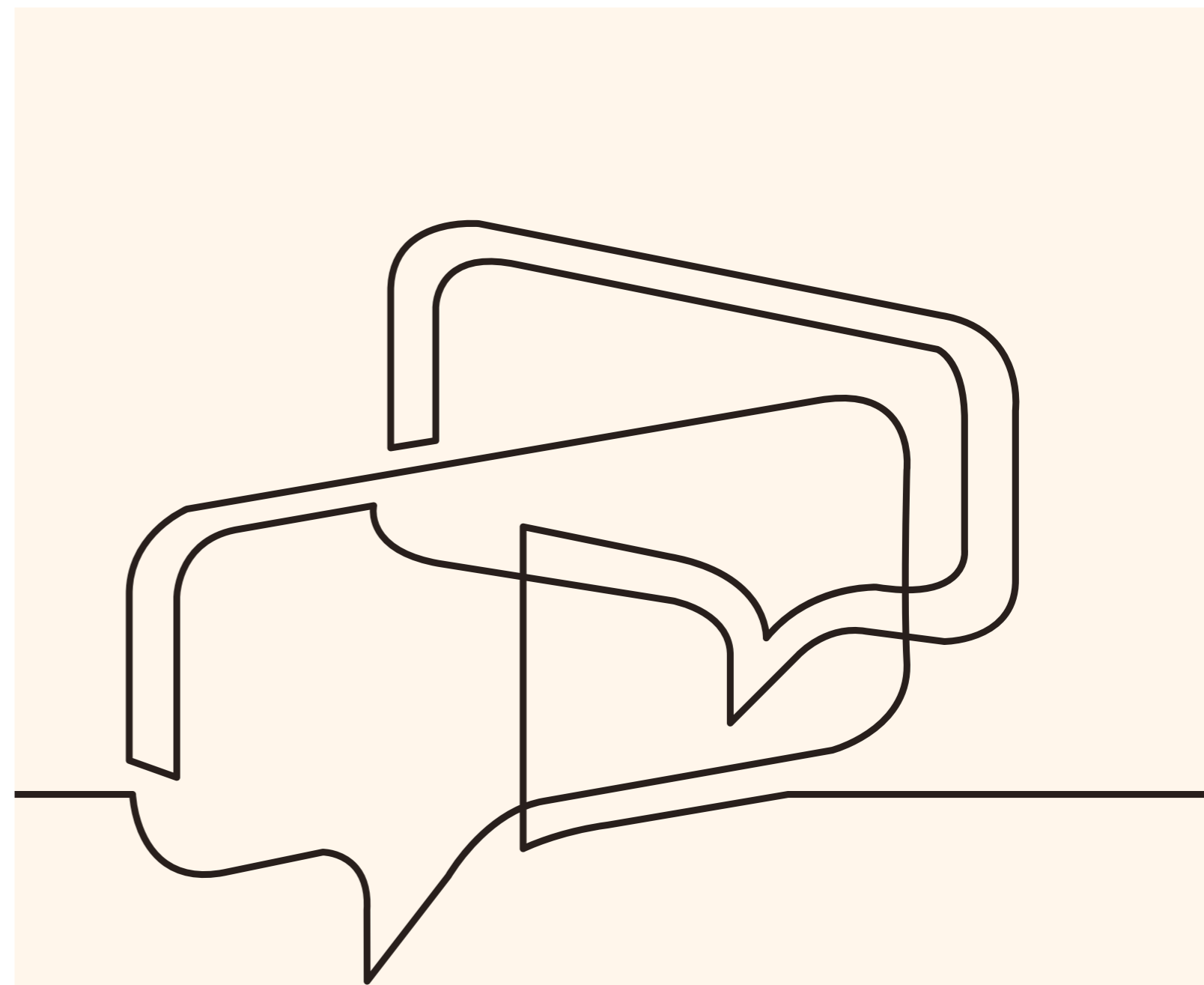
<sup>11</sup> The authors name the following roles: insider position, expert position, victim position, the citizen position and activist position (2019, 1221).

<sup>12</sup> Due to the specific scope, the following analysis is limited to individual conspicuous aspects of the staging in the articles and posts. However, a comprehensive approach that uses the methods of film analysis can be a complementary and enriching element in the examination of the staging and impact of audiovisual content by extremist actors, for example: Pogodda and Scherer on <https://rise-jugendkultur.de/artikel/filmische-weltentwerfe/>.

can have on radicalisation processes and the characteristics of alternative media. All of these aspects make it clear that the topic of "extremism and the media" is a crucial aspect of analysing online extremism. They also point to their complex correlations and the importance of analysing them.

One element that has so far received little attention in this context, however, is the direct reference of extremist groups

to these very media. This publication series is dedicated to addressing this particular issue. The following section uses examples of articles and posts to show how selected actors and groups portray the media, how they refer to them and how they are inspired by journalistic language styles. The final sections discuss the implications of the insights gained in dealing with the communication of Islamist online actors.



### 3. Media as the enemy: Somewhere between lies, agenda and conspiracy

Observations of the content of field-relevant actors in social media make it clear that they do not always directly and openly articulate the true nature of their topic. The context is only revealed through the interplay between text, articulation, staging and framing of the article or post, for example through thumbnails, titles, descriptive texts, etc. Fielitz and Kahl refer to the partly coded character of extremist communication: "The form of extremism disguised as the politics of lifestyles was often expressed in coded language." (2022, 308). Accordingly, it is pertinent to not only analyse the statements, propositions and narratives themselves, but also to look at the rhetorical means and the type of communication that Islamist actors use to convey their content. The following section uses examples to show how Islamist online actors refer to mass media in terms of content and how they frame mass media in the process.

#### Framing

According to Robert Entman (1993), *framing* refers to the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality that are made more salient through communication in a text. This is done in a way that conveys a specific *problem definition*, *causal interpretation*, *moral assessment* and/or *recommendation for action* (Entman 1993, 52).

*Framing* can be used to "lend meaning to certain events as well as to condense or simplify interpretations of reality" (Grauvogel and Dietz 2014, 207). Amongst other things, the communication of extreme right-wing actors reveals that they strongly emphasise or amplify specific messages and interpretations (*frame amplification*) so that "the identity of a collective victim role can be constructed" (Marcks und Fielitz 2020, 5).

#### 3.1 Coherent actor with an anti-Muslim agenda?

In many videos by well-known actors from the Islamist array, mass media are portrayed as actors with an anti-Muslim agenda. Sometimes, the interpretation is casually interspersed. In other cases, entire videos are dedicated to (supposedly) exposing the malicious intentions of the media. As shown by Neumann (2018), media reports about Islam, Muslims in general or their own group are the main point of reference for the actors. There is hardly any criticism of the media with regard to other topics. The following examples illustrate how the image of "the mass media" as a sup-

posedly uniform and hostile actor is created in terms of content and language.

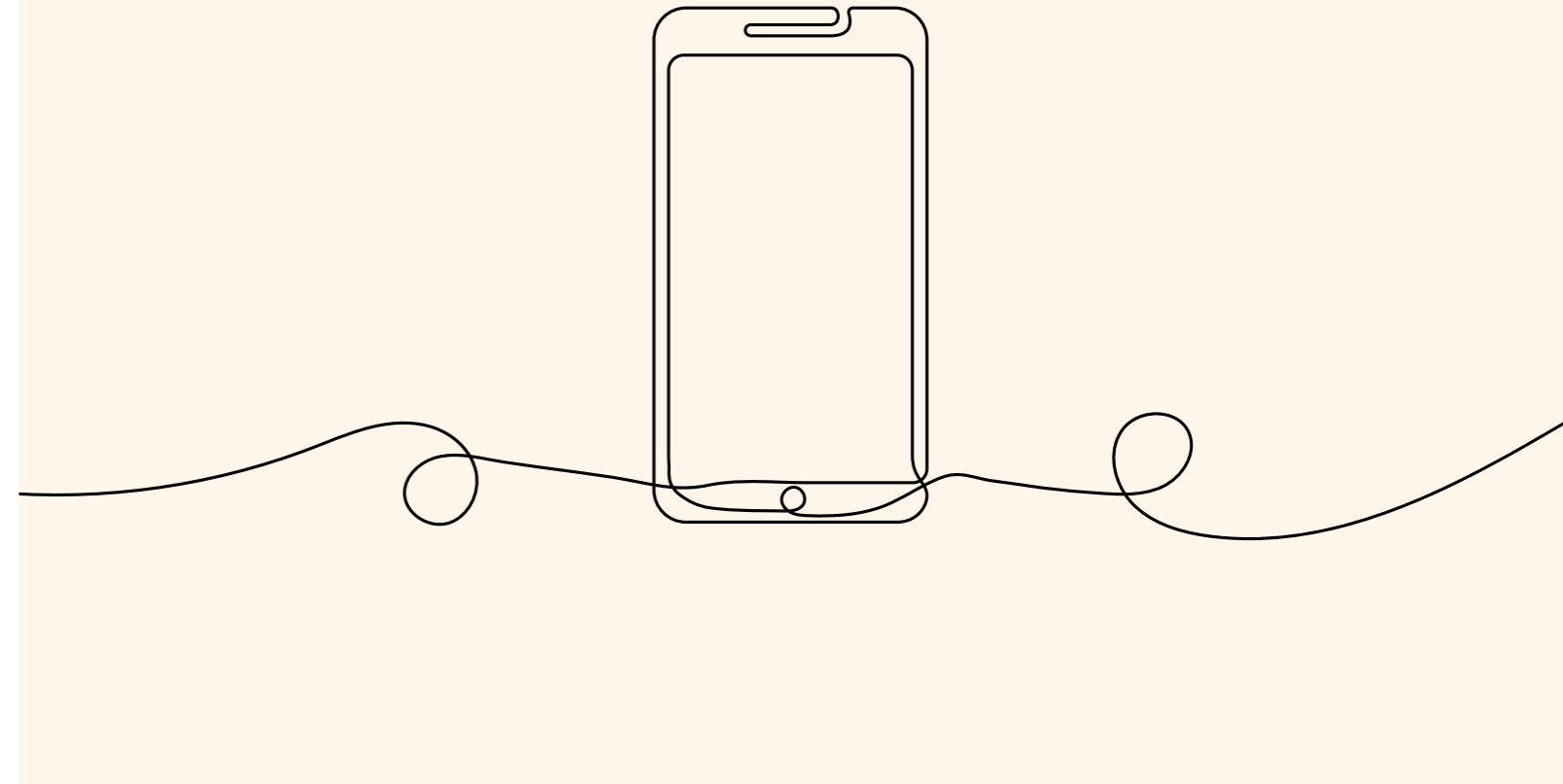
In a video on the *YouTube* platform, *Pierre Vogel* (2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpSKHk9pb4E>) comments on the media and its supposedly obvious agenda: "What I find so positive about this whole thing is that we as Muslims have clearly seen how the media works. [...] Even the dumbest idiot who used to believe everything before now knows that you can't believe anything they say. They're lying through their teeth!" (min.: 4:12). With this quote, *Vogel* defines the collectivised or homogeneous in-group ("we Muslims") and postulates an incontrovertible truth that is recognisable to everyone ("Now even the last person has seen the truth. Even the dumbest idiot [...]"). Then he correlates this eye-opening awareness with a conclusion or behavioural implication ("I can't believe them") and rates this supposed self-revelation of the media as "so positive". The reference to "the media" can be characterised as an "inadmissible generalisation" (Meibauer 2022, 31), which makes a statement about a larger whole based on individual examples. This type of generalisation plays a major role in the "genesis and spread of stereotypes, prejudices and devaluation [...]" (Meibauer 2022, 31). Characteristics or behaviours are identified based on individual, observed cases that are then attributed to the entire group. This also creates the image of a homogeneous out-group, as the corresponding characteristics or, in this case, intentions or behaviours are attributed to all group members.<sup>13</sup>

*Vogel* also comments elsewhere on the "incitement of German media against Islam" (2023; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDZDnhseIro>). "Don't tell me the German media are stirring up hatred against Islam! Yes, they are! Quite clearly.

