2017 ANNUAL REPORT

Right-wing Extremism on the Internet

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Demokratie leben!

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the BMFSFJ or the BAFzA.

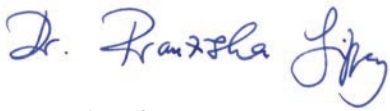
Dear readers,

With this status report on right-wing extremism on the internet jugendschutz.net makes aware of how professionally right-wing extremists approach children and young people in order to make them susceptible to their messages. By addressing young people with emotionally-charged topics they specifically target children and teenagers to lure them into their anti-democratic and misanthropic ideology. With an interactive performance and videos in the social web right-wing extremists rebrand themselves: modern and dynamic, cool and attractive.

This shows: We must protect children and young people from far-right online propaganda. Here, it is essential for them to learn how to deal with the media confidently and critically. Within the federal program ‚Demokratie leben!' i.e. ‚Live Democracy!' the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth provides funding for numerous projects that make children and young people aware of anti-democratic movements online, extremists' arguments and actions and that show them how counter hate and extremist slogans. We encourage young people to stand up online for democracy and bravely counter discrimination, hatred and agitation. We strengthen those who care for our democracy.
We care for those who care!

In order to protect children and young people from extremist and other endangering content online internet providers are challenged, too. They must quickly remove harmful content and take effective measures to enable young people to use the internet without risk and according to their age. Children and young people have the right to experience the digital world free of troubles – specifically in social media.

jugendschutz.net makes an important contribution to a better protection of children and young people on the internet. To enable all children and young people to grow up well in a media world. Thank you very much for this.



Dr. Franziska Giffey
Federal Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

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DIMENSIONS UND TRENDS

Right-wing extremists exploit the internet to spread their propaganda and to stage themselves. Here they tie in with young people's life worlds: They deliberately adjust their activities to young people's interests and their behavior online, and systematically serve their listening and viewing habits. This is how extremists try to influence young users' worldview and to convince them of the right-wing extremist agenda.

In recent years, right-wing extremist propaganda tools have changed. The 'right-wing extremist experience world' presents itself more and more diverse and differentiated. Mobile application use has also increased. In group chats and in their pretended 'private' profiles right-wing extremists stage themselves as easily approachable and as 'taboo-breakers'. They aim at encouraging young people to join in by promising 'action', adventure and approval.

Whereas for instance on Instagram, right-wing extremists often spread their propaganda messages in a subtle way adapting their user behavior, openly right-wing extremist and inhumane content can be found on platforms like VK. Here, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and other unequal value ideologies are openly promoted. Calls for violence and the use of graphic depictions to incite hatred are very common.

Right-wing extremists use messaging services to encourage young people to join in

In summer 2017, jugendschutz.net could observe how right-wing extremist groups used Twitter's messaging services to organize campaigns. Initially, this is how the ‚Identitarian movement' could reach many young people. Very quickly other right-wing extremist groups more and more began to use messaging services. The group ‚Reconquista Germanica' rapidly became established as the key player of coordinated right-wing extremist online campaigns.

Online campaigns promise ‚action'.

Career opportunities in the ‚infowar': Discord channel ‚Reconquista Germanica' hierarchy.
(Source: Discord, Reconquista Germanica)

Messaging services are widely used to cross-connect users and to plan and start joint online activities. Whereas Telegram served as the first central platform, a whole range of channels quickly emerged on Discord. This platform originally designed for social gaming enables text and audio communication between users in a chat channel. US right-wing extremists already operated several channels there in mid-2017.

Twitter in particular is a favored destination of online campaigns. This is where specifically compressions of typical right-wing extremist memes and images are disseminated. Graphic depictions from internet culture like the cartoon character 'Pepe the frog' and popular films and series serve as a basis. Extremists also reshape contemporary iconographic images in order to use these for spreading their own propaganda.

Apparent humorous or satirical contributions are also very common. The exaggerating content shall address the feelings and encourage users to like and share the content. This strategy makes inhumane and antidemocratic claims and slogans look like a 'joke', which can lead to a normalization of right-wing extremist positions.

