



REPORT

Telegram: Amidst Propaganda of Violence and “Infowars”

Without Protective Measures for Children and
Adolescents

July 2020

Over recent years, Telegram has become an essential (default) platform for right-wing extremist propaganda. Its number of channels and groups catering to various right-wing sectors has risen sharply, as has their membership. Telegram serves as a back-up community for the event that right-wing extremist channels may be deleted on larger social platforms. In addition, it functions as an alternative platform, a medium for communication and networking, and an archive for propaganda and materials. Alongside the purportedly private communication it supports, Telegram also enables the dissemination of content that includes drastic violations of user terms and legal regulations. The service provider does not respond proactively to ban this content and does not react adequately when such content is reported.

Telegram as the central default platform for right-wing extremists

Since as early as 2017, increasing use of the messenger service Telegram by right-wing extremists in Germany and on the international level has been observed. Particularly during the year 2019, a steep rise in this type of traffic occurred. Whereas, at the end of 2017, there were merely individual channels¹ (mainly oriented towards single-issue campaigns) being included in the constant monitoring of right-wing extremist propaganda undertaken by jugendschutz.net, there are now almost 500 such channels, and their number is rising quickly. The monitored German-language channels with the greatest outreach now have about 120,000 members. Daily, on average, about 10,000 new posts are produced and published.

Because some of their posts on other platforms are deleted and they feel disadvantaged or repressed, right-wing extremists increasingly turn to less public services that they consider persecution-free, transferring their main activity into the so-called “dark social” net. In the course of this development, Telegram is taking on greater significance for the media strategy of the extreme right.

While a number of right-wing activists and groups promote their Telegram channels and groups offensively via offerings to a wide audience on other social media – for example YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook – over time others have emerged that pursue

an audience solely via Telegram. Their material can be found using internal searches and frequently by following links embedded in other chats and channels. In this way, Telegram has become a core element of right-wing media and networking strategies.



Additional channel as an “emergency anchor”: due to “repressive measures against German patriots”, right-wing extremists increasingly gravitate towards platforms with little or no content moderation, such as Telegram. (Source: Instagram, falkhuendorf)

¹See [Hashtag #hate: Identitarian movement recruits new followers on Messenger and Twitter](#)

More than just a messenger service – Channels, groups, and their functions

It is important to distinguish between channels and groups on Telegram: on a channel, members can 'like' posts, add comments, and participate in surveys, but cannot post content of their own. Therefore, these channels function mainly in one direction only and enable the person maintaining the channel to disseminate content with a minimum of disturbance or contradiction.



Likes, emojis, comments: with its interactive features, Telegram is in some respects similar to classical social networks. (Source: Telegram, EinProzent; original not pixelated)

In groups, on the other hand, users carry on an exchange in direct contact with other members and with the admins. The emphasis is on the networking aspect. Many extreme right-wing groups have member numbers in the low hundreds. However, some also attract well over 1,000 persons, and a few groups even have more than 10,000 members.

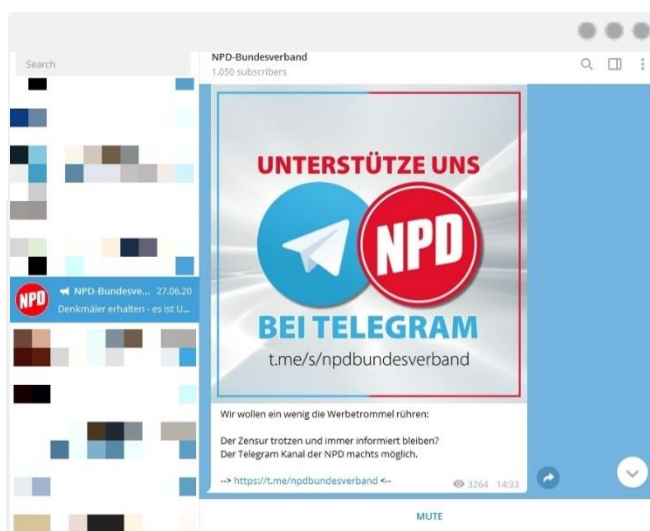
Due to the development of a range of functions used actively by the extreme right, Telegram is now more than just a messenger service: With its commentary function, survey tools, image and data transfer, audio

and video posts – combined with the wide audience outreach of the channels and the extremely large groups – Telegram increasingly functions as an independent social network for the right-wing spectrum.