And people who haven't realised this after the World Cup in Qatar should, metaphorically speaking, recite the *Salāt al-Janāza* [the funeral prayer] for their brain" (min.: 0:12). *Vogel* once again postulates a clearly recognisable "incitement". Additionally, by referring to the funeral prayer, he suggests that only people who can no longer think or are brain-dead would not recognise the supposedly obvious "truth".

*Abul Baraa's* articles and posts also contain repeated references to a supposedly anti-Muslim agenda of the mass media. *Abul Baraa* (2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A004Y-1lohMA>) describes the ways in which newspapers distort the

<sup>13</sup> The effect of attributing homogeneous characteristics to members of another group is known from cognitive and social psychology and is referred to as *out-group homogeneity bias*. For example, see: Quattrone and Jones (1980), Park and Rothbart (1982) or Judd et al. (1991).



truth. Starting from a single situation (reports of a potential coronavirus aid scam), he generalises and de-individualises it by pointing to an overarching agenda as the reason for the media attention in this case: "it's about discrediting Muslims and that's well-known" (min.: 1:57). Similar to *Pierre Vogel's* video, *Abul Baraa* suggests that the media's supposed agenda against "the Muslims" is an obvious, proven fact by adding that this is "well known". In the same video, *Abul Baraa* adds further fuel to this allegation by speaking, in the style of conspiracy narratives, of an ominous, powerful group of people who would order the smear campaign in the newspapers: "And of course it's well known that the newspapers are also getting orders from other people everyone surely knows, so they can malign who we are and damage our reputation" (min.: 2:25). The aforementioned articles describe an agenda with a stated goal. However, the specific reason or motive – or, according to Entman, the *causal interpretation* – for this behaviour remains relatively abstract.

#### 3.2 Media as a tool of the state?

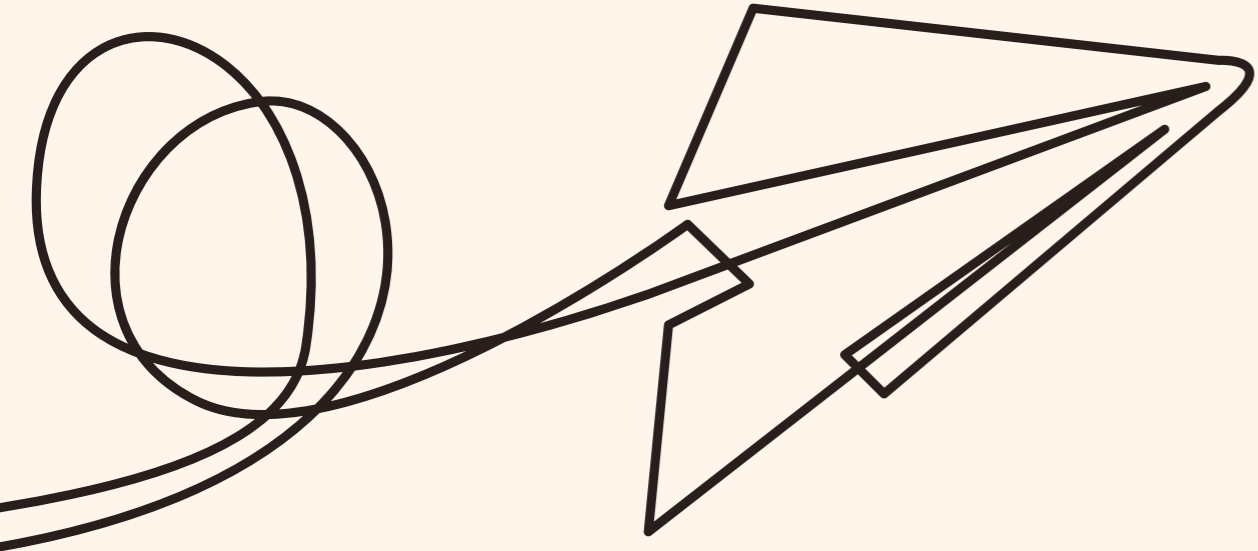
Other analysed contributions articulate more specifically what this agenda looks like or what the alleged motive and goal of the agenda are. Especially contributions from tabloid media are repeatedly cited by various actors as evidence of media islamophobia. One line of argument that can be found in particular in contributions from channels such as *Generation Islam*, *Realität*

*Islam and Muslim Interaktiv* is that the (public service) media are controlled by the German state.<sup>14</sup> There is often talk of a state mandate to abandon the "true Muslim identity" in favour of a state-installed "reform Islam" or an "assimilation agenda".

Videos with titles such as "REACTION: How the media and state are using Zeinab's renunciation of Islam for their Islamophobic agenda" (2023d; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oB6St-F4vleA>) by *Generation Islam* clearly describe an alleged state and media agenda that is directed against Islam. In particular, formats of the public youth format *FUNK* are repeatedly mentioned and criticised. However, one hypothesis that requires further investigation is that *FUNK* formats, due to their digital nature and their focus on a young, internet-savvy audience, represent particular competition for Islamist online actors, who also primarily target a young audience.

A short video by *Generation Islam* entitled "The Agenda of FUNK" very specifically describes the agenda that is attributed to public broadcasting in particular (2023c; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvjJaD5nSSo>):

<sup>14</sup> The three channels are said to be similar to the one banned in Germany, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Baron 2021, no page; or German Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2022, 184)



"So whenever you see the FUNK logo, such as on Y-Kollektiv, StrgF, etc., you know that it is part of this public broadcaster. That means the agenda and the goal are clear: Muslims should be more secular and liberal" (min.: 0:00). The comments<sup>15</sup> under the video are largely in favour. The most liked comment explicitly praises it: "Very good! This is very important! All Muslims must be warned about it. The organisations must educate people about it!". "Another comment repeats the warning from the video, referring to the *FUNK* logo: "So, watch out for this symbol, my dear brothers and sisters". In this case, the creation of a threat scenario ("must be warned about it"; "watch out") appears to be effective. The group reference ("all Muslims" or "my dear brothers and sisters") also adopts the speaker's rhetoric in the video.

### Public service broadcasting

Public service broadcasting in Germany is expected to provide the population with independent and objective information, reflecting the diversity of society and providing cultural and educational content. In order to guarantee independence from commercial and political influences, this service is financed by the public broadcasting licence fee, which is paid by every household.

<sup>15</sup> Looking at individual comments is no substitute for a comprehensive impact analysis and is by no means representative of the entire audience. However, they can be seen as an indication of how the video was received.

The most important public broadcasters in Germany are ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen). As key players in German television and radio, they provide comprehensive news coverage and are the most widely consumed broadcasters in the country. Both broadcasters play a key role in providing information and building trust among the population. In addition to ARD and ZDF, there are also regional public broadcasters that provide an important supplement and are primarily intended to cover regional topics.

The *Realität Islam* channel also addresses the topic in a detailed video entitled "Let's take funk & co apart (2021a; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPc9Xj6KFKs>). The thumbnail reads: "Wie funk & Co Undercover gegen den Islam hetzen" [How Funk & Co go undercover to incite against Islam]. First, "the Islam haters" (min.: 0:05) are addressed. This often diffuse and pejorative term is found in the posts of various actors and often refers to people who are supposedly part of the anti-Muslim agenda. Over the course of the video, various *FUNK* formats are presented and "categorised" in excerpts. At the end of the video, the protagonist summarises the various *FUNK* formats: "After all, it's about reinforcing existing narratives. Just not in a very obvious way! As I said before, it needs to be done in a sneaky, perfidious way" (min.: 42:12).

The protagonist also refers to the alleged contradiction between the claim of a democracy and the assumed limited freedom to practise religion. As Reinke de Buitrago (2022) states, this is a popular means of propagandistic communication. The speaker argues that the majority society must "ensure that [...] [Muslims] are allowed to exercise their religious convictions. [...] Otherwise, you openly admit that you live in a dictatorship, where people are told what to think and what to believe. And that's why we don't call this whole approach an ideology-based dictatorship for nothing." (min.: 42:47) Formats such as those of *FUNK* are "just more tools [...] of the German state to advance the assimilation policy towards Muslims. And we should be on our guard against it. We should warn and educate people about it [...]" (min.: 44:32).

In addition to a state agenda, other supposed motives for the media's alleged incitement can be identified. The following *Instagram* post is an example of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CgY7WxmF1H\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CgY7WxmF1H_/). In the video excerpt, Axel Springer publishing director Matthias Döpfner describes himself as a non-Jewish Zionist who is in favour of Israel's right to exist. The *Instagram* account that reposted this video commented on it: "No wonder they always incite and lie against Islam!" A connection to the state of Israel, which often serves as the starting point for anti-Semitic narratives, is thus cited as the motive for the diagnosed incitement. Köhler and Ebner (2019, 20) point out that the "fake news" motif often goes hand in hand with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and can be found in far-right and Islamist communication. *Abul Baraa's* aforementioned insinuations that an unspecified group is giving instructions to the media and that the audience knows who it is leaves room for the association of anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives<sup>16</sup>, provided that they are salient to the audience as explanatory patterns.

Actors with Islamist narratives accuse the media of financial motives as a further motivation for their supposed smear campaigns. "In the aforementioned *Nasheed* "Medienhetze", one of the artists sings: "Storytellers like the Grimm Brothers; Everyone here knows that the lies aren't true; Is it all about money or what's the point; Divide the world, tell me, where does that lead?" This verse paints an exemplary picture of a "lying" press that deliberately "divides" and whose actions are driven by financial motives. The motif that hatred of Islam is lucrative is also mentioned in other videos.

<sup>16</sup> Anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives usually refer to a small, elite group that controls politics and the media through a malicious agenda. A specific reference to Jews is not necessary to construct latent anti-Semitism: "Nowadays, however, a global conspiracy no longer needs to be labelled 'Jewish' to be anti-Semitic. Due to the general familiarity of supposedly 'Jewish' characteristics, this is no longer necessary. It is enough to consciously and unconsciously use anti-Semitic codes" (Baldauf and Rathje 2015, 49).