Right-wing extremists cross-link their Discord channels on popular social media sites. (Source: Facebook, Revolte auf Beton)

Specifically the possibility of low-threshold access per smartphone poses a risk for young users. They are encouraged to participate in campaigns on Twitter and other social media sites. This internet activism is described as an adventure where young people shall have fun with provocation. Additionally, they are talked into thinking that their own actions are effective. Mutual confirmation when spreading anti-democratic and xenophobic resentments, acceptance by the group and the chance to become a "deserved" member or even rise to an elite position in the 'infowar' respond to young people's needs.

#BTW17: Right-wing extremists exploit political events for hate propaganda

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections 2017 right-wing extremist groups actively sought to vilify politicians and stir up public opinion against the political parties in the Bundestag. The election was referred to as a 'fateful election' that would decide on the continuation of the 'German people' and the 'Western culture'.

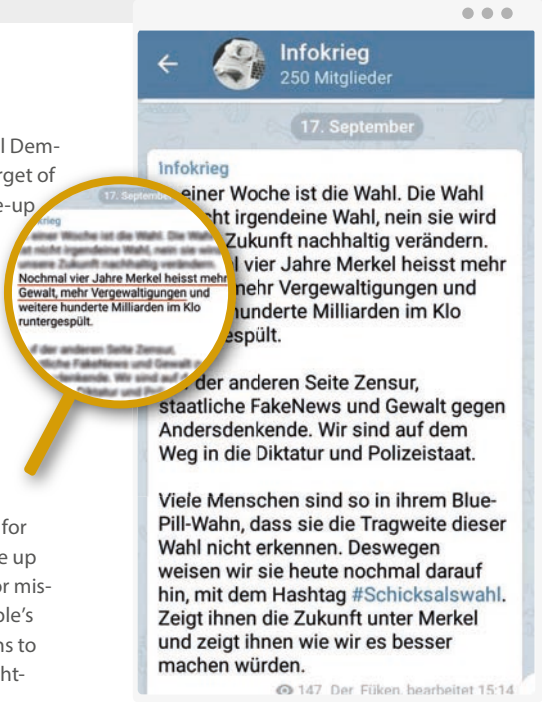
Spreading meme: Chancellor Merkel is put on a level with Adolf Hitler and an Islamist.
(Source: Twitter, sub page; original not pixelated)

Specifically the politics in the area of flight and migration were a decisive connecting factor for starting agitation online; gender equality and LGBT rights were also discredited. Extremists mainly coordinated campaigns like this via group chats in messaging services specifically addressing young people such as Telegram and Discord.

Hate campaigns were aimed at well-known politicians. Right-wing extremists specifically targeted Chancellor Angela Merkel: They called her 'traitor to the people' working against Germany's interests. She should be brought before a court for her alleged crimes against the 'German people' like all other government leaders and high-ranking politicians. They often used the term 'Nürnberg 2.0' and put her on a level with Nazi perpetrators.

Martin Schulz, top candidate of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, was also the target of right-wing extremist campaigns. In made-up stories he was defamed as a descendant of the 'head of the concentration camp Mauthausen'. Representatives of other political parties were also objects of defamation, were denigrated in memes or threatened.

Disaster scenarios creating a climate of fear shall influence social debates and reach out to young people. Impulsive actions online shall provide a framework for getting actively involved. Stories of ‚those up there' who have the sole responsibility for mistakes and irregularities serve young people's rebellion wishes. This calls for joint actions to ‚overthrow the system' according to a right-wing extremist ideology.



Campaigns via Telegram: Disaster scenarios shall encourage to get involved.
(Source: Telegram, 'infowar')

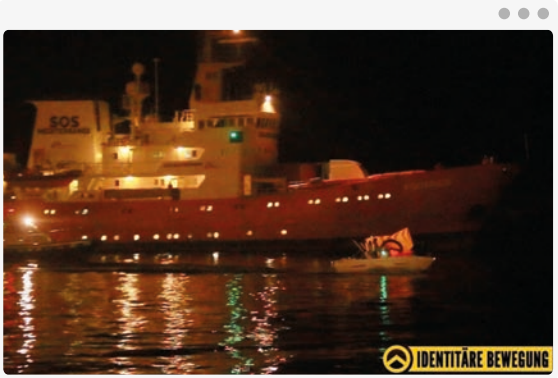
Threat scenarios shall fuel fear and hatred.