Wide range of offerings – A hotbed for the extreme right

As a result of the manifold options it presents and the growing number of users on the service – about 7.8 million persons daily in the German language area – Telegram has attracted and continues to attract right-wing extremists from diverse contexts and with varying types of content.

To be found on Telegram are thus channels of well-known activists on the extreme right, with their various pitches, alongside channels run by right-wing extremist political parties. Early on, cadres of the *Identitarian Movement* integrated Telegram into their media strategy. Right-wing extremist political parties such as the NPD, *Die Rechte* or *Der III. Weg* also have their own Telegram channels and use them to spread their propaganda.

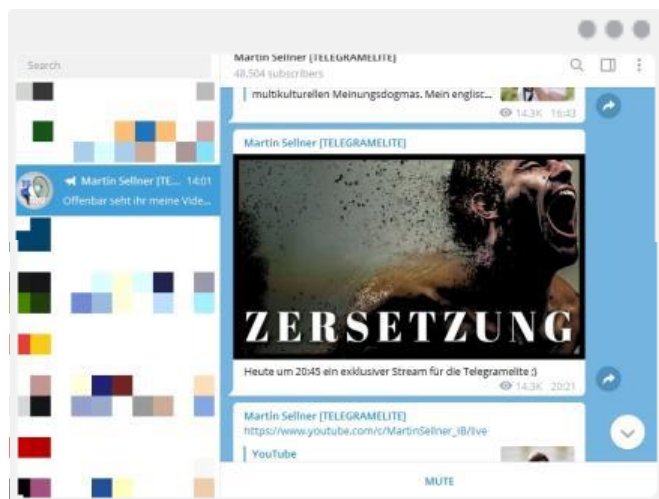


On Telegram, the NPD promotes its channel as an information platform “free of censorship”. (Source: Telegram, NPD National Assn.; original not pixelated)

In addition, there are channels and groups generated by the “Citizens of the Reich”, by right-wing extremist online shops, music labels, bands, and “alternative media”, even by right-wing terrorist circles. Particularly since the onset of the Corona crisis, groups and channels promoting conspiracy narratives have gained a great deal of ground.²

The extreme right creates a sense of privacy, intimacy and exclusivity

One of the largest German-language channels on the extreme right is run by the Austrian *Identitarian* Martin Sellner. On Telegram he has almost 50,000 followers, and overall he reaches about 150,000 persons daily with an average of 11 posts. The emphasis is on links to his YouTube videos, content published by the *Identitarian Movement* or other right-wing extremists, and articles in “alternative media”. Sellner not only headlines his channel with the title “TELEGRAM ELITE”, but also, in text, frequently addresses his followers as “elite”. There is a calculation behind this.



For the “Telegram elite”: supposedly exclusive content is geared to attract and flatter users.
(Source: Telegram, Martin Sellner; original not pixelated)

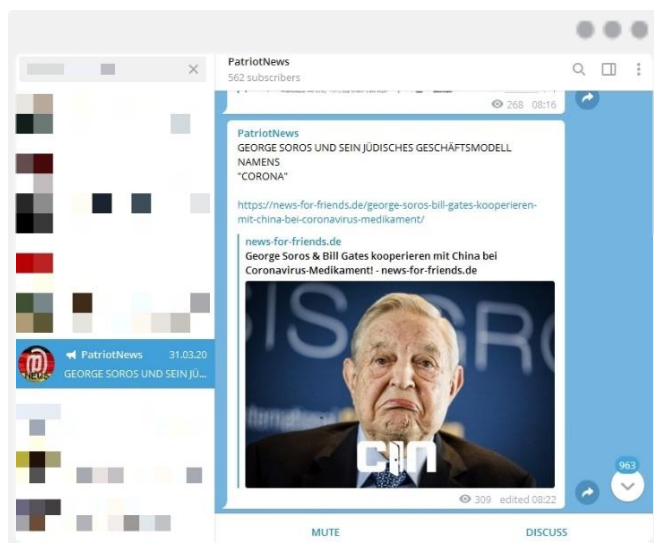
The aim of this pitch – to be observed in similar form on other channels and in their promotional efforts on other platforms – is to suggest a sense of intimacy and exclusivity. In keeping with this, there is certain content that is only disseminated via Telegram: short comments on current events in the form of text or live video, glimpses into the supposed private life of the person posting, even invitations to establish direct contact.