In the video "Generation Islam in the media – What's behind it?" (2019; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWNa7XrfH0Y>), the speaker reports on a "business model of Islam haters" (min.: 1:16), including in relation to Thilo Sarrazin and his commercial success. Later on, the video postulates the following claim about some politicians: "They merely play a violin in the anti-Islam orchestra, which has been conducted by a media-driven, political agenda for decades" (min.: 2:24). In reporting on Islamist groups on the internet, the protagonist claims to have recognised a deliberate attempt to silence them: "This is really about nothing more than banishing undesirable voices in the discourse. And what is the most efficient way to do this? By blurring the boundaries to militant groups and claiming that, although they are not posting anything that glorifies violence, something very dangerous is subtly and subliminally brewing." (min.: 4:21). Here too, criticism of sometimes undifferentiated and stigmatising reporting is used to spin a narrative that insinuates a strategy of state and media suppression of alternative opinions. It also shows that the various attributed motives do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can complement each other. The mass media are denied the role of information provider or mediator. Instead, they are primarily portrayed as (manipulative) actors with an interest in communicating their own or the state's anti-Muslim agenda.

### 3.3 Societal islamophobia through media incitement?

Another recurring pattern of argumentation is the attribution of (shared) blame for societal islamophobia and anti-Muslim acts of violence to the media. In several articles and posts, the media (and state actors) are held responsible for anti-Muslim acts of violence or racist world views or are ascribed a role in the construction of right-wing ideologies.

A *YouTube* short by *Abul Baraa* on the *LoveAllah* channel (2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWfqfOyygQg>) entitled "Abul Baraa meets a media victim" is a great example of the argument that media reports (monocausally) lead to "fear of Muslims". In the video, *Abul Baraa* reports that a female neighbour told him during an encounter that she was afraid of him. After a brief conversation, however, this fear dissipated and he now gets on well with her. *Abul Baraa* explains the reason for the neighbour's original stance:

"What's the problem? [...] These people are victims of the media. They believe the media because they don't know anything about Islam either." The video "Generation Islam in the media – What's behind it?" (2019; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWNa7XrfH0Y>) (starting at min.: 6:00) also raises the question of the connection between "20 years of massive media propaganda

against Islam” (min.: 6:05) and Islamophobic attitudes and acts of violence. In some cases, a (more) direct causal link is established between media coverage and anti-Muslim acts of violence and the media is (partly) blamed. For example, the *Nasheed* is called “media incitement”: “Christchurch, Hanau, how much blood must be shed? Look, the suffering will never end if we just fight each other. There’s blood on your hands. I hope you realise, a thousand hate-filled drops become one big river.” (Mo Deen and Redlion 2022, min.: 1:16)

According to the logic of the sample contributions described above, the media exert such a strong influence on the world view and actions of their audience that they would be (directly) persuaded by the media to be hostile towards Muslims. Individuals or groups with racist and anti-Muslim positions are only given limited agency for their ideologies and responsibility for their actions (“media victims”), whereas the media are portrayed as the perpetrators of these positions and, in some cases, of racially motivated acts of violence.

The actors thus refer to an important and complex question regarding the connection between the image conveyed by the media and its effect on the audience. The exact effect of discriminatory reporting on the actions of individuals is extremely complex and can hardly be clearly determined empirically. This is partly due to “the general difficulty of determining media effects, as people are always exposed to very different influences, e.g. in family settings, peer groups and educational institutions. They impact public images and the way people deal with media discourses.” (UEM 2023, 185). The UEM report points out that there is empirical evidence of a connection between a negative media portrayal and, for example, racially motivated acts of violence. With regard to islamophobia, there has not yet been sufficient research into “whether the negative image of Islam also has a direct incendiary impact on acts of violence against Muslims” (UEM 2023, 185).

In the sample articles, the media are designated as a uniform actor with a collective agenda outside of society (i.e. the media/journalists are not portrayed as part of society with the corresponding diversity of opinions, prejudices, etc.). This claim ignores the interactions between different discourse spaces such as media, society, politics and the economy as well as influences from socialisation, culture or professional ethics and thus negates the interdependent character of the creation of media portrayals (UEM 2023, 186). The media outlets are portrayed as a homogenous actor that virtually indoctrinates people through its intentional agenda (thus largely denying them personal responsibility and the ability to act), this holding media (in)indirectly responsible for anti-Muslim hostility and acts of violence against Muslims. This portrayal fails to recognise the complexities and interdependencies.

### Islamophobia in media reporting

With regard to anti-Muslim racism and the prevalence of islamophobia, there are sufficient studies that justify well-founded criticism of some parts of media reporting. For example, a large amount of content analysis studies on media coverage of Muslims show that they are “disproportionately often presented in the context of violence and crime” (Neumann 2018, 33). The report by the Independent Expert Group on Islamophobia (*Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Muslimfeindlichkeit*, or UEM) makes it impressively clear that islamophobia is very widespread in society (UEM 2023, 43 et seq.) and that media coverage of Muslims and Islam focuses very heavily on conflicts (UEM 2023, 182). With reference to Stoop (2017), however, the UEM report also points out that it is typical of media reporting that everyday issues are not addressed, but that conflict-laden topics are the main focus of reporting (UEM 2023, 84).

## 4. Overall social situation in Germany

As a result of the events on 7 October 2023 and the ongoing, massive violence in the “Middle East conflict”, a polarisation of debates and an emergence of lines of conflict could also be observed in Germany. Topics such as the (in)visibility of civil suffering, (non-)partisan solidarity and foreign policy consequences characterise the political and social discourse on the conflict. It is becoming clear that the conflict is extremely emotional and that polarised positions are clashing, some of which appear irreconcilable.

In this increasingly heated climate, inhumane ideologies and actions are gaining momentum. It can also be observed that actors from anti-democratic scenes (e.g. right-wing extremism and Islamism) are attempting to exploit the conflict, civil suffering and humanitarian catastrophe for their own inhumane ideology, so that they can mobilise them for their own political agenda. For example, the exacerbated situation is reflected in the frequency of discriminatory and inhumane behaviour, especially towards groups of people who are seen as having a direct connection to the Middle East conflict due to their (perceived) group affiliation.

Anti-Semitic statements and criminal offences as well as cases of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobic criminal offences increased significantly in Germany in 2023. The 2023 annual report by *CLAIM – Alliance against Islamophobia and Hostility against Muslims* recorded 1,926 anti-Muslim incidents, a 114% increase compared to the prior year<sup>17</sup> (CLAIM 2024, 25f.). The figures from the *Bundesverband der Recherche- und Informationsstellen Antisemitismus* (Federal Association of Research and Information Centres on Anti-Semitism, or RIAS) show an increase of 82.3%

<sup>17</sup> In 2023, 17 counselling centres took part in the data collection, compared to 10 in 2022. The authors therefore point out that this does not allow a general conclusion to be drawn about an (equivalent) increase in anti-Muslim incidents in society. It should also be mentioned that there is a high number of unreported anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents.

(4,782 cases) – particularly after 7 October 2023 (RIAS 2024, 13 f.). The rise in misanthropic incidents based on (ascribed) group affiliation is also reflected in the police crime statistics (Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik, or PKS) for 2023. The PKS recorded a sharp rise in *anti-Semitic*<sup>18</sup> offences (5,164; +95.5%; thereof 148 violent offences) and *Islamophobic* offences (1,464; +140%; thereof 93 violent offences) under the generic term “hate crime” (PKS 2024, 11). These figures make it clear that the respective misanthropic beliefs and narratives are also sometimes expressed in violent ways.

### 4.1 Perception of the conflict and media portrayal

The ongoing conflict situation in Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon is preoccupying the media and the public worldwide. The image of the conflict conveyed by the media plays a pivotal role, as it significantly influences the perception and interpretation of events. Different perspectives and narratives characterise reporting and help shape public opinion.

A recent representative survey<sup>19</sup> conducted by infratest dimap on behalf of the German media magazine ZAPP in July 2024 with 1,294 participants (first broadcast on 28 August 2024) asked how much trust people had in the media’s reporting on the situation in Gaza. While 7% have a great deal of trust and 33% a lot of trust, 33% said they had little trust and 15% no trust at all (12% don’t know/no response). The survey also recorded how many respondents perceived media coverage in Germany as balanced (38%), too biased in favour of Israel (31%), too biased in favour of Palestine (5%) (26% don’t know/no response).

<sup>18</sup> The majority of these offences (58.8%) were committed by people categorised as right-wing PMK (politically motivated criminals). By contrast, the percentage increase compared to 2022 was particularly strong among perpetrators from the areas of left-wing PMK, foreign ideology and religious ideology.

<sup>19</sup> Individual opinion polls must be taken with a grain of salt. For an overview of the weaknesses and risks of opinion polls, see: <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/192958/zur-wahrnehmung-und-wirkung-von-meinungsumfragen/>





This shows that there is a lack of trust in German media reporting (just under half) and the impression that reporting is one-sided among a considerable proportion of society (around a third). Regardless of how balanced the reporting actually is, it can pose a problem for society. It can lead to an erosion of trust, a feeling of invisibility, a lack of representation and increasing alienation. This makes the audience more receptive to alternative news formats that specifically spread false information and extremist narratives in coded form.

#### 4.2 Middle East conflict and media perception within the context of Islamist extremism in social media

If a significant proportion of society has the impression that reporting is "too much in favour of Israel", it can result in a (perceived) need for a different perspective that focuses more strongly on the suffering of the Palestinian side. This can take a variety of different forms. However, it also offers actors from the field of Islamist extremism an opportunity to establish connectivity by focussing on the suffering of Palestinians and the real or imagined repression as well as the perceived bias of media reporting, political decisions and social discussions as a visible topic and "hook".

Frustration, fear and anger provide fertile ground and echo chambers for the messages communicated by extremist actors. Experience from monitoring shows that this effect is increasingly evident in the sphere of Islamist extremism in social media. Actors of various misanthropic extremisms exploit crises, feelings of anger, helplessness and fear for their own ideological and political goals (Ebner and Köhler 2019, 12–13,19).

The portrayal of the problem is often constructed selectively by actors and sometimes enriched with false or unconfirmed information. At the same time, in an ongoing violent conflict, especially when independent journalists are denied access to the conflict area, it is difficult to paint a precise picture of the conflict anyway. However, the various actors manage to hit on a point that concerns many people. The key issue here is particularly their *framing* and the causal conclusions that are expressed or clearly insinuated, giving the communicated messages anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic character.

Islamist online actors in German-speaking countries regularly refer to the reporting of (German) media and question their credibility and legitimacy. Well-known Islamist narratives and accusations (e.g. dictatorship of opinion, compulsion to assimilate, one-sidedness, media agenda, deliberate concealment/deception) are embedded in the current context. The reference to media report-

ing is often directly linked to the struggle for interpretative sovereignty and the presumably appropriate consequences of action. On the one hand, media reporting by Islamist actors is presented as false and untrustworthy and unilaterally pro-Israel (the survey shows that this criticism or perception is not specific to this area, but is also shared by a considerable segment of society). On the other hand, the positions of Islamist actors on the conflict itself are generally unilaterally pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli.