‘Defend Europe’: Identitarian campaign reaches wide audience

The campaign ‘Defend Europe’ aimed at defaming initiatives that rescue refugees in the Mediterranean as ‘criminals’ and ‘human traffickers’ and attracting much media attention. This is based on the statement that powerful forces would systematically or favorably support migration in order to minimize and suppress the local population. The ‘Identitarian movement’ stages itself as the active resistance group against the ‘big exchange’. Their professional media strategy enables the Identitarians to reach a wide audience, not only in the social media. Traditional media also picked up their actions and thus influenced public discourses. This even increased the reach of the ‘Defend Europe’ campaigns.

An action video was the campaign’s kick-off, which quickly went viral on YouTube: In a powerful inflatable boat and with a flag and Bengal lights Identitarians tries to ‘block’ an NGO’s rescue boat in an Italian harbor.

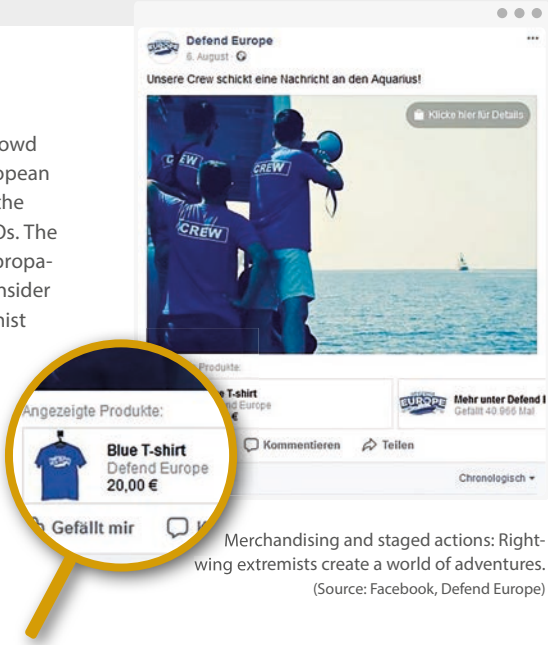
This was mostly all about a staged appearance: Just like in other campaigns they purposely made use of iconography of environmental and animal welfare organizations well-known among young people evoking associations with the environmental group ‘Sea Shepherd’ which tried to obstruct whaling ships.



Following campaigns of animal welfare organizations: Right-wing extremist imagery takes up young people’s viewing habits.
(Source: Facebook, Identitarian movement - Germany)

After successfully raising money using crowd funding, Identitarians from different European countries chartered a boat to set sail for the Mediterranean to watch and disturb NGOs. The campaign was underpinned by a broad propaganda offensive: with alleged statistics, insider reports and articles on right-wing extremist news sites.

Narrow reporting about what the Identitarian crew experienced in the Mediterranean was the key element of the campaign. Videos described their Mediterranean aspirations and life on board showing a greater closeness and possibilities for identifying themselves with this.



Merchandising and staged actions: Right-wing extremists create a world of adventures.
(Source: Facebook, Defend Europe)

Something for young people to identify with.

The right-wing extremists portrayed themselves as heroes and passed their actions off as a success. This should also increase the willingness to donate. Identitarians's online shops provided for matching merchandise. The motifs met young people's taste and thus offered the chance to feel actively involved in the 'right in the middle and not just on the sideline' campaign.

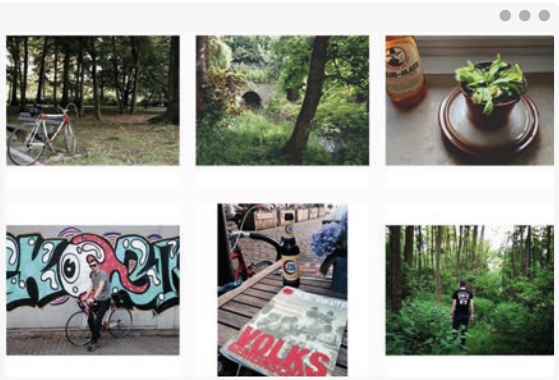
The agitated framing as innocent activists played a key role in helping also young people to identify with the racist and inhumane campaign against rescuing refugees at sea.

