

Hashtag #hate: Identitarian movement recruits new followers on Messenger and Twitter

Right-wing extremists use online flash mobs and memes to approach young people

September 2017

With their media strategy 'memetic warfare' the Identitarian movement aims at engaging more actively in public debates and spreading hate messages. Here, the right-wing extremists focus on Twitter and messenger communication. They use online flash mobs, fake accounts and social bots to disseminate masses of memes, animated GIFs and videos. The Identitarian movement uses its 'cool' appearance and join-in activities to attract young people to their racist ideas.

Recruitment and radicalization: Twitter as a propaganda tool

The right-wing extremist Identitarian movement increasingly exploits Twitter to specifically influence young people and win them over as active followers. The movement organizes campaigns, engages in public debates and spreads its right-wing extremist ideas. Besides memes meeting youth and pop culture aesthetics, specifically the possibility of low threshold participation poses a risk for young users. They shall be encouraged to get involved in campaigns on Twitter. This online activism is supposed to look like an adventure and their own course of action suggests effectiveness which seems attractive to young people.

Identitarians organize their campaigns via chats and groups in messaging services. The communication takes place with 'veteran' members of the movement. Factors like mutual confirmation when disseminating anti-democratic and xenophobic sentiments, acceptance by the group and the possibility to become a 'well deserved' member or even climb to the 'elite league' in the 'information warfare' respond to young people's needs and can feed radicalization.

In its online propaganda the **'Identitarian movement'** conveys racism against Muslims and also attacks human rights and democracy. The so-called Identitarians replace more captious terms like race and national community with words like ethnicity and culture and reinterpret these as a concept of an 'ethno-cultural identity'. With modern imagery and seemingly innocuous messages the Identitarian movement specifically addresses young people outside the scene whom they could not reach with conventional right-wing extremist websites.

High reach: 'Trending raids', fake profiles and social bots

In their chats in messaging services like Telegram the Identitarian movement plans so-called trending raids on Twitter, comparable to virtual flash mobs, and provides templates for Tweets. This aims at massively using a given hashtag connected to up-to-date discussions to make it a 'trend'. This is how the content disseminated shall reach as many users as possible.

In July, the movement started such a virtual flash mob with the hashtag #Maaseffect as a right-wing extremist protest campaign against the 'Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks', initiated by the Federal Minister of Justice Heiko Maas. Although this action failed to become a 'trend', close to 2,900 Tweets were posted within a short time. Analysis has shown that 577 Twitter accounts were involved in the action and that most of the Tweets (nearly 70 %) were posted from only 58 profiles. Still, this small action reached 763,500 users.



Call for 'trending raids' via messenger app: Seemingly innocuous hashtags shall ensure a vast reach of right-wing extremist content. (Source: Telegram, original not pixelated)

On the occasion of this and the following 'trending raids' with the hashtags #ohneMerkel (i.e. without Merkel) and #Barmbek (referring to the knife attack by an Islamist in the north German city of Hamburg) Identitarians used a multitude of fake profiles and social bots (programs in social media networks simulating users and automatically generating messages). Further technical tools facilitate e.g. the use of several fake profiles in parallel or integration of images from image hosting services with an unlimited supply of memes.

Subtle agitation: Memes referring to pop culture and satire

Specifically Twitter – not least because of the character limit for Tweets – is a platform for disseminating images and memes typical for the extremist scene as condensed content. Here, graphic depictions of internet culture like the comic character 'Pepe the Frog' as well as popular films and series serve as a basis; but also contemporary iconography is modified for disseminating the Identitarians' own propaganda.



Provocative memes: Segment from an Islamist execution video as an anti-democratic photo collage serves as input into debates. (Source: Twitter, original not pixelated)

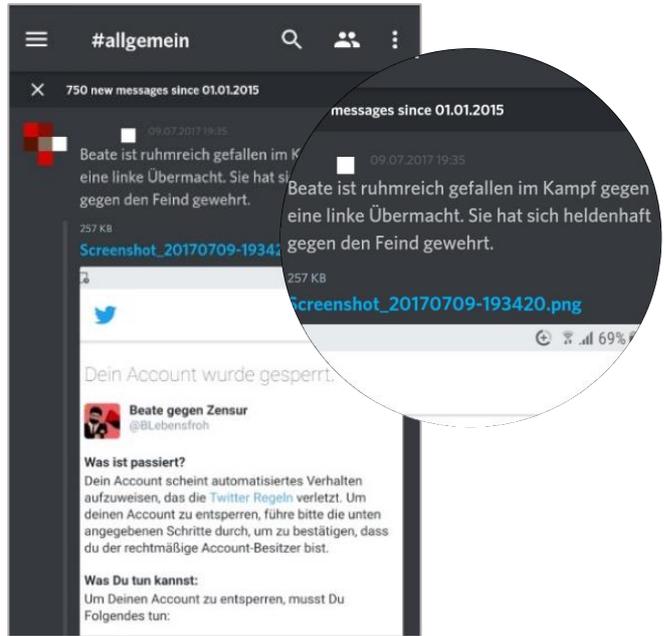
Allegedly humorous or satirical posts are also very common. The content, brought to a point and appealing to the users' emotions, shall encourage them to 'like' and 'share' it. This strategy serves as a cover making cruel and anti-democratic calls for action or slogans seem like a 'joke'; this again can lead to a normalization of right-wing extremist positions.

Desire to break taboos: 'Memetic warfare' as low-threshold gateway for young people

Identitarians see their actions as a heroic struggle against alleged superior political enemies and so-called mainstream media. In 'manuals for media guerillas' specifically written for their propaganda strategy they call their actions 'memetic warfare'.

In warlike language they describe, for instance, how they use a multitude of accounts or a redundant 'barrage of memes' to generate traffic and suggest relevance. Massively

flooding the web with innocuous hashtags relating to extremist content makes their propaganda position look like a normal and legitimate view in public discussions.



Warlike language: Chat glorifying a blocked Twitter account glorified as a 'hero's death'. (Source: Discord, original not pixelated)

Identitarians use warlike language and imagery to stage themselves as radical taboo breakers. They test the limit of what is still legally admissible and stop well short of crossing the line of infringing the law. This is how they serve the pleasure of breaking taboos which is specifically common among young people, but still remain easy enough to connect to in order to reach a broad audience beyond the right-wing extremist scene.

This is also how they attract young users who are afraid of getting caught and facing personal consequences for the future. Last but not least, it appears to be attractive that

Twitter more and more becomes an important element of right-wing extremist media strategy

Twitter's relevance for political and social debates has increased. Right-wing extremists more intensively integrate Twitter into their propaganda strategy in social media. Typical of Twitter: short texts, videos or images. A clever choice of hashtags enables users to attach their own posts to specific topics, disseminate them widely and thus reach a broader audience. Right-wing extremists specifically use this to prominently present their content, enter into debates and attract attention. At the same time, massive spreading of the content shall make believe that their right-wing extremist positions are highly relevant.

online activism is a low-threshold way to join in where young people can easily participate with their smartphones.

Further information

www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus

www.hass-im-netz.info

What can you do?

<http://www.hass-im-netz.info/was-tun/user>

Reporting option

<http://www.hass-im-netz.info/hass-im-netz-melden>

Political extremism on the internet – Project background

Within the project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looks closely at right-wing extremist content on the internet and develops counter activities. The project work is currently funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the framework of the federal program 'Demokratie leben!'

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