Given the combination of great interest and need for news about the current situation and the often unclear or challenging factual situation, the framework conditions provide a solid foundation for Islamist actors to present themselves as an alternative, supposedly credible source of information. In *Instagram* stories, some accounts post content on a daily basis that explicitly shows suffering, injuries, destruction and death in the conflict zone. Content from non-Islamist accounts and journalists is also shared. The account operators then directly engage in *framing* by relating the suffering to a postulated oppression of Muslim life and Muslim positions, for example in Germany, and thus presenting predetermined interpretation patterns.

Groups such as *Generation Islam* or *Realität Islam* attempt to present themselves as alternative sources of information. While this role was already established in mid-2023, it is being significantly bolstered by the current conflict situation. The reason for this is likely a combination of many factors: The general dismay in the face of great humanitarian suffering, the social polarisation that is evident in Germany and elsewhere, the impression that media reporting is biased or only selectively depicts the suffering and the resulting need for information that fills the alleged or actual gaps in reporting. The tendency to select a language style that is strongly aligned with traditional mass media is echoed by publishing formats that are very similar to official broadcasts. An impressive example of this phenomenon is the digital magazine "Muslim Insider", which *Generation Islam* publishes and updates. Aesthetically, it is reminiscent of the well-known weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*. In terms of content, the "Muslim Insider" often deals with various topics and events in a highly judgemental, interpretative, sensationalist, misleading and selective manner.

At the end of each paragraph there are links to well-known international news channels or newspapers as (alleged) proof of the theories put forward by *Generation Islam*. The publication of its own online magazine, which is intended to provide an overview of global political events, accentuates the group's claim to be an alternative information provider.



Fig. 1: Cover of an issue of the online magazine "Muslim Insider" by Generation Islam from September 2024.

#### Der Spiegel

*Der Spiegel* is a privately held German news magazine and one of the best-known and most important media outlets in Germany. It reports comprehensively on topics from politics, business, society, culture, science and many other areas. *Der Spiegel* is particularly well known for its investigative reporting, which has earned it a prominent position in German journalism. The online version of the magazine was accessed around 166 million times between December 2023 and September 2024 alone. Around 695,000 copies of the weekly print magazine were sold in 2023.

#### 4.3 Instrumentalisation of suffering and correlation to the situation in Germany

Without exception, all posts by Islamist accounts in relation to Israel are anti-Israeli, but not all posts are anti-Semitic. In some cases, however, there are also explicit references to well-known anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, such as control of the financial and media sector by a "Jewish elite", which is linked to current political developments. Furthermore, Israel's right to exist is called into question (Israel is frequently mentioned in quotation marks or otherwise distorted). Without being able to quantify it yet, social media monitoring gives the impression that both the quantity and intensity of these statements have increased significantly as a result of the escalation of the conflict.

Moreover, a wide-spread claim purports that it is impossible to criticise Israel in Germany, because any criticism of Israel's actions is automatically labelled as anti-Semitism. It should be noted that the actors themselves argue in an abbreviated and simplistic manner. The communicated intention behind this is to reinforce the impression among the audience that the suffering of Palestinians and their own anger and powerlessness are not being heard and that criticising the situation is unacceptable. On the other hand, actors try to blur the line between "criticism of the state" and inhuman ideology, which is communicated in code. They hope to establish connectivity and attempt to protect themselves against criticism or to make counter-claims.

As a result of the reference to the suffering of Palestinian civilians, the actors quickly draw a connection to the (supposedly) repressive conditions in Germany towards Muslims. Once again, facts (prevalence of anti-Muslim racism, selective reporting in some areas, etc.) are mixed with claims (dictatorship of opinion, agenda against Muslims, necessity of a caliphate). The focus quickly shifts from the suffering and death of Palestinian civilians to the situation of Muslims in Germany. Political decisions or the actions of security agencies are characterised as state repression, violent suppression and dictatorship of opinion.

This type of communication framing appears to be an instrumentalisation of civil suffering and social polarisation for their own strategic agenda. It often turns out that the actors construct a mosaic in which they decontextualise fragments of truth and mix them with allegations, assumptions and discriminatory statements. This creates a bigger picture with misleading or deceptive characteristics that hides the diverse spread of suffering (e.g. victims of Hamas), selectively (does not) share information and consequentially proposes "solutions" such as a caliphate.

#### 4.4 (Not) a specifically German problem? Situation in France and Great Britain

The developments described in Germany can also be observed in other European countries with a large Muslim population, such as France and the UK, where comparable political undercurrents and social trends are emerging. While the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, or AfD) party is fuelling Islamophobia in Germany, Marine Le Pen's party (*Rassemblement National*) in France and the Reform Party (*Reform UK*) in the UK are contributing to a similar mood. Furthermore, trust in the established media has been steadily declining in these countries for several years (Newman et al. 2023, pp. 74, 76, 59). In these countries, the Muslim community is also increasingly burdened by a heated and sometimes Islamophobic discourse. For example, newspapers in the UK report more intensively and emotionally on terrorist attacks when the perpetrators are Muslim (De Coster et al., 2024). This type of reporting can poison the social climate towards Muslims in the long term and encourage far-right forces to promote discrimination and violence against Muslims. A terrifying example of this phenomenon are the anti-Muslim protests by the far-right "English Defence League" in numerous cities in England and in Belfast, Ireland, in which Muslims were physically attacked and Muslim shops were damaged, sometimes with incendiary devices (Deutschlandfunk 2024). In France, the far right is also fuelling resentment towards Islam and Muslims, which is leading to a tense social climate (Kaya et al. 2023). There are repeated clashes between political groups, particularly in urban areas (BBC 2023).

These tendencies, coupled with social disadvantages in terms of education and opportunities for advancement for people with a migration background and Muslims, lead to young people turning away from the mainstream media due to their experiences of marginalisation (Robert and Kaya 2024). A study by Robert & Kaya (2024), in which 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young Muslims from France, showed that they feel stigmatised and marginalised by media discourses in France (Robert and Kaya 2024, 637). These developments open up opportunities for the recruitment and radicalisation of young people by Islamist actors (cf. Robert and Kaya 2024; Dusseaux-Edom and Boudoukha 2022).

Developing a stable identity is particularly challenging for young people in Muslim communities, because they are confronted with structural discrimination in addition to the developmental tasks typical for their age. Experiences of racism, media and political stigmatisation, material exclusion and marginalisation are often part of everyday life for Muslims in German, French and British cities (Abbas 2019; 2020; Mac An Ghaill and Haywood 2015). Pro-

pagandists reinforce feelings of marginalisation and establish lines of conflict by spreading the narrative that Muslims around the world are subject to an agenda of oppression. In response, they are calling for a militant stance against this system (Larsen 2020, 398). Research on Islamist radicalisation has shown that people who have experienced discrimination and racism are more open to Islamist narratives as an alternative to mainstream media (Logvinov 2017, 39–40).

#### Public service broadcasting and privately held media organisations in Germany

Public service broadcasting (e.g. ARD, ZDF) is financed by household licence fees and is expected to provide objective, diverse programmes and educational content, independent of commercial interests. Privately held media companies (e.g. RTL, ProSieben, SAT1) are mainly financed by advertising. Consequently, they aim for high ratings. Their focus is more on entertainment and commercial content, which makes them more flexible in their programme design. Public broadcasters are required to offer balanced information, while privately held broadcasters focus more on market-orientated formats.

## 5. Interaction with the media: Between proximity and distance

### 5.1 Media reports as evidence of your personal position

As illustrated in the previous section, media outlets are primarily framed as anti-Muslim actors spreading lies based to push their own agenda. Nevertheless, there are references to media reports as sources in various videos.

The process of referring to journalistic sources as evidence for an actor's personal position is often very selective, with headlines or individual sentences being inserted or quoted and then loaded or supplemented with the actor's own interpretation. For example, as the controversy over the credibility of Ahmad Mansour's<sup>20</sup> biography unfolded, a video by *Generation Islam* (2023b; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLu5rL\\_UKQM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLu5rL_UKQM)) cited research by *hyphenonline.com* as a source and referred to its statements. However, the content was subsequently used as a starting point for further speculation ("I wouldn't be surprised if it was all a lie", from min.: 22:19), which goes beyond the content of the article and what is factually verifiable.

Furthermore, media reports are only used if they match the position or narrative represented by the respective actors. Media reports therefore appear less as a source of information or to demonstrate different positions, but rather selectively in order to reinforce the actor's personal position or to add credibility or legitimacy through the source. Accordingly, the media reference does not appear to be without preconceived conclusions, but rather a tactic to reinforce the actor's own narrative. Conversely, reports with critical or deviating content are only addressed in the context of articles that delegitimise either individual media, the respective journalists or the entire media industry (see chapters 4.3 and 4.4). This selective approach to sources fits in with the overarching communication strategy of extremist actors, which relies on dichotomous portrayals of the world and clear enemy concepts that are less nuanced or differentiated.

With regard to *Muslim Interaktiv*, the *Landes-Demokratiezentrum Niedersachsen* (State Democracy Centre of Lower Saxony) describes: "In fact, the group's approach can largely be described as factual suggestion, sometimes due to the abbrevi-

<sup>20</sup> As a result of a cease and desist agreement between Mansour and *hyphen online*, some factual assertions were removed from the article <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/hyphen-korrigiert-darstellung-ueber-ahmad-mansour-19088955.html> (Retrieved on 3 September 2023).

ated or selective presentation, sometimes due to the deliberately exaggerated presentation of the content. This approach serves [...] to polarise and evoke emotions" (2021, 15).

This shows that, regardless of the specific subject matter, journalistic (or sometimes scientific) sources are used as a supposedly legitimate, objective starting point for the reproduction of certain narratives. However, the subsequent interpretations or assertions often go far beyond the content of the original source. It is interesting to note that selective citation of sources, conjecture, distortions, inadmissible logical conclusions or generalisations can be found in the communication of Islamist online actors while many of these elements are also the subject of criticism of media reporting by the same actors.

### 5.2 Appearances in the media

Despite the framing of "the media" as an anti-Muslim actor, the platform offered by mass media formats is sometimes utilised by Islamist actors. For example, *Hassan Dabbagh* has appeared on public TV talk shows such as "hart aber fair", "Maischberger" and "Sabine Christiansen", where he presented his views to a wide-reaching audience. *Dabbagh* himself still reposts some excerpts on his social media channels and gives them titles like "Double standards of the media" (2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StM.JenhlemM>). Elsewhere (2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZiJgpxleDY>), *Dabbagh* commented on politics and the media as follows: "We don't generalise. We don't say that all politicians are hypocrites. Just some of them, unfortunately. And we also don't say that all representatives of the press are liars. But most liars are representatives of the press" (min.: 0:49). Despite the supposedly differentiating approach, *Dabbagh* describes the majority of politicians and press representatives as hypocritical or dishonest.

