

2017 REPORT

Islamism on the Internet

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Demokratie **leben!**

Platform operators must take on more responsibility

Islamist propaganda is a youth protection issue. This is what jugendschutz.net's research reveals anew every year. Specifically social media makes the ideologies accessible to many young people – i.e. services all teenagers and more and more children use in their daily lives. And this is where Islamists try to legitimize violence against those whom they regard as 'un-Islamic' and call for an armed struggle and terror attacks.

The internet specifically takes over the role of convincingly communicating and reinforcing extremist messages. Posts on Facebook tie in with the users' lifestyle and emotions; videos on YouTube or Telegram picture an inhumane alternative to our democratic and diverse society. Online propaganda is – in that respect – an important element for recruiting purposes and for keeping followers committed.

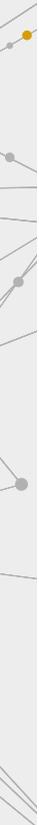
How can we react to these developments in terms of youth protection in the media?

It seems extremely important to give providers a greater share of the responsibility for taking action against propaganda that is disseminated through their services.

Specifically among the global players there is still too little understanding of how not only activities of the terror organization 'Islamic State' and al-Qaeda can add to radicalization and harm young people. Whether or not an Islamist post is a criminal offence is not the deciding factor, but rather how it ties in with the living environment of young people and what the online reach is. Here, major platform operators should also proactively – with technical means and awareness campaigns – interrupt their users' radicalization processes.

Finally, media education is a key component: Young people must be empowered to specifically recognize the subtle forms of extremist propaganda and resist these – also online. Parents and educational experts especially need information and modules they can use when interacting with young users. They are not only challenged as empathic persons to approach, but also as the ones who offer children and young people competent support in growing up well in a media world.

CONTENTS



Page 06 - 15

**DIMENSIONS AND TRENDS
OF ISLAMIST PROPAGANDA**

Far reach by taking up emotional topics

Phenomena of youth culture as connecting factors for Islamist propaganda

Calls for violence and glorification of militant jihad

Psychology of potential threat to legitimize and disseminate hate

Girls and young women as a target group

Children in the sight of Islamist propaganda

Islamist propaganda with GIFs and stickers appealing to young people

Page 16 - 17

ILLEGAL CONTENT AND ACTION TAKEN

Page 18 - 19

KEY FIGURES

DIMEN SIONS AND TRENDS

Along with the dynamic developments of the internet and specifically the social web Islamist organizations refine their strategies of agitation and recruiting. They quickly take advantage of new features and services to 'keep their fingers on the pulse of time' and directly reach particularly young users.

Messaging services like Telegram and its numerous functions, but also WhatsApp are the 'apps of choice' when it comes to modern communication methods. jugendschutz.net, for instance, continuously monitors more than 300 telegram channels with Islamist content. Two thirds of this content can be allocated to the violent i.e. jihadist spectrum. In addition, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram play an important role especially for low-threshold propaganda that particularly Salafist players and groups use to lure young people.

The target-specific approach, among other things, is what makes Islamist online content so professional. Children and young people are addressed in many different ways and in accordance with their living environments, their viewing and using habits. Disseminated via profiles, blogs and channels in German language, the content is also brought to a non-extremist audience allowing for an easy access to the extremist scene.

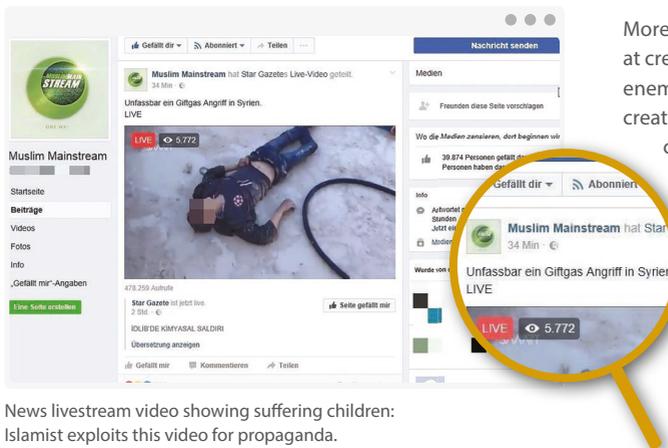
Far reach by taking up emotional topics

In order to increase the impact of their propaganda and reach as many users as possible Islamist groups tie in with up-to-date and social debates. Addressing young people on an emotional level shall convince them of their extremist worldview.

Here, Islamist groups specifically make use of current affairs, daily politics as well as social discourses related to Islam or armed conflicts. They present recent events in such a way that they fit into the ideological worldview and the promoted narrative of perpetrators and victims.