Right-wing extremist lifestyle and subtle propaganda on Instagram

Right-wing extremist players portray themselves modern and approachable on Instagram, a platform specifically popular among young people. At the same time they give themselves an inconspicuous look and only reluctantly spread clearly right-wing extremist content. Those extremists who adapt their profiles to the typical user behavior on Instagram reach a wide audience. They post personal ‚moments in life' and convey a sense of privacy. Here, they often spread propaganda very subtly in the background of photos of their allegedly authentic everyday life: as a slogan or symbol on their clothes or rather inconspicuously on a poster, graffito or sticker.

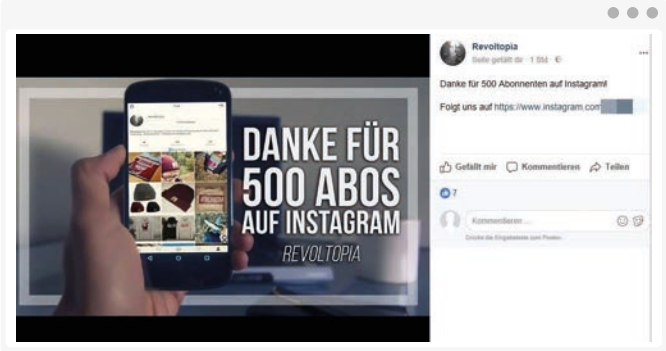
Right-wing extremists portray themselves as 'influencers'.

Right-wing extremists tie in with popular topics creating a longing: city life, travels or nature. They associate this with photos of political demonstrations and actions. Their aim is to design an own alternative lifestyle while they deliberately blur the lines between political activism, agitation and private issues. Right-wing extremism is portrayed as normal daily life and full of fun elements to attract a young audience saying that they can be part of a ‚cool' community without the fear of negative consequences. Instead they advertise extremist online shops where the right clothing and propaganda material is available for purchase.



Next to graffiti, racing bikes and mate advertising for the neo-Nazi glossy magazine 'N.S. Heute'.
(Source: Instagram, user page)

Right next to the typical scene hashtags right-wing extremists also use other hashtags to spread their content. Since there is no word limit on Instagram posts they often use numerous hashtags to spread content to get engaged in different discourses. When searching for a certain topic you can quickly stumble across right-wing extremist content that is not obvious as such at first sight. An appealing image can be enough to get new followers.



Fashion via smartphone: Right-wing extremist shop advertises on Instagram. (Source: Instagram, Revoltopia; original not pixelated)

Specifically children and young people have difficulties to recognize the real intentions of right-wing extremists right away. There is a risk that they perceive this modern and youth-oriented staging as 'cool', follow right-wing extremist players and thus permanently face their propaganda. This also makes the first contact with them easier.

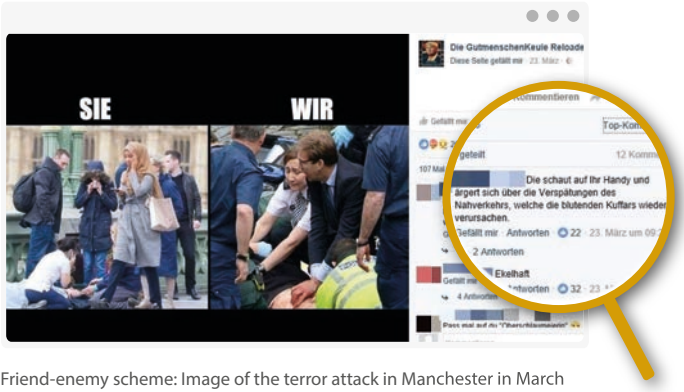
Even young people who are not active in the right-wing extremist scene use Instagram's commenting feature to get in touch with other users. Portraying themselves close to real life and spreading subtle propaganda on Instagram makes right-wing extremists seem approachable and lowers the interaction threshold.

‘Traditional’ enemy images of right-wing extremist online propaganda

The forms of right-wing extremist propaganda constantly change in the fast moving social media world. Still they always feed the ‚traditional‘ enemy images. Right-wing extremists’ media strategy ties in with up-to-date public discourses and this is why not all enemy images are equally present. However, overall they remain stable in the closed right-wing extremist worldview. A contemporary, modern depiction and connecting factors to up-to-date topics concerning young people’s life style tailor the denigration of specific individual groups to the target audience.

The dissemination of hate speech aiming at denigrating refugees and Muslims is consistently popular. In comments, video blogs and memes refugees are put on the same level with vermin, rapists or invaders. This causes their dehumanization and calls for violence against them. Very often agitation against refugees interferes with anti-Muslim statements.

