



REPORT

Influencing and Conspiracy Propaganda

Exploitation of Users' Media Habits
Creates Risks for Children and Adolescents

March 2023

Travel videos, make-up tips, or Let's Plays: Content created by social media influencers is widespread and has become a standard element in the media consumption of many young people. Due to the special audience relationship, the influence exerted on children and adolescents can be problematic. This effect is even more severe when right-wing extremists and conspiracy ideologues assume the posture of an influencer and take advantage of seemingly harmless topics to circulate anti-democratic statements or conspiracy narratives. Particularly in such cases, basic defense strategies are called for that allow young people to protect themselves against conspiracy narratives.

Research topic: Conspiracy ideologies presented on multiple platforms

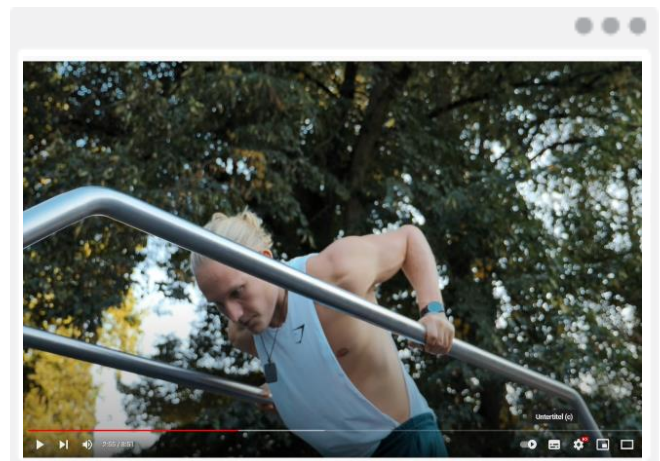
In 2022 jugendschutz.net conducted explorative research relating to conspiracy influencing in German