*Social division
is the aim.*

Moreover, this strategy aims at creating and reinforcing enemy images, and at creating social division along confessional lines.



News livestream video showing suffering children: Islamist exploits this video for propaganda. (Source: Facebook, Muslim Mainstream; original not pixelated)

For example, the live stream video on a Turkish news website showing victims of a suspected gas attack in Syria was embedded on a Facebook profile of a German Islamist that was specifically designed in a way to attract young users and exploited as a propaganda tool.



Misleading image claiming to depict Rohingya in Myanmar being tortured: image of an incident in India.
(Source: Instagram; myummah; original not pixelated)

The persecution of the Muslim minority Rohingya in Myanmar is another example: Here, Islamist propaganda also links up in order to reach a wide audience through an emotional approach. Under the pretext of wanting to call attention to the conflict, Islamists fuel discussions on social networks and incite antipathy towards the 'Western World' that would keep quiet about this problem.

Extremely violent and frightening images shall appeal to young people's sense of justice. However, many of the images and videos assessed are related to other contexts, e.g. the conflicts in Central Africa, the wars on drugs in South America or accidents and natural disasters. By confronting others with such highly emotional and at the same time extremely disturbing content, Islamists aim at stirring up anger and hatred among young users and making them susceptible to a 'we against them' rhetoric.

*Often false
and taken
out of context.*

Phenomena of youth culture as connecting factors for Islamist propaganda

The strategy of violent Islamist groups includes tying in with phenomena of youth culture. This is how they directly satisfy young people's viewing habits and meet them in their living environment to promote militant jihad. Thus, the ideology conveyed appears interesting to the target audience and increases the influence on young people's view of the world. An Islamist violent video, for instance, that jugendschutz.net documented on the messaging service Telegram has a modern look specifically appealing to young people.

*Propaganda
meets young users'
viewing habits.*



'Islamic State' video looking like a video game is supposed to be a lure for young people to follow the ideology.

(Source: Telegram, Mustafa Al Iraqi)

The protagonists are modified computer game characters acting as jihadists carrying out suicide attacks and executing captives.

The scenes are embedded in the iconography of 'Islamic State' propaganda, they glorify the goals of IS and promote a copycat behavior in terms of terror attacks.

Calls for violence and glorification of militant jihad

Videos and photos are central tools for Islamist groups to disseminate their ideas and incite armed action. They romanticize and portray war, fighting, killing and dying as a 'holy act'. Further they call on individuals to participate and even offer illustrated how-to guides.

For example, in their online propaganda magazine 'Rumiyah' (translated as Rome), the IS published a step-by-step instruction manual for carrying out a truck attack with structural guidance for the 'ideal vehicle' as well as the 'ideal targets' to kill as many people as possible. The instructions put into info graphics in so-called 'share pics' were perfect for dissemination in the social web and in messaging services. This is how – and in a way that young people can easily understand – the IS advertised for terror attacks on Twitter and Telegram. One of the groups affiliated with the terrorist organization al-Qaeda again published a video showing a German who allegedly converted to Islam calling for militant jihad.



A German convert promotes militant jihad as an alternative to the 'degenerated' Western society. (Source: YouTube, Al Muhajirin Media)

The video was disseminated on Facebook, Telegram and YouTube and within two days it was viewed more than 15,000 times on YouTube alone. In first person narrative, the jihadist portrayed the Western society as degenerate and backed this up with TV news clips of societal issues such as drug consumption and racism. He promoted participation in the 'holy war' as a legitimate and sole means for a life in freedom and justice. Additionally, adventure and comradeship would be waiting for new recruits in Syria – a call primarily addressing young people.

Psychology of potential threat to legitimize and disseminate hate

Enemy images play a key role in Islamist propaganda. These are raised in different debates in the social web and they take up existing sentiments. Americans, 'non-believers', Buddhists, homosexuals and Muslims who do not fit into the worldview of extremists are being defamed, degraded and dehumanized.

Here, anti-Semitism that Islamist groups promote on the occasion of current events comes up repeatedly.

They spread conspiracy theories and present Jews as an existential threat to Muslims in general. For example, Islamist groups use the public attention that the US government's acknowledgment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel attracted to incite hatred against Jews. Here, the Islamists camouflage themselves and hide behind apparently innocuous 'pro Palestine' profiles that primarily concern themselves with the Middle East conflict. This is how they target young people who are interested in the conflict and try to subliminally approach them with their propaganda.



