

Massive denigration of Muslims on the internet

Shocking depictions and emotional statements fuel anti-Muslim racism

Racist incitement against Muslims has been an increasing phenomenon on the internet for years, even at international level. Recently, depictions of cruelty are more and more exploited for denigrating and offending Muslims. Here, not only defamatory statements, but also shocking content can have a negative impact on young people. jugendschutz.net looked closely at the context and the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism online, assessed the relevance of this phenomenon in terms of youth protection and searched for potential counter strategies.

Terminology: *Islamophobia* means rejecting or denigrating Islam as a religion. This often leads to hatred against Muslims and *anti-Muslim* statements and reactions, a generally hostile attitude to Muslims. Research revealed that there often is no clear separation between the enemy images of Islam and Muslims.

Broad range of anti-Muslim agitation on the internet

Right-wing extremists have long seen Muslims as the enemy. Over the previous years, specifically the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD, right-wing extreme political party) and neo-Nazi groups initiated campaigns like 'Maria instead of Sharia' and exploited the fear of Islamic violence to incite to hatred; newer right-wing extremist groups and movements also have hatred towards Islam and Muslims in their propaganda repertoire.

Propaganda of the 'Identitäre' appearing in the social web is currently very relevant: The 'Identitäre' argue against 'multikulti', a multicultural society, and for the preservation of an 'ethno cultural identity' in Germany using slogans and campaigns targeting a young audience and shaped by anti-Muslim racism. The German Defence League (GDL) is also disseminating anti-Islam content on more than 30 Facebook pages. The GDL follows the British model English Defence League, an anti-Islamic group coming from a hooligan background in Great Britain.

Additionally, decidedly anti-Muslim content has emerged, often operated in the form of blogs. Here, blog writers pretend to criticize Islam, but actually they convey their contemptuous attitude towards all Muslims. The blog 'PI-News' (PI stands for Politically Incorrect) is the central platform of this movement; it addresses the allegedly imminent 'Islamization of Europe' and serves as a stage for a number of writers to spread their hatred.

Numerous Facebook pages with titles like 'Burqa? NO! Sharia? NO! And I stand by that!' or 'Islam – the evil ideology' have one object only: incite racial sentiments and generally disapprove of Muslims.

Graphic depictions legitimize racism

Following recent war-like conflicts, jugendschutz.net recorded many posts centering on jihadist atrocities like very detailed executions, photos of mutilated bodies or terrorists posing with severed heads. These are violations of human dignity.

Being aware of how shocking these images are, extremists regularly use them to prove their racist supposition that it is in the very nature of faithful Muslims to be inclined to violence and cruelty. On the bottom line of these arguments: *The Islam and the Muslims are a threat. There is no differentiation between militant Islamists and Muslims.*

Bloggers often stick to content covered by freedom of speech. However, in the accompanying comments, the graphic depictions quickly lead to a general denigration of Muslims and end in inciting statements or calls for violence. For one user, for instance, the pictures serve as proof that Islam is poisonous to the soul and he speaks openly about Muslims as 'human waste'. Another user calls for 'proactive self-defense' and is prepared to give his life so that his children do not have to live 'under this Satanism'.

Users regularly share these postings in the social web and reach a wide audience. Graphic depictions of violence can negatively affect children and young people and there is a danger that they accept this media content uncritically and believe the media portrayal of Islam as generally evil and Muslims as cruel.

NPD exploits fears of terrorism for their regional campaigns

Right-wing extremists take up anti-Muslim sentiments in many places to lure followers to their ideology. They specifically exploit local incidents like new religious buildings to stir up widespread public fears. Facebook groups linking to regional developments and set up, for instance, as soon as plans for building Muslim community centers or mosques come to light, receive thousands of 'likes' in no time because of the strong public interest.



Mobilization via Facebook: Right-wing extremists fuel fear of Muslims, more than 10,000 'likes' for regional campaigns. (Source: Facebook)

The connection to the NPD is often not obvious: no self-advertising or NPD logo; the pages look like independent citizens initiatives. With online petitions and collecting signatures they try to mobilize citizens and to put pressure on local politicians. The NPD now and then used pages with a broad range of actions for their following election campaigns reaching users far beyond the right-wing extremist scene.

Misrepresentations stir up anti-Islam sentiments

Hoaxes, i.e. targeted misrepresentations counting on going viral on the internet, are recurring elements of anti-Muslim agitation. They circulate reports containing racist statements (e.g. 'all Muslims are rapists') or supposed evidence of an imminent 'Islamization' of society. Mostly it is not transparent where the statements come from. The submitters exploit the fact that users only barely check the source of information that seems reasonable at first sight and that inconsistencies are overlooked in the information overload.

Often the story is also about frightening incidents with no sound basis. E.g. an image of a woman tied to a bed, covered in blood and with a cross in her mouth was shared a thousand times. It should prove an alleged rape and murder of a Christian woman by Muslims. What is not clear is that the image is fictional and taken from a splatter film (a particularly bloody horror film). The shocking (false) report shall support the allegation of a general enmity between Christians and Muslims portraying the latter as brutal and inhuman.



Photo collage on Facebook: Demonization of Islam with depictions taken out of context. (Source: Facebook; Original not pixelated)

Striking images hope for instant approval

Specifically in the social web, short, provocative texts and images are very popular and common to convey messages powerfully. Users quickly 'share' and 'like' them many times; this is also the case with anti-Islam content. Racist and discriminating messages towards Muslims are often disseminated together with satirical or pseudo-scientific messages that make a fool of Muslims or give them a criminal or low-grade stigma.



Quick, catchy message: Disgusting comparison ('Islam is part of the reality of Germany; Athlete's foot, too') shall underpin the rejection of Islam. (Source: Facebook)

Repugnant portrayals of Islam as moldy bread and athlete's foot or even images associating Muslims with garbage hope for a spontaneous emotional reaction. They call for the users' gut instinct and thus provoke them to agree and to have the same denigrating attitude towards Islam and all Muslims. jugendschutz.net's research revealed: The more offensive and provoking a statement is, the more it spreads creating a snowball effect and receiving broad acceptance.



Derogatory connotation: Putting Muslims and garbage on an equal level, dissemination via Twitter. (Source: Twitter; Original not pixelated)

Need for consistent intervention and sensitization

The social networking principles of 'share' and 'like' lead to a far-reaching impact of Anti-Islam content also beyond an extreme right-wing audience, e.g. on news or entertainment websites. jugendschutz.net recorded violations of youth protection laws mainly in user comments (e.g. inciting statements in reaction to provocative content) or in depictions of violence and its consequences (e.g. violation of human dignity).

Platform operators mostly removed illegal content when put on notice. However, they are challenged to do more and make sure that anti-Muslim content stopping well short of violating youth protection laws does not result in a hostile attitude and become the breeding ground for hatred and violence against Muslims. It seems important to build a culture of objection. Here, users must be strengthened to overcome their fear of confrontation and encouraged to take a stand and oppose to racist content right away.

Within the **project right-wing extremism**, funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, jugendschutz.net focuses regularly on different forms of group-focused enmity, such as anti-Semitism, Antiziganism or – in this case – anti-Muslim hate. jugendschutz.net analyzed the dissemination of clearly right-wing extremist websites and profiles in the social web as well as anti-Islam content without any obvious link to the far-right scene.

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