Telegram as a catapult for disinformation and conspiracy

For their users, extreme right-wing Telegram channels also serve as a source of (purported) news. The messenger service distributes articles and videos in large quantities, particularly material coming from so-called “alternative media”. Above and beyond that, there are also supposedly “neutral” or “disclosure” items by individual influencers and reports extracted from conventional media that happen to support the ideological perspective dominant on the channel. Anything that fits into one’s own view of the world has a good chance of being presented to a larger audience.

Particularly in the context of current events – and not just relating to the Corona pandemic – it becomes evident how Telegram contributes actively to the dissemination of extreme right-wing disinformation and conspiracy narratives. When, for example, on Shrove Monday in 2020, a 29-year-old drove his car into a carnival parade in Volkmarsen in northern German Hesse and injured more than 150 persons, Telegram swiftly distributed the allegation that this had been an Islamist attack. Even after the police and the public attorney had contradicted this account univocally, the narrative was disseminated further and eventually reached the large social media platforms Facebook and YouTube.

²See [Corona-Pandemie und rechtsextreme Onlinepropaganda](#) (article in German: Corona Pandemic and Extreme Right-wing Online Propaganda)



Enemy stereotype Soros: on Telegram, anti-semitic conspiracy theories circulate, also relating to the Corona virus. (Source: Telegram, PatriotNews; original not pixelated)

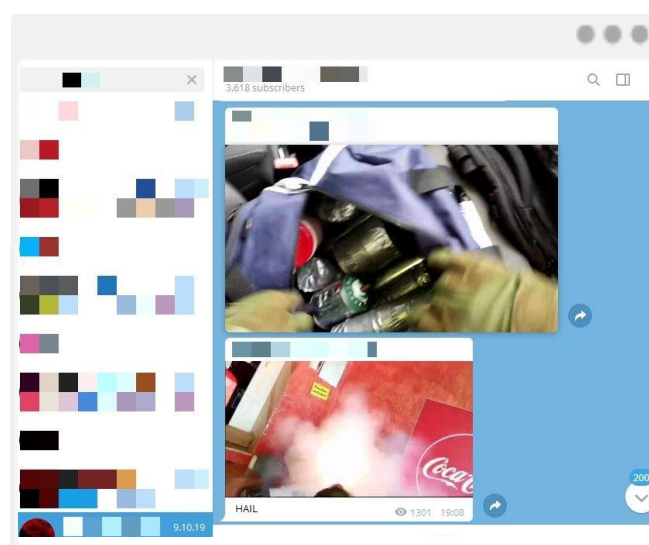
Telegram has thus become a major location for the spread of disinformation. In part, this is due to the fact that, on a majority of its channels, conspiracy narratives are posted and remain uncontested. Particularly the material posted via messenger seems to be considered authentic and credible. Channels presenting content of this type more than doubled their audience during the first months of the CoVid19 crisis. During this short period, a newly created channel even managed to register 60,000 members.

Rapid and easy distribution of violent videos

In addition to presenting texts and links to material at other addresses, Telegram also offers the option of making one's own media productions available on its channels and in chat groups. As a result, there are channels that contain large galleries with thousands of memes, images, text and music files – also videos that are very frequently viewed, many of them including explicit depictions of violent acts.

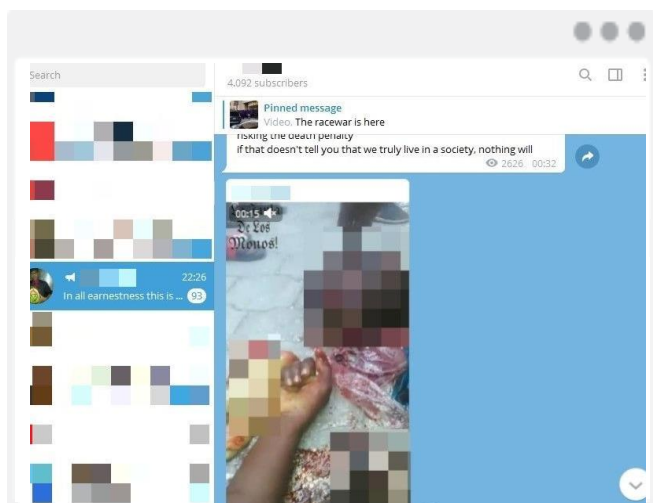
Individual content can be shared or downloaded without technical difficulty. These options for easy distribution are taken full advantage of by users.