The term ‚Islamization‘ is often used to imply that Muslims have a basic hostility towards the allegedly superior ‚Western civilization‘. Conspiracy theories are also widespread: It is supposed to be the plan of powerful elites to use Muslim refugees to suppress Germany and eventually destroy the ‚locals‘.



Friend-enemy scheme: Image of the terror attack in Manchester in March 2017 taken out of context incites hatred towards Muslims.
(Source: Facebook, Die GutmenschenKeule Reloaded; original not pixelated)

There is a persistent high number of anti-Semitic hate speech. Hedging expressions make an appearance next to the open anti-Semitism denigrating and assaulting Jews. There are numerous conspiracy theories saying that there is a powerful elite consisting of (alleged) Jewish people. However, mostly the assumed 'world Jewry' is not the topic, but rather names like 'Soros' or 'Rothschild' serving as codes. Online, anti-Semitic agitation often translates into a referral to Israel. The country is demonized as a whole and associated with typical anti-Jewish stereotypes. Finally, Israel serves as a projection screen for anti-Semitic resentments and is denied the right to exist.

Cartoon character against homosexuality: Homosexuals described as 'unnatural'. Violence towards them is legitimized. (Source: Facebook, Zukunftsgeneration)

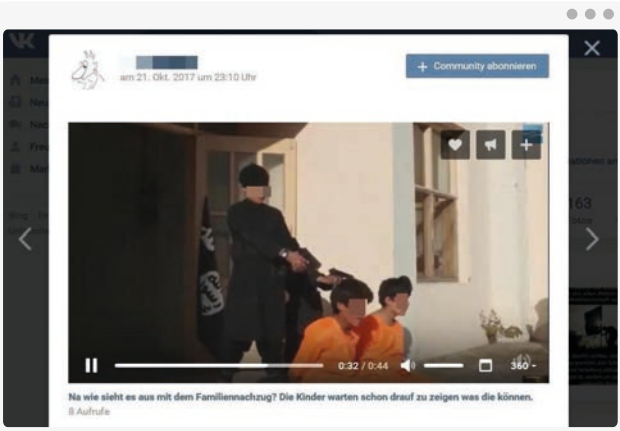
After the German Bundestag passed the bill on 'same sex marriage' there was a significant increase of hate speech against homosexuals. Right-wing extremism desires to protect traditional family structures and therefore marriage is one of the key elements of a national worldview. Thus, right-wing extremists defamed homosexuals saying they were 'unnatural', 'sick' or even 'public vermin'. They specifically used memes to spread homophobic content and often reinterpreted the rainbow flag, a symbol of diversity since the gay movement, as an object of hatred. This is how the messages conveyed misanthropic propaganda in a trendy and youth-oriented appearance.

Old enemy images in a modern design.

Hate propaganda and right-wing extremist music on VK

The Russian social media platform VK becomes increasingly popular in Germany, too. More and more right-wing extremists focus on this service. It is a ‚safe haven' for them since the platform operator only rarely removes illegal content. Right-wing extremists also move their activities to VK because major platforms like YouTube and Facebook remove illegal content. Additionally they fear that the Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks (Network Enforcement Act) adopted by the German Bundestag, impedes ‚undisturbed' propaganda. This is why they search for alternative platforms for their agitation.

Whereas in the past mostly right-wing extremist individual profiles could be found on VK, meanwhile the whole spectrum of right-wing extremism is present with own pages. In order to reach the biggest possible audience right-wing extremist groups still continue to use the major social media platforms in the first place. However, cross-linking leads users from there to individual content and pages on VK. The platform's multi-media options even make it more attractive: content specifically targeting young people like pop music and movies next to misanthropic rock music and right-wing extremist ‚killing' videos. These are available without any age check.



'Islamic State' beheading video used for inciting hatred against refugees.
(Source: VK, user page; original not pixelated)

At the same time, VK serves as a networking and exchange platform for right-wing extremists from different countries to confirm and strengthen each other's hateful behavior. At transnational level, they advertise typical right-wing extremist or music events of militant and terrorist neo-Nazi organizations like Blood&Honour, Combat 18 or the Misanthropic Division. International networking massively contributes to the dissemination of hate propaganda and easy access to absolutely illegal content. Profiles of German neo-Nazis contain e.g. videos detailing brute force and killing scenes where Russian neo-Nazis chase alleged homosexuals or foreigners and torture, humiliate or brutally kill their victims.

VK: 'Safe haven' for right-wing extremist propaganda.

VK's terms of use prohibit content promoting 'racist, religious, ethnic hatred', 'fascisms or supremacism' or containing extremist material. However, the reality is different. For years, jugendschutz.net has documented massive violations of the laws from the use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations to incitement of the people, glorification or denial of the Holocaust up to videos of brute force or killing scenes. The latest research in 2017 revealed that VK usually takes no action when put on notice by users. Although jugendschutz.net could establish a quite reliable contact with the support team in 2017 and also achieved initial success, VK still remains a key platform for the dissemination of right-wing extremist hate propaganda.

ILLEGAL CONTENT AND ACTION TAKEN

Measures against right-wing extremist content on the internet aims at protecting children and young people from risks and endangerments as quickly as possible.

This is why jugendschutz.net gets in touch with providers and platform operators in Germany and abroad and asks them to remove content violating the laws. Whenever there is a German person responsible for the content or the content should be added to the list of media harmful to minors of the BPJM, the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors, jugendschutz.net forwards the case to the Commission for the Protection of Minors (KJM). In cases of imminent danger the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) is called in.

Most of the right-wing extremist propaganda checked in 2017 was hosted on social media services abroad like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. However, links to websites are not uncommon. In order not to attract the attention of law enforcement right-wing extremist groups mostly refrain from disseminating illegal content in social media services. On the other side, there are comments on contributions or on individual postings in right-wing extremist profiles in groups violating the laws. Moving the illegal content to platforms like VK, Telegram or Discord makes it harder to take action since the communication either shifts into hidden channels or the platform operators only react insufficiently.

In 2017 jugendschutz.net documented 1,228 cases with a total of more than 1,340 infringements in the area of right-wing extremism. Most infringements were about incitement of the people, the use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations or Holocaust denial. The removal or blocking rate was over 88 %.

Right-wing extremism online in detail

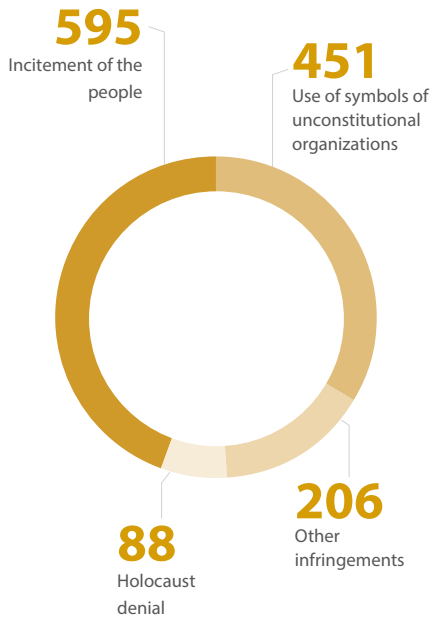
Social media services are the key tool for disseminating right-wing extremist propaganda: This is where more than 92 % of the cases were recorded.

Number of infringements and cases:

INFRINGEMENTS
1.340

CASES
1.228

Drastic infringements clearly predominate:



Success in cases concerning social media global players

Direct contact is the most effective measure

Removal or blocking achieved in more than **88 %** of all cases after direct contact with providers

Facebook

403 cases

95 % removed or blocked

YouTube

296 cases

98 % removed or blocked

Twitter

234 cases

97 % gelöscht oder gesperrt

Instagram

43 cases

97 % removed or blocked

Alternative platforms are ‘safe havens’

VK

162 cases

36 % removed or blocked

Other measures: calling in media supervisory bodies and forwarding to the BKA

38 cases

Enable young users to explore the digital world free of troubles

As the German center at federal and state level concerning the protection of minors on the internet, jugendschutz.net looks closely at risks in internet services specifically attracting young people and urges providers and platform operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles.

jugendschutz.net operates a hotline accepting reports about illegal and harmful content and takes appropriate action to have this content removed as quickly as possible.

Internet users can report problematic content to:

www.hass-im-netz.info/melden
hotline@jugendschutz.net

JUGEND SCHUTZ.NET