Inciting hatred against Shiites ('Shias') by using a popular TV series character.
(Source: Telegram, BLVCKFLAG)

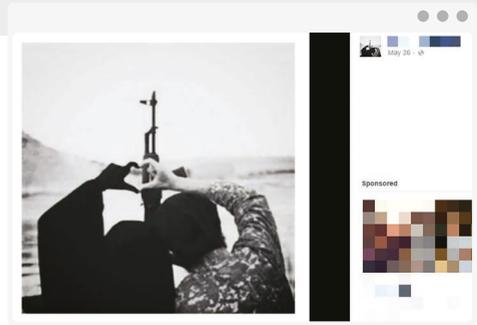
Hatred against Shiites (the second largest religious group) is specifically spread by Salafis (part of the Sunni Islam). This reflects the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq where the members of these two religious communities confront each other. In Salafi propaganda Shiites are portrayed as 'dissidents'. From this, the jihadist spectrum derives the legitimacy for actions against them. Propaganda posts again and again include components of dehumanization and calls for violence. One post, for example, exploits a scene from a US TV series also popular among young people to stir up hatred against Shiites.

Girls and young women as a target group

Some of the jihadist content in the social web specifically targets girls and young women to indoctrinate them and recruit them to join terrorist organizations. They are approached on Facebook, Instagram and Telegram.

Easily accessible content serves as bait with its extremist background not visible at first glance. This content glorifies militancy and promotes groups such as al-Qaeda or the IS – sometimes in a subtle way, but also very openly. Young women are encouraged to marry a jihadi fighter, have children and in turn raise them within the constrictive ideology.

Another repeatedly communicated role perception of women is that of a female fighter. Jihadists promote this, for instance, in the form of images of women wearing a niqab (full-face veil).



Jihadi marriage: romanticizing armed combat.
(Source: Facebook, Shire Clandestine; original not pixelated)

These women are depicted as defenders of the faith who arm themselves and actively participate in the fight 'good versus evil'. Women's acts of violence are also romanticized as heroism and shall encourage copycat behavior, similar to the ones carried out by male attackers.

Jihadist profiles or channels for girls and young women often feature colors like pink and purple, along with hearts-and-flowers motifs. The posts rely more heavily on images and texts rather than videos and cover day-to-day topics such as relationships, sexuality or questions concerning the bodily development. They suggest positive feelings of confidence and self-esteem, offer the young women orientation, and support them in shaping their own identity. The basic objective is to connect with female users on an emotional level and lead them to adopt the jihadist worldview.

Children in the sight of Islamist propaganda

Islamist groups also adapt their propaganda to children as another target audience. In 2017, the IS released its fourth app specifically designed for children. The app named 'Moalem Al-Hijaa' (spelling teacher app) follows the format of the first editions.

In different educational games, images of weapons such as cannons, assault rifles and rockets in colorful and child-like animations shall teach children the correct spelling of the words. The symbols of the 'Islamic State' are



Jihadist marketing: promotional video of IS app for children advertised in online magazine.

(Source: Rumiyah 13)



IS app for children: stylized shelf for toys with grenade, knife and gun.

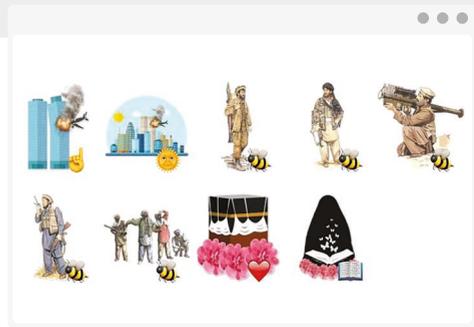
(Source: App Moalem Al-Hijaa)

prevalent in all games included in the app, e.g. the IS flag. The German edition of the terrorist organization's online magazine 'Rumiyah', for instance, advertises the app. For the first time, the IS also used a standalone video to draw attention to the product. In the design of a promotional film it shows children allegedly living in the IS territory and using the app. This kind of content for small children shall help create emotional bonds and sympathy for the terrorist organization at an early stage.

Islamist propaganda with GIFs and stickers appealing to young people

The messaging service Telegram has meanwhile become the 'app of choice' for Islamist's communication. Links on popular Facebook pages or other social media predominantly from the Salafist spectrum guide young people to their Telegram channels. When joining such a channel with just one click links quickly lead to a huge amount of other Islamist content. Push notifications allow the subscribers and specifically young people who are virtually always online with their smartphones to regularly and quickly receive new posts

Silent video clips or short animated images, so-called GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) are very often integrated in the chats of messaging services. Once clicked they play on loop and are supposed to make communication more fun. GIFs with IS iconography are very common on the messaging app Telegram. This is how the flying IS flag, photos of a suicide attack or even an execution can easily be included and shared in other users' mobile communication within just a few seconds. GIFs containing graphic violence can pose a high risk for young people specifically when they unexpectedly come across such content.



Stickers with al-Qaeda iconography: hatred and violence prepared for everyday communication.

(Source: Telegram, Abu Bakr al-Janabi)

In addition, Telegram offers another feature particularly designed for young users: so-called stickers inspired by the standard emojis. Just like emojis and GIFs the stickers are also supposed to enhance communication and increase the fun factor, and they are very popular. Telegram users can create their own stickers in order to spread them. Here, jihadists specifically use their own stickers in order to express sympathy with terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda or the IS. One example shows the American journalist James Foley dressed in an orange jumpsuit along with his murderer wearing a black mask and carrying a knife. Another one shows a cartoon-style and colorful depiction of the burning World Trade Center with an airplane flying towards it. Users who click such sticker icons can download sticker packs and thus use the stickers for their own chat messages on Telegram. The propaganda GIFs and stickers can easily and quickly get circulated in this way and also fill moderate communication channels. This allows for an easy access of young people to the iconography of the IS and other terrorist organizations and their inhumane ideology.

ILLEGAL CONTENT AND ACTION TAKEN

Action against Islamist content on the internet aims at protecting children and young people from risks and damages as quickly as possible.

To achieve this, jugendschutz.net puts providers and platform operators in Germany and abroad on notice and calls on them to remove illegal content. Whenever jugendschutz.net can identify a German person responsible for the content or wants the content included in the List of Media Harmful to Young Persons, compiled by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors (BPjM), the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM) is called in for further action.

Most of the Islamist propaganda recorded in 2017 was hosted on international social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Telegram, however, links to cloud services like Google Drive are not uncommon; here the actual content like for example propaganda videos is uploaded. This is how the links can reach a wide audience and can be exchanged in a rapid manner. Additionally, they can be stored there for a longer period of time regardless of the sometimes only short presence of Islamist communication channels.

In 2017, jugendschutz.net documented 786 cases in the field of Islamism with more than 1,547 illegal incidents in total.

Most of these concerned the use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations, illegal depictions of violence and violations of human dignity, e.g. IS execution videos or trophy pictures showing Islamists posing with dead bodies. The third largest category concerns content glorifying war. jugendschutz.net achieved removal or blocking of such content in 91 % of the cases.

Key figures of Islamism online

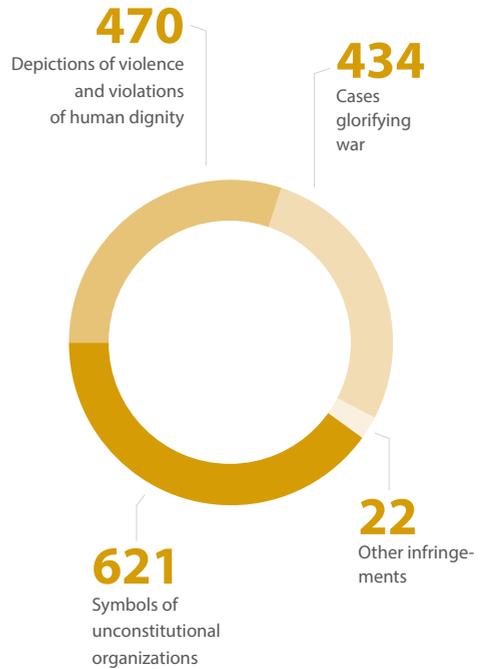
The social web is a key medium when it comes to disseminating Islamist propaganda: 99.8 % of all Islamist content viewed was recorded there.

Number of infringements and cases:

INFRINGEMENTS
1,547

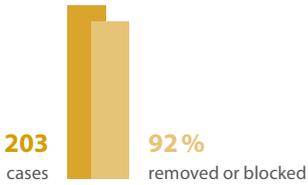
CASES
786

Drastic infringements are by far most prevalent:

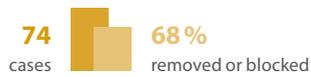


Successful actions in relation to global social web players

YouTube



Facebook



Twitter



Telegram



Contacting providers directly remains the most effective way of taking action

In **91%** of all cases removal or blocking could be achieved

92% of these after contacting providers directly

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. Within a project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looks closely at Islamist content on the internet and develops counter activities. This work is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the program 'Demokratie leben!' i.e. 'Live Democracy!'.