The effects become especially apparent in cases where videos relating to current events are posted in large numbers. The right-wing terrorist assassin who attacked the synagogue in Halle, Germany (October, 2019) recorded his actions on video, and this material was and is available on Telegram in countless different versions while being quickly and repeatedly deleted on other platforms. Just like the video posted by the assassin in Christchurch, New Zealand, the video material from Halle remains on the platform to this day, open to view despite numerous complaints.



Video of the right-wing terror attack in Halle was disseminated thousand-fold and incorporated into GIFs and memes. (Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)

To be found on Telegram are also videos showing street fights, murders or executions along with their aftermath. When imbedded into a right-wing extremist narrative, they are intended to stir up the emotions of the viewer. They are meant to provoke fear and hate and thus trigger reactions that can extend to violent acts.



Video of a mutilated corpse: Black persons are depicted as brutish – a way of fomenting hate against them. (Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)

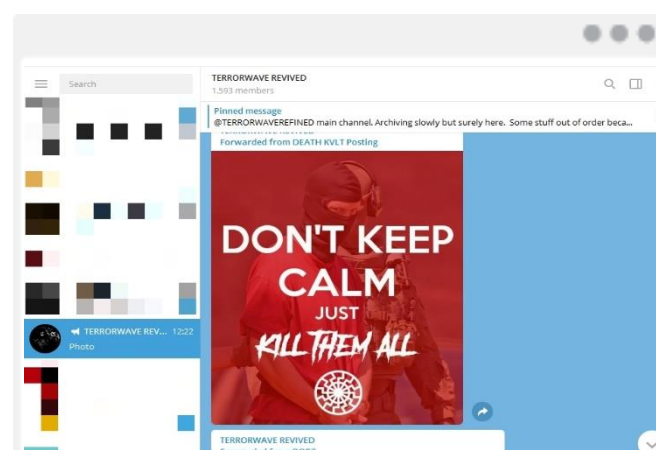
Switch board and node for “infowars”

Right-wing extremists regard the internet as a field of action in which they can deliberately induce public debate by organizing campaigns and shitstorms or by collectively appropriating certain topics. The increased use of Telegram by right-wing extremists since the end of 2017 is aimed at providing material, instructions, and strategies for their self-declared “infowars”. The channels serve as a control center and a meeting place for planning and coordination. Here, political opponents and others with whom right-wing extremists are in some way at odds are singled out as targets. The extensive file archives and multimedia resources available at a click provide convenient access to the tools of defamation: users have countless derogatory memes at their fingertips.

Furthermore, Telegram functions as a node and meeting place where right-wing extremists from various sectors can congregate and also pursue international networking efforts. Sharing of content posted by other users and especially the numerous links to other channels make it simple to access a wide range of additional sources. In this way, via links and shared content, just a few clicks can open the path to an enormous realm of right-wing extremist offerings.

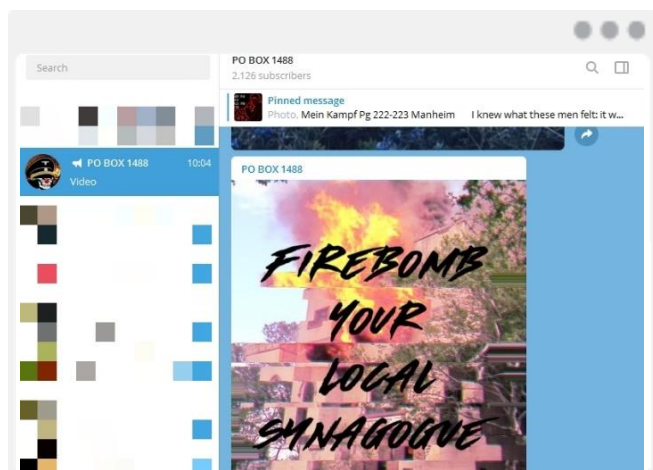
Right-wing terrorist propaganda – The aim is escalation of violence

Among right-wing extremists, Telegram is considered a “safe haven”. Consequently, it includes content openly propagating contempt for other human beings and violence against them. Right-wing terror attacks are celebrated, assassins are glorified, and copy-cat criminality is encouraged. The series of right-wing terror attacks in 2019 – from Christchurch, Poway, and Bærum to Halle and Hanau – was interpreted as a kick-off to “Day X”: high time for a D-Day of violent terrorist acts, triggering a civil war from which the extreme right would proceed in triumph.