There have also been examples of Islamist actors appearing in public service formats in the recent past. *Ibrahim al-Azzazi*, for example, was featured extensively in a report by "Y-Kollektiv", a format of the public service network *FUNK*, entitled "Salafist influencers on TikTok: "We represent proper Islam!" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37h7-Ydbf-w>), exposing him to a wider audience.

Referring to Neumann and Baugut (2017), Reinemann et al. state: "Mass media reporting has an impact on extremist scenes, but extremists also try to exploit mass media reporting for their own agenda" (2019, 19). Reports on high-profile campaigns or groups from the Islamist scene attract attention and can help the actors expand their reach and possibly gain new sympathisers.

At the same time, citing sensationalist and stereotypical reports provide a particularly good argument or starting point to illustrate their supposed bias and as alleged proof of a comprehensively dishonest, anti-Muslim media landscape and majority society. An ambivalent relationship to the media and their reporting can thus be observed. This reveals certain parallels with findings from research into the communication patterns of right-wing extremist actors. According to Köhler and Ebner, a dual strategy can be recognised in their dealings with the media. It is based on generating attention and reach through provocation, while the actors try to create their own media ecosystem and discredit the credibility of established media (2019, 20).

### 5.3 Between reaction and imitation: Reactions to media reports and enquiries

The channels *Generation Islam*, *Muslim Interaktiv* and *Realität Islam* refer to content in media reports. In recent months, they have increasingly published reaction videos, in which they react to excerpts from the media, among other things, and supposedly categorise them or refer to the statements made in them. However, their videos often mimic the aesthetics and staging of professional media or journalistic formats. There are discussion panels, purportedly informative information videos, street surveys and interviews. These are all formats that are familiar from professional media and journalistic settings. The articles and posts give the impression that the actors want to present themselves as a trustworthy source of information, not only in terms of staging, but also in terms of content, and that they have been inspired by the formal style and aesthetics of the media.

The length and level of detail of the analysis of the media reports varies considerably. In some cases, only a single, short excerpt from a television programme is presented and then placed in the context of their own narratives and explanatory patterns. For example, *Muslim Interaktiv* published a reaction video (2023b; [https://www.tiktok.com/@raheem\\_mi/video/7247920725972012314](https://www.tiktok.com/@raheem_mi/video/7247920725972012314)) in which they show a short excerpt from an ARD report that criticises *Muslim Interaktiv* as anti-democratic, among other things. Based on the statement from the TV report, the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* constructs the alleged necessity for Muslims to either decide to adapt to the Western way of life or that "we insist on our Islamic identity and become outcasts of society without any prospects" (min.: 0:39).

This illustrates the abbreviated, distorted interpretation of statements in which *Muslim Interaktiv* presents itself as representative of all Muslims, postulates a presumed incompatibility of liberal society and Muslim identity and constructs a threatening scenario in

which adherence to Muslim identity is accompanied by expulsion from society and a lack of prospects. In the end, an unspecified group or public (presumably referring to the majority society or the media) is addressed and criticised: "Your goal is to get us Muslims to give up our own values and convictions in order to submit unconditionally to liberalism" (min.: 0:46). With the choice of personal pronouns (we/our vs. you/your), the actor reinforces the demarcation between the allegedly coherent in-group and the hostile out-group. The remaining choice of words (unconditional submission, outcasts) also combines familiar victim narratives with threat scenarios.

Reinke de Buitrago (2022, 57) points out that people who separate themselves from the oppressive out-group experience a reevaluation of their identity by positioning themselves as "true Muslims" against "the infidel and doomed West". Presenting your own group as positive (Williams und Tzani 2022, 8) while simultaneously devaluing the out-group is a well-known method used by extremist actors to create polarisation or escalate debates (Bähr 2019, 192).

The valorisation of your own group is particularly effective when referring back to real experiences of discrimination because it implies a reversal of power relations: Instead of being in the marginalised position, the individuals become the superior or "infallible" ones through their rejection of the lost out-group and their adherence to the "true faith" (Reinke de Buitrago 2022, 57). This kind of (moral) valorisation through adherence to the "right" belief can also be seen in the rest of the above-mentioned article: "And this is exactly what the Messenger of Allah [...] prophesied. Thus he said: A time will come upon the people when he who steadfastly holds onto Islam will be as if he is holding burning coals in his hands. We promise all those responsible for this agenda, all politicians and all the media that Muslims will make a clear choice in favour of Islam. They will stick to the Islamic identity under all circumstances and will not allow them to form a new, modern Islam, regardless of the consequences that will come our way." (min.: 0:55)

The argumentative correlation of a victim narrative based on a prohibition policy or assimilation agenda with the conclusion of the "incompatibility of coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims (Fielitz and Kahl 2022, 295) can also be found among other Islamist actors.

In other reaction videos, such as "Forbidden Love: LGBTQ and QUEER 'Muslims' – Reaction Report Mainz Pride Month" (Verbotene Liebe: LGBTQ und QUEERE ‚Muslime‘ – Reaction Report Mainz Pride Month / 2023a; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jHqKWj2aHZM>), entire television reports are discussed in detail. The descriptive text of the article illustrates the framing of media reporting (as well as the recurring negative statements about

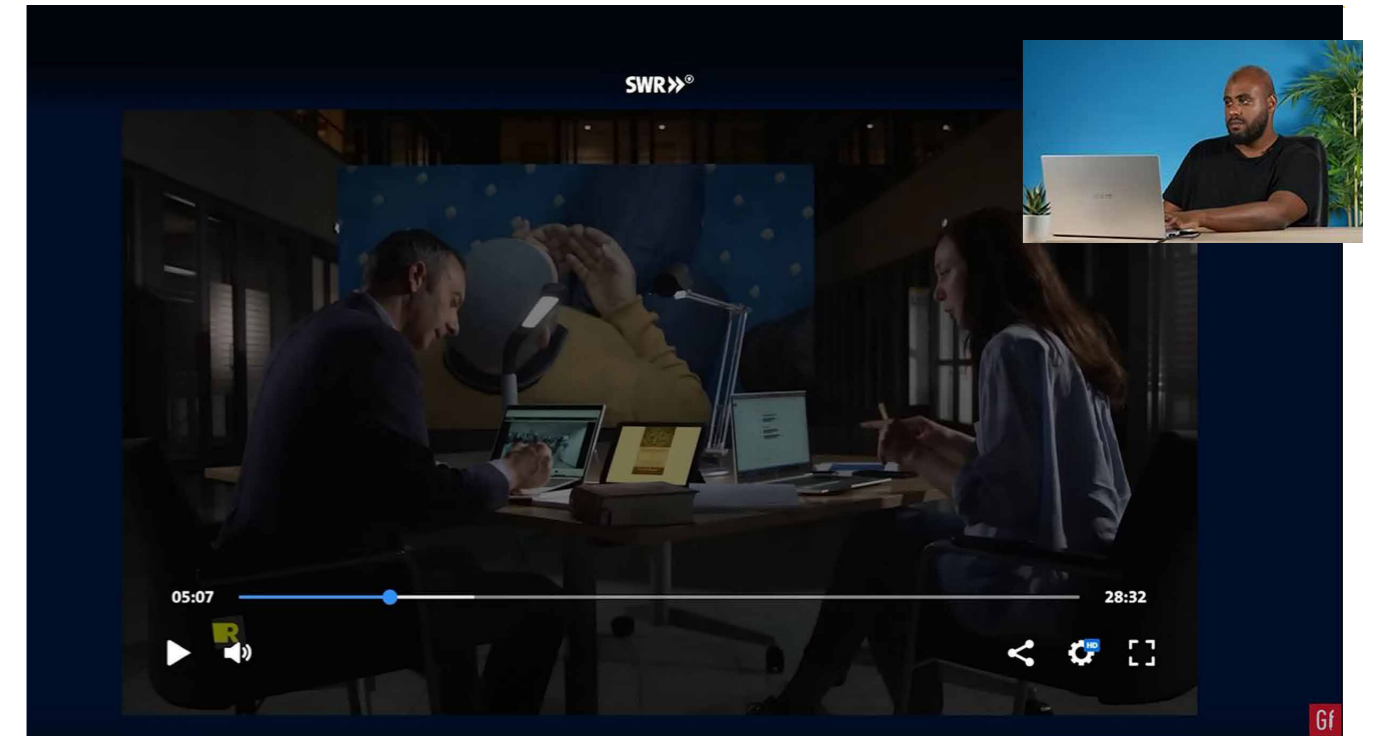


Fig. 2: The protagonist of *Generation Islam* (top right in the small picture) shows excerpts from the report of the programme "Report Mainz" and reacts to its content (*Generation Islam 2023a*).

people and topics related to LGBTQIA+): "We have known for a long time that the public service media likes to incite against Islam. As early as 2003, Report Mainz, like the Christchurch attacker and other Islam-haters, spoke of a creeping Islamisation of the West. Now they are trying to damage Islam and the Muslim community with a very questionable article on the topic of #LGBTQ." The text states that the public media is inciting hatred against Islam and mentions the TV programme in the same context as the Christchurch attacker who killed 51 people in an attack on two mosques in 2019. The mention of the racist violent criminal, which is not apparent from the other context of the video, can give the impression of a connection or (linguistic) similarities between the attacker and the TV format and thus possibly lead to an associative delegitimisation of the programme format.

It is also noteworthy that various channels broadcast their videos (e.g. on current political events) from a studio setting that is reminiscent of professional television studios. With regard to the setting, Baaken et al. stated:

"In a professional studio or documentary style, some channels engage in civic education from their Muslim/Islamist world view, but also disseminate religious explanations. This style is probably intended to emanate a serious tone and authenticity." (2019, 45)

It is not uncommon for excerpts from television programmes (as in the reaction videos) and article headlines or short "online research" to be shown to uncover the truth (alleged connections or contexts). Both the staging and the selective use of media reports and internet sources (partly to confirm their own narrative, partly as the object of the criticism itself) create the association of an alternative source of information to "the anti-Muslim media".

Street surveys are another popular format used by various actors. In these videos, passers-by in a public place are interviewed on a specific topic. In some videos, e.g. from *IMAN TV*, the protagonist of the respective video asks one person about topics such as the existence of God or discusses relevant issues with them.

In other street surveys, e.g. from *Muslim Interaktiv*, several people are asked about one topic. These surveys are familiar formats from TV programmes and in both cases suggest that they provide an overview of opinions. However, in the case of *Muslim Interaktiv*, picking the respondents is apparently very selective, creating the impression that there is a uniform, clear and coherent opinion among the respondents or the surveyed group. The (selected) in-group represents a uniform opinion that is congruent with the respective actor. This reinforces the argumentative position of the actor.



Fig. 3: In this professional studio-like setting, the protagonist of *Realität Islam* scrutinises a report by Bayerischer Rundfunk about Abul Baraa, which is portrayed as an “attack” and “incitement” against the “entire Muslim community” (*Realität Islam* 2021b).

It enables him to present himself as a representative of the respective group. Critical or dissenting voices are rare or non-existent. A great example here is a video by *Muslim Interaktiv* (2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuiQ-kIlyzM>) on “Regenbogen-Kaaba” (Rainbow Kaaba). In this video, several people on the street are asked what they think of the image of a rainbow-coloured Kaaba. Although the specific wording of the answers varies, the message purports to be the same for all respondents. They express their disapproval, irritation and indignation.

At the end of the video, the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* summarises that the street survey revealed a unified opinion among Muslims: “The voice of the Ummah is unified. It is a provocation and an insult [...]” (min: 5:04). However, it remains unclear how the interviewed respondents or the scenes were selected and what communication may have taken place beforehand.



Fig. 4: As part of the street survey, the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* shows one of the interviewees the picture of the “Rainbow Kaaba” and asks him for his opinion (*Muslim Interaktiv* 2022; the respondent was anonymised).

#### 5.4 Analysis of sample videos from the *Muslim Interaktiv* channel

A special type of reference to the media has been observed on the *Muslim Interaktiv* channel over the past six months. This channel took several interview requests as an opportunity to publish videos about the media organisations and journalists. In response to a press enquiry from a ZDF journalist, the channel published a video to supposedly expose her and uncover her motives (4.3.2.). One of the protagonists of

*Muslim Interaktiv* gave an interview to the *Botschaft des Islam* channel, explaining why they had (not) given any interviews (4.3.3.). In response to the interview request from *Spiegel TV*, the channel staged a complete interview that never actually took place (4.3.4). Using the example of these three videos, which are particularly elaborate and unique in terms of their staging, the following section looks in more detail at how interview (requests) are made the subject of communication and how media are presented.



#### Sample video *Muslim Interaktiv* responds to ZDF interview request

The video (2023c; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS4PVSz-pZek>) shows one of the two protagonists of *Muslim Interaktiv* and another masked person sitting in front of a chessboard. The ZDF journalist’s questions, which she sent to *Muslim Interaktiv* in writing, and *Muslim Interaktiv*’s answers from the chat are shown synchronised with the chess moves of the two people in the foreground of the chessboard.

Fig. 5: The symbolic “chess game” between *Muslim Interaktiv* and the masked person who is supposed to represent the ZDF journalist can be seen here (*Muslim Interaktiv* 2023c).

In keeping with the metaphor of a game of chess, the conversation is staged as a strategic game in which the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* ultimately checkmates his opponent. This staging of a debate “victory” against the journalist is followed by statements by the protagonist in which he claims that the “impudence of some journalists knows no bounds” (min.: 0:41). With reference to Entman, this can be categorised as a *moral judgement*. The protagonist also emphasises that these are not the “usual suspects such as Bild, Reichelt or Spiegel TV” (min.: 0:49) and thus alludes to a fundamental rejection or mistrust of these media (creators). He puts the credibility of the ZDF journalist into perspective by claiming that her “quality journalism” (he uses the term with his fingers in the air in *scare quotes*<sup>21</sup>) “essentially consists of inciting against the Islamic lifestyle” (min.: 1:06). With this message, he questions the quality of journalism and reproduces the narrative of the inflammatory media. This delegitimisation is reinforced by the fact that the protagonist describes a report by the journalist from 2019 as a “propaganda film” (min.: 1:11), in which the journalist collaborated with known Islam haters.

The journalist’s interview request reveals her “master race mentality, which makes her believe that we Muslims are so stupid as to get involved in her dirty game” (min.: 1:43). The choice of personal pronouns combined with the journalist’s alleged insinuation that the in-group is “stupid” also creates tension and polarisation on a linguistic level. The term “master race mentality” also creates associations with historical racist and inhuman systems of thought from National Socialism.

According to the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv*, the journalist tries to accuse Muslims of “destroying the local social order and then seizing power” (min.: 2:05). Subsequently, the protagonist lists several analogies with reference to militaristic terms that insinuate that the journalist wants to portray Islam or Muslims as a military threat: “Our headscarves are uniforms, our mosques are military bases, our prayers are battle formations and our public appearances are a declaration of war on the German state” (min.: 2:10). The use of these terms reinforces the framing of a threatening situation or a struggle. Fielitz and Kahl point out that segments of the Islamist scene clearly distance themselves from violence and that the “language used, with its militant calls for the defence of identity in the face of omnipresent oppression, if not the imminent demise of one’s own group, [would] also provide points of reference for ‘resistance’ through violence” (Fielitz and Kahl 2022, 292).

The video goes on to say that the journalist is part of an “Islamophobic machine” (min.: 3:06). The protagonist addresses the journalist with the question “how could you seriously believe that we would allow ourselves to be used as extras in your format?” (min.: 4:03). The video concludes with the protagonist’s statement that the ZDF journalist has joined the ranks of Reichelt and *Spiegel TV* and made it into the “Hall of Fame of failed journalism” with her interview request (min.: 4:08).

The comments section gives a first impression of how the video was received. The chess metaphor is also taken up in the comments and interpreted as a visualisation of the opponent’s “cunning moves”. The video is described several times as “illuminating”, “convincing” and “very good analysis”. This indicates that the audience has the impression that they gain information from the video, which may even serve to discover or expose hidden patterns or intentions. The attempt to discredit the journalist also seems to work (on parts of the audience). For example, the decision not to conduct an interview with “a journalistically unqualified person [...]” is praised, as this could have “truly fatal consequences”. The comments section also contains the motif that there is “good money to be made” with Islamophobia in Germany and that the ZDF journalist is aware of that fact. The comments reflect the image of analytical, honest, truth-seeking and enlightening work by *Muslim Interaktiv*.

It is noteworthy that *Muslim Interaktiv* thus turns press enquiries into a communicative or discursive object and uses them as an opportunity for a supposedly enlightening debate with the respective media. This provides an alternative option to ignoring or rejecting interview requests or utilising the reach that reporting brings.

21 In linguistics, *scare quotes* are quotation marks that are used by people to distance themselves from the statement (Apel et al. 2020, 112).

Quantification of the ratings development of channels that share similar views as Hizb ut-Tahrir

Progression development of subscribers on YouTube

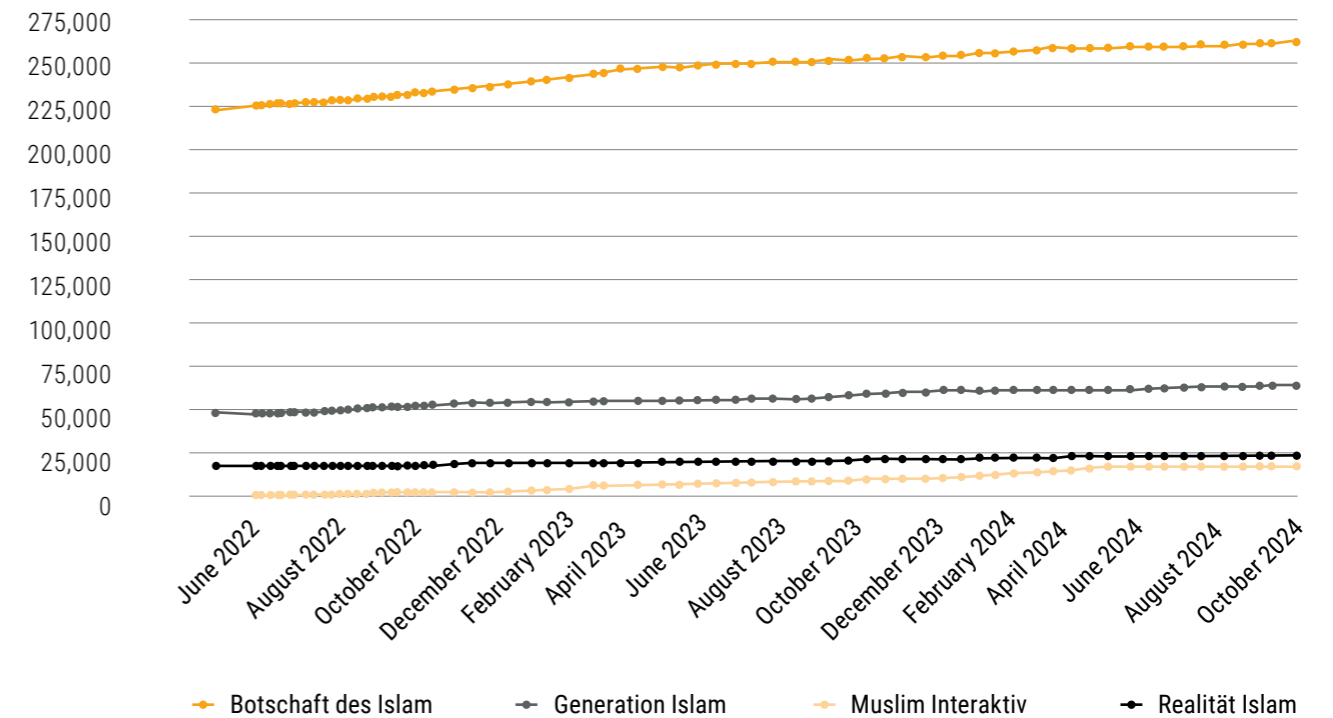


Fig. 6: Ratings development of channels on YouTube that share similar views as Hizb ut-Tahrir between June 2022 and October 2024 (source: KN:IX plus Social Media Monitoring).

Channels that share similar content as Hizb ut-Tahrir, such as Botschaft des Islam, Generation Islam, Muslim Interaktiv and Realität Islam, are particularly notable for their strong daily political focus and a pronounced activist component in the German discourse. This sets them apart from actors like Salafist preachers, who are much more traditional and less dynamic in terms of their appearance and their choice of topics. The reach of the channels on social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Instagram* and *TikTok* is quite remarkable. At the same time, there are German-language Islamist accounts on *Instagram* and *TikTok* in particular, for example from the Salafist sphere, which have even higher ratings. Occasionally, they manage to generate hundreds of thousands to millions of views, especially with current political references or short videos of organised demonstrations. The typical reach of the posts is usually significantly lower.

	TikTok	Instagram	YouTube
Botschaft des Islam	14,896	68,025	263,000
Generation Islam	2,376*	74,503	64,900
Muslim Interaktiv	16,980	7,219	18,900
Realität Islam	4,392	33,339	24,700

Fig. 7: Reach of German-language accounts that share similar views as Hizb ut-Tahrir as of 31 October 2024. (Source: KN:IX plus Social Media Monitoring; \*= the TikTok account of Generation Islam is currently offline; the data are based on the last retrieval on 16 January 2024)



Fig. 8: The "interview setting" shows the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* with microphone in hand (left) and the interviewer from *Botschaft des Islam* (right), who can only be seen blurred out at the edge of the entire video (*Botschaft des Islam* 2023).

**Sample video**  
***Botschaft des Islam* (BDI) "interviews" *Muslim Interaktiv***

While interview requests from various media outlets are consistently declined, the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* grants an interview (2023; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcjaRRhr-Wao>) to the *Botschaft des Islam* channel, which is also considered relevant to the field at this point in time.

In addition to the recurring motif of media incitement (starting at min.: 6:35), there is also a specific discussion about the handling of press enquiries and interviews. When asked why they are conducting an interview with BDI, the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* states that they generally do not reject interviews. Actually, it's quite contrary: "After all, we want people to hear us. We also want our ideas, what we stand for, to get out to the public, preferably as far-reaching as possible." (min.: 37:34). With regard to the media in general, the *Muslim Interaktiv* protagonist says: "No matter how you approach them, they will always play with you (min.: 39:02). He then claims that there have been several people who have been guests on *FUNK* formats and said "I shut that guy down! I beat him with my arguments!" (min.: 39:16). However, the video was allegedly edited to change the outcome. This claim, which cannot be substantiated or proven, serves as the reason why *Muslim Interaktiv* does not agree to an interview

with journalists, and instead appears on a *YouTube* channel with similar content.

Instead of critical questions or contextualisation, the *Botschaft des Islam* "interviewer" asks the rhetorical question: "It's not fear of confrontation or critical questions at all. Isn't it actually more about the fact that you know they don't have an honest intention? They [the media] are not interested in the social good, in starting a discourse or in exchanging ideas. They want to push their own agenda on you to generate a specific outcome." (min.: 39:35) So, instead of asking critical questions as in a proper journalistic interview, the interviewer reproduces the familiar narrative of dishonest media pursuing an agenda and thus supports the narrative presented by *Muslim Interaktiv*. The protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* adds that their handling of press enquiries is possibly "a good example for many Muslim influencers, social media personalities and people who are active in this arena" (min.: 40:16) sei. Following Entman's definition of framing, this is a form of *recommendation for action*: Because the media lie, distort and pursue an agenda, it makes sense for Muslims who are active on social media to distance themselves and expose the motives of the media. To illustrate the contrast, the preview image of the video shows the protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* and the sentence "A Muslim always speaks the truth". The credibility of the actor is highlighted in a stark contrast to the alleged dishonesty of the media.



Fig. 9: The protagonist of *Muslim Interaktiv* in the interview imitation. The putative *Spiegel* reporter can be seen in the left section (*Muslim Interaktiv* 2023a).

**Sample video**  
**Interview imitation by *Muslim Interaktiv***

*Muslim Interaktiv* also elaborately staged an illusory interview elsewhere (2023a; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHpKtjwUs00>). The 15-minute video creates the impression until shortly before the end that an interview with *Spiegel TV* has taken place. The illusion is only broken and dissolved shortly before the end. In this case, the elaborate and professional staging of the video is particularly noteworthy. It is a testimony to the actors' high level of media expertise. At the beginning (starting at min. 0:12), one of the two protagonists of *Muslim Interaktiv* can be seen in Hamburg. He walks towards the *Spiegel* office building and pushes down the door handle of the entrance door. After a cut, we see an office space that conveys an interview setting. A microphone is switched on and positioned on the table. The interviewer can only be seen blurred at the edge of the picture. Over the course of the video, the putative *Spiegel TV* editor asks *Muslim Interaktiv* questions<sup>22</sup>. This allows the protagonist to answer the questions and reproduce the narrative of state-enforced "assimilation" (min.: 1:10), which is "a danger to Islamic life" (min.: 1:35), without any further questions, categorisation or similar. The protagonist also postulates: "We're being criminalised for everything we represent, everything that defines us. [...] They want to completely exclude us from the public discourse" (min.: 10:13).

<sup>22</sup> *Muslim Interaktiv* states in the description text of the video that these questions were presented to them by *Spiegel TV*. Despite repeated requests, *Spiegel TV* has not commented on whether these are actually the (complete) questions that they sent to *Muslim Interaktiv*.

Particularly notable in terms of staging are shots during the video (e.g. from min.: 2:48 and at min.: 7:02) that display some sort of pinboard

with cards, notes and photos, some of which are tied together with string. This staging is geared towards the (media-conveyed) visual aesthetics of investigative journalists. The notepads contain questions such as "Goals?", "Why are they so successful?", "How many are there?". The ostensible authenticity of the interview setting is further emphasised by these elements.

It is not until min. 14:54 that the protagonist turns directly to the camera for the first time, breaking the illusion and addressing the viewer or *Spiegel TV* directly by proclaiming that *Spiegel TV* reports are "lurid, hysterical, exaggerated, tendentious and opinionated" (min. 15:25) and that the production company was not prepared to conduct an "authorised interview" (min.: 15:01) that would reproduce their statements without distortion. To avoid misrepresenting, shortening or fragmenting their statements, *Muslim Interaktiv* decided to produce their own video. By stating that they wanted to avoid misrepresentation of their statements, the channel also avoids a real interview setting, which could mean critical questions or contextualisation of their theories. At the same time, the staging as an interview emphasises the illusory willingness to have an "honest" conversation.

The reference to press enquiries, the reaction to reports about their organisation and the "unmasking" of the motives of media professionals show that *Muslim Interaktiv* consciously and intensively engages with their media representation. Instead of ignoring them, media reports or enquiries are regularly addressed and localised as part of the agenda described above.

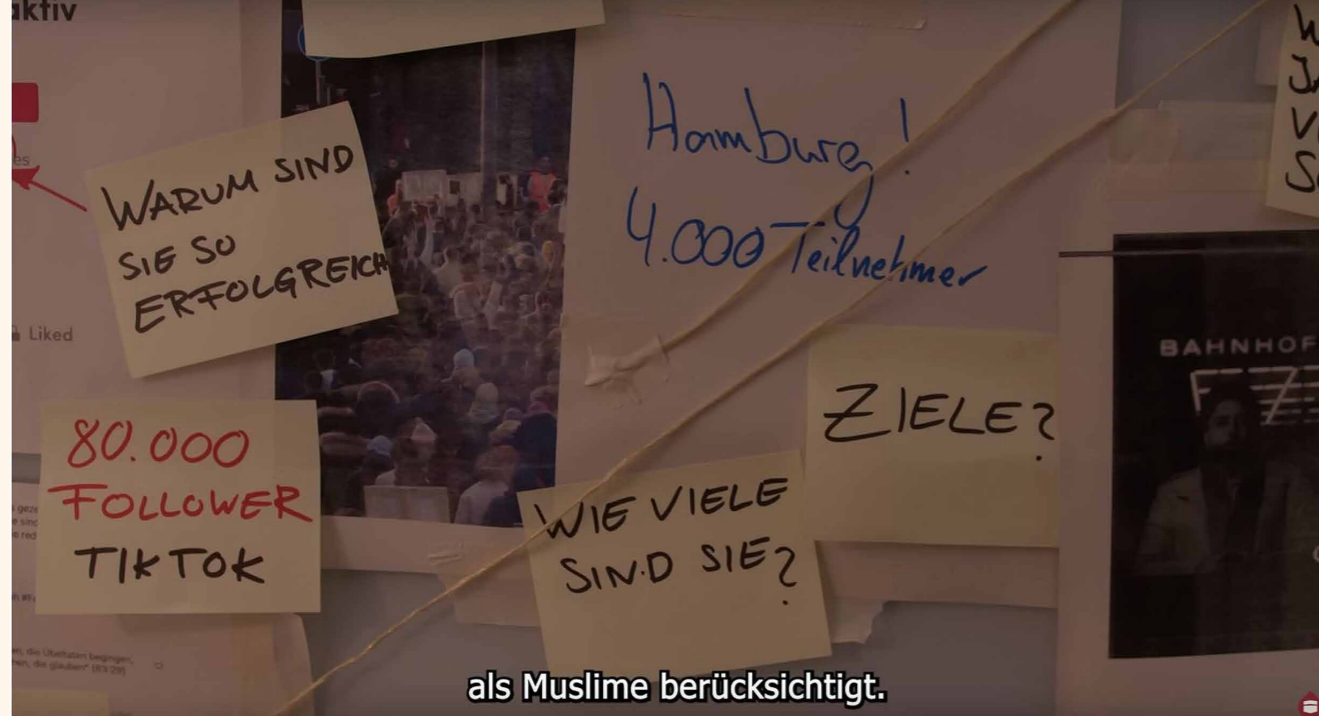


Fig. 10: The pinboard created by Muslim Interaktiv with notes and pictures allegedly representing the questions and research results of the Spiegel TV reporters (Muslim Interaktiv 2023a).

## 6. Concluding remarks

### 6.1 Effects of the communication strategy

Referring back to Entman's (1993) definition, the following *framing* of mass media by actors from the Islamist spectrum can be outlined: The definition of the problem is anti-Muslim reporting in the media. The roots of this issue are identified as either a state-sponsored agenda of repression, financial interests or instructions from unspecified groups. The resulting moral assessment is a fundamental devaluation and rejection of the media and its credibility. Ultimately, the implications for action include distancing oneself from the media and referring back to the in-group, refusing to communicate (e.g. interviews) and the need to clarify and expose the presumptive media agenda.

Using the image of the "fake news media" conveyed by the actors as a starting point, this discrediting results in a need for "actual" facts and truths. Some of the actors attempt to fill this gap themselves by presenting their interpretations, world view and narratives as an explanatory approach. It is reminiscent of the combination of victimisation and superiority or moral elevation postulated by Reinke de Buitrago (2022).

The in-group is threatened by the media incitement outlined above, while the in-group (supposedly represented by the social media actors) is primarily concerned with exposing the truth and ensuring justice. Pointing out and exploiting alleged contradictions can also be found in the communicative approach, for example when the claim and external appearance of truthful reporting is contrasted with the ostensibly inflammatory media agenda.

This creates a comprehensive and clear explanation for the audience that reduces the complex topics of media information selection and topic setting, islamophobia in the media and society as well as the ability to recognise false information to a simple formula. The reduced complexity and ambiguity have a relieving effect for the audience.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of investigative exposure of grievances is (implicitly) recognised by the actors, whereas the specific journalistic reports are delegitimised due to the diagnosed agenda. The actors present themselves as enlightening, exposing or unmasking and suggest that they are bringing the actual truth to light, which is deliberately concealed by the media and politics. There are parallels here with alternative media.

<sup>23</sup> For example, research of conspiracy theories shows that understanding one's own environment, a feeling of control and security as well as maintaining a positive self-image or group image are potential motives for believing in conspiracy narratives (Douglas et al. 2017, 538).

While journalistic behaviour is imitated or performed, the core of methodically clean journalistic work (press code, source work, editorial control) is undermined, because these principles are precisely what forms the foundation for journalistic work being methodically associated with credibility. As emphasised by Figenschou und Ihlebæk (2019), alternative media platforms are not subject to any ethical guidelines or types of external monitoring or correction, whereas professional media are subject to the press code.

Instead, the credibility or authority of the statements of Islamist online actors is based on the argumentative starting point of "empirically and experientially plausible experiences of discrimination and exclusion" (Fielitz et al. 2018, 23), which is reinterpreted through suggested facts, distorted representations, derogatory out-group labels and polarising narratives to fit into a clear and dichotomous friend/foe scheme. Through their interaction with journalistic media, the actors partially "immunise" themselves against criticism: Journalistic interviews with potentially critical questions are rejected and critical reports can be delegitimised as part of the media agenda.

If the audience accept the interpretation of Islamist online actors, there is a risk that the self-contained argumentative system with friend or foe attributions, explanation patterns and consequences of action will take on self-perpetuating or confirming characteristics.

The actors in turn present themselves as proclaimers of the truth, which they expose, convey and reinforce by repeating it. In doing so, they create a clear, dichotomous, closed-minded world view that is not open to criticism/correction and that provides clear answers to complex questions and problems. If the audience adopts this world view or explanatory pattern, there is a risk that cognitive psychological processes such as confirmation bias<sup>24</sup> will lead them to interpret almost every situation as confirmation of their own assumptions.

This type of communication and presentation potentially creates a gap or vacuum of trust in credible journalistic authority, which is then partly filled by the actors themselves when they postulate that they are "speaking the truth" or "exposing the facts". Similar to right-wing "alternative media" (Figenschou und Ihlebæk 2019, 1229) platforms, they present themselves to be honest, authentic, trustworthy and critical.

<sup>24</sup> The *confirmation bias* describes the observation from cognitive psychology that people tend to process and interpret information in a way that meets their expectations and thus confirms their own preconceptions. For example, see: Klayman (1995).

Against the backdrop of the presumably untrustworthy mass media, actors such as *Muslim Interaktiv*, *Generation Islam* or *Realität Islam* present themselves as an alternative source for reports on the "true" situation and combine it with an activist component in which they present themselves as legitimate representatives or mouthpieces of the marginalised in-group.

### 6.2 Implications for civic education and prevention work

Struck et al. (2022) point out that extremist communication is only effective if it is perceived as meaningful and relevant. The fact that islamophobia is an empirically proven problem in parts of society and in media reporting means that it offers online Islamist actors an effective starting point to substantiate their victim and threat narratives.

In this context, a differentiated view is particularly important. Such a debate must avoid at all cost ignoring anti-Muslim racism in society or propagation of anti-Muslim stereotypes in the media. If these empirically proven problems are not addressed and scrutinised, the debate loses credibility and misses the reality of people's lives. When it comes to working with young people who are affected by anti-Muslim racism or other types of prejudice, it seems especially crucial to recognise legitimate frustrations, feelings of powerlessness and anger and to be empathetic.

However, it is important to go one step further in this context and show that the narrative of the fundamentally Islamophobic media pursuing a targeted agenda against Muslims does not line up with the complex reality. It is vital to contrast the distorting, polarising and dichotomising narratives of extremist actors with a differentiated view. It should leave enough space for legitimate and necessary criticism of media reports. At the same time, it should highlight the pivotal role journalism plays in a just and democratic society. With that in mind, bolstering media skills appears to be indispensable. Recognising journalistic quality characteristics and standards is a particularly important resource to independently and critically question and classify reports and thus minimise susceptibility to abbreviated or fake news (which can be found in the communication of Islamist online actors as well as in parts of media reporting).

This aspect is by no means limited to the area of Islamism. Various studies point to overlaps in the argumentation and staging of right-wing extremist and Islamist actors (e.g. Fielitz and Kahl 2022; Reinke de Buitrago 2022; Köhler and Ebner 2019). Herzig (2022) refers to an example that highlights the relevance of the ability to recognise narratives and accept multiperspectivity. However, as the study by Reinemann et

al. (2019) shows, simply knowing about and recognising narratives is not enough to deflect extremist propaganda. This requires, among other things, trust in democracy and state institutions. This trust in a democratic state and the mass media is precisely what the biased Islamist online actors are trying to erode with the presented material.

In addition to contextualising information, it makes sense to focus on reports, features and contributions that demonstrate the value of journalistic work, for example by exposing grievances and discrimination. This makes it possible to combine media skills training and recognition of quality criteria for journalistic work with focused presentation of positive examples that illustrate why the portrayal of the media by Islamist actors is misleading.

### 6.3 Implications for journalists and the media

When journalists and media professionals interact with Islamist actors, they should be aware that they are dealing with very media-savvy individuals. As the examples have shown, even reports and interview requests are exploited by the actors for their benefit. Individual questions as well as articles and reports published by the journalists or media organisations in the past are used as “evidence” of their hostile intentions. Accordingly, thorough research is highly recommended before making contact. Reporting should be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing polarising narratives through a lack of preparation or the reproduction of stereotypes.

Moreover, before reporting on extremist actors, it is worth considering to which extent it could be counterproductive

instead of having desirable or intended effects (such as providing information on current developments, dangers posed by anti-democratic actors, etc.). For example, it could be counterproductive to provide coverage for anti-pluralist and anti-democratic content. It is important to weigh what insights interviews with the respective actors offer and how their statements can be appropriately contextualised.

Another important consequence is that media professionals must critically reflect on the propagation of anti-Muslim stereotypes and that editorial teams need to be more diverse. Mass media platforms continue to play a key role in conveying information about Islam and Muslims and “are [...] seen as a bottleneck for combating islamophobia” (UEM 2023, 170). Becoming aware of this responsibility appears to be a significant aspect, especially in light of a “close connection between the media’s image of Islam and the perception of discrimination, erosion of trust and even social disintegration” (UEM 2023, 185). Non-discriminatory and stereotype-free reporting is fundamentally desirable and necessary. Of course, it should also be independent of all considerations of possible instrumentalisation by Islamists. This is the best way to ensure that racism and prejudice are not perpetuated and media reporting makes a contribution to a pluralistic, democratic and non-discriminatory society. In order to completely fulfil a role that promotes discourse and democracy, the media and journalists must be measured against this standard. Taking the potential incendiary effect of discriminatory reporting on anti-Muslim ideologies and acts of violence into consideration, this aspect becomes particularly relevant.

Promoting more diversity in editorial offices appears to be a relevant starting point for contributing to stigmatisation-free and more balanced reporting.<sup>25</sup> For example, a “lack of professional representation” (UEM 2023, 192–193) of Muslims has potentially negative consequences in the context of internal editorial negotiation processes. Regarding factors that can promote anti-Muslim reporting, the UEM report also points out inadequate access to sources, news factors that are based on stereotypes and the lack of culturally sensitive qualifications (2023, 189–194).

At the same time, a differentiated and well-founded topic-based debate provides fewer starting points for Islamist actors to use as evidence or negative examples. This does not imply by any means that differentiated media coverage would put an end to attempts to discredit extremist actors. As has been shown, the actors are less interested in well-founded media criticism than in exploiting it for their communication strategy of polarisation and constructing threat narratives. However, more differentiated, non-discriminatory reporting and more diversity in editorial offices could make it more difficult for Islamist online actors to establish connectivity and draw attention with their narratives.

The conflict in the Middle East illustrates how deeply societal debates can be shaped by emotional and historical burdens and potentially radicalise people. In order to counteract polarisation, it is crucial to take legitimate emotions and perspectives seriously without giving space to discriminatory or anti-Semitic narratives. Media professionals have a special responsibility

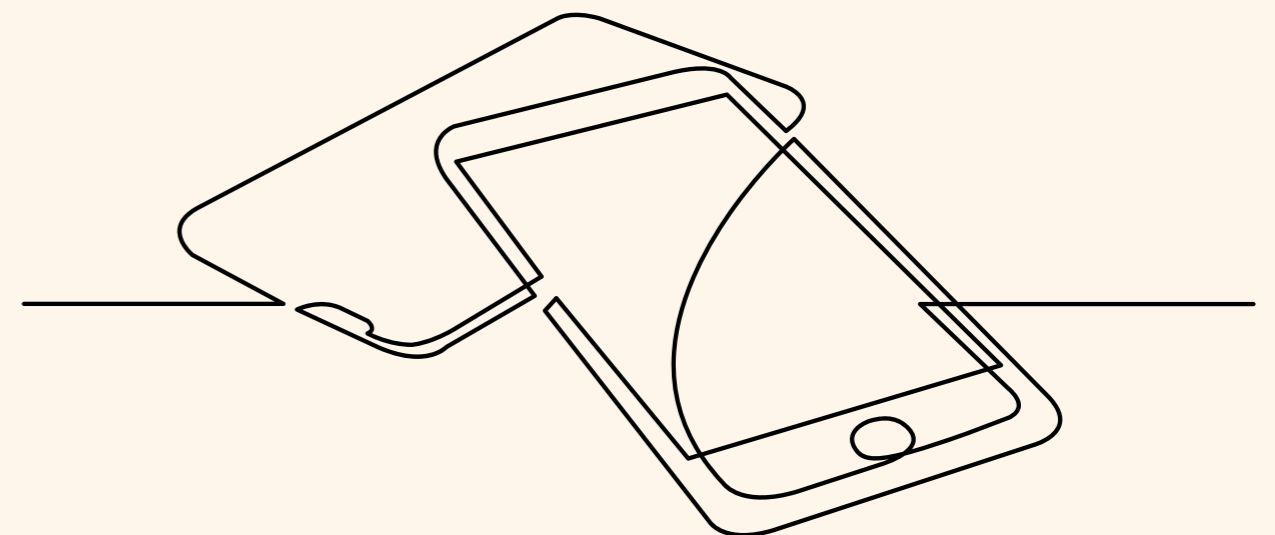
here. They can contribute to de-escalation by creating fact-based and differentiated content that respects the complexity of the conflict.

A contribution to a respectful public discourse can be achieved with voices that focus on dialogue and understanding and by clearly classifying problematic rhetoric.

As the previous explanations have elucidated, this is a very complex topic with significant social problems such as anti-Muslim racism, anti-Semitism and a wide range of interdependencies. In this article, some aspects of the communicated reference of Islamist online actors to the mass media are examined based on examples. The findings are therefore not representative and only cover part of the extensive debate. Among other things, the selection of posts and accounts is based on the findings and impressions gained from social media monitoring as part of *KN:IX plus*. Therefore, it is possible that it was biased or that there are blind spots.

A more comprehensive quantitative approach that considers a larger number of accounts and posts beyond Germany would be a useful addition. Additional (empirical) research is also needed in order to more thoroughly investigate the ties between anti-Muslim racism in society and the media and anti-Muslim acts of violence and to make these connections empirically comprehensible. Further (impact) research into the perceived credibility of conventional mass media in comparison to Islamist online actors who offer alternative media platforms could also enrich the debate on this topic.

<sup>25</sup> The “Neue deutsche Medienmacher” network (<https://neuemedienmacher.de/>) is worth mentioning here as a great example.





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Judy Korn, Thomas Mücke – Executive Board  
Alt-Reinickendorf 25  
13407 Berlin  
☎️ (030) 917 05 464  
📠 (030) 398 35 284  
✉️ post@violence-prevention-network.de  
🌐 www.violence-prevention-network.de

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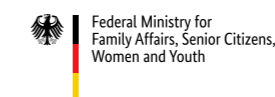
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