The right-wing terrorist Stephan E., accused of murdering Walter Lübcke, is venerated as an idol. (Source: Telegram, Terrorwave revived; original not pixelated)

Not only are memes circulated that depict assassins as “saints” or “heroes”: content posted by these persons in the form of manifestos or violent videos is broadly distributed and re-used. There are also detailed instructions on building weapons, readers on battle tactics and “leaderless resistance”, as well as “terror handbooks” with illegal content to be found on many channels across the right-wing terror spectrum.



Call to violence in the form of a meme: right-wing terrorist channels present their propaganda in formats that appeal to young people.

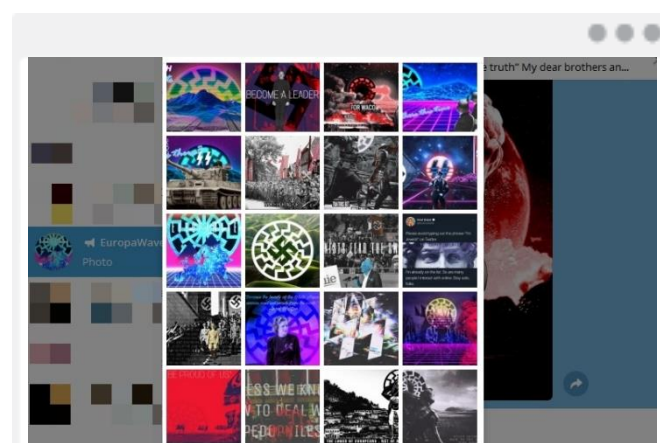
(Source: Telegram, PO BOX 1488; original not pixelated)

Even in group chats that are accessible to the general public, there is frank and explicit discussion concerning potential attacks on individuals or locations. Moreover, such channels enable networking across borders and between continents to reach persons who are receptive to the propaganda of violence – which can result in their ongoing radicalization. Repeatedly, in international right-wing terrorists groups, cross-references to German users are to be observed, for example calling attention to content in German or to shared posts.

Inadequate response despite massive distribution of illegal content

The Telegram app has an integrated function allowing users, without much effort, to submit complaints about offensive open-access channels, stickers, or bots. Reporting is also possible via e-mail. And in its FAQ, Telegram itself claims that it deletes publicly posted illegal or terrorist content, at the same time explicitly denying any “participation in politically motivated censorship”.

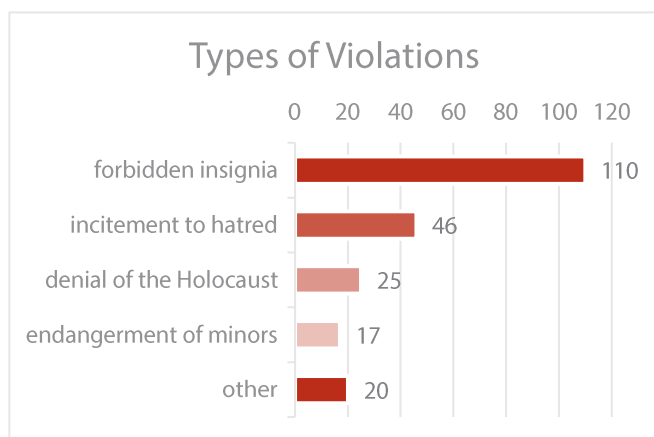
Experience gathered by jugendschutz.net indicates, however, that in most cases the platform does not respond to complaints about right-wing extremist channels, groups, or particular content, even if the complaint points toward clear-cut violations of the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (JMStV) – such as posting of forbidden insignia, incitement of violence, denial of the Holocaust, incitement to hatred, or portrayals of violence. In the end effect, even the very limited restriction stated in Telegram’s own “Terms of Service” – that no content endorsing violence may be disseminated on open-access channels – is not implemented.



A number of channels contain extensive collections of material that is highly illegal.

(Source: Telegram, EuropaWave; original not pixelated)

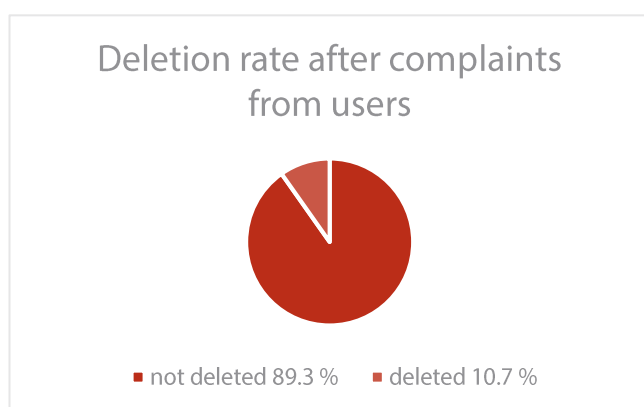
In the context of researching this specific issue, jugendschutz.net initiated complaints on 206 content items with 218 violations. In the case of three channels, legal proceedings by the media authorities were set in motion. One offering was reported directly to the Federal Criminal Police due to imminent danger. The remaining 202 measures were reported submitted directly to Telegram.



The diagram distinguishes types of violations among the total of 218 that were researched and reported.
(Source: jugendschutz.net)

In only 10.7 % of the cases reported was the illegal content deleted in accord with the user complaint. Among those deleted were two right-wing terrorist channels that contained multiple violations.

Telegram did not respond to reports submitted via e-mail that called attention to the legal mandate exercised by jugendschutz.net. Seen overall, to date, success in achieving deletion of illegal content on Telegram has been sporadic, with no recognizable logic determining what is to be deleted.

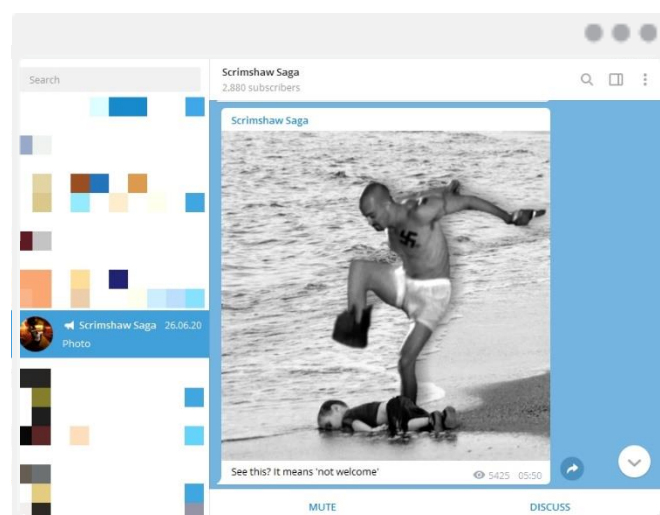


As the diagram indicates: Telegram's response to users' complaints is insufficient.
(Source: jugendschutz.net)

Protect children and adolescents – Increase pressure on providers

With a daily average of almost eight million users in Germany, Telegram cannot yet match the popularity of comparable messenger services. But studies on media habits demonstrate a steep rise in young people's affinity to this form of communication.³ One case in point is the Fridays for Future movement in Germany, furthered predominantly by young people who are networking via WhatsApp, but also Telegram.

Children and adolescents run the risk of exposure to highly illegal content due to its sheer mass and the easy inroads presented by search functions, networking and sharing options. Potential dangers are further heightened by the fact that Telegram employs push notifications to maintain nearly constant contact with users, while providing additional functions otherwise associated with social networks. With the increasing popularity of "dark social" particularly among young users, there is urgent need for action towards more effective protection.



Violence, provocation, vilification: Telegram presents a conglomeration of massive violations.
(Source: Telegram, Scrimshaw Saga; original not pixelated)

³cf. [Jugend-Internet-Monitor 2020](#) for Austria (Youth Internet Monitor)



No improvement has been achieved through reporting on violations that can frighten, disturb, or endanger young people. It has not been possible to establish steady contact to the platform administration. Experience shows, however, that public pressure can have some effect: Telegram had been criticized for years for allowing the so-called “Islamic State” to pursue extensive recruitment efforts via the platform.⁴ Finally, the provider initiated proactive steps to prevent this and in doing so has indicated at least the possibility that it will acknowledge its own responsibility.

⁴See [Jihadists make Telegram messaging app a recruiting tool](#) and [Islamist content on Telegram](#)

Further information



www.jugendschutz.net

Options for reporting violations



www.jugendschutz.net/hotline

Enabling Children and Young People to Grow Up Well in a Digital World

jugendschutz.net is the joint federal-state center for the protection of children and young people on the internet. jugendschutz.net looks closely at dangers and risks in internet services specifically popular among young people and urges providers and operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles.

The German youth ministries founded jugendschutz.net in 1997. Since 2003, jugendschutz.net has been organizationally linked to the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM). The work of jugendschutz.net is funded by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states, the State Supervisory Bodies and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

jugendschutz.net's hotline accepts reports about violations of youth media protection laws. These can be reported at www.jugendschutz.net/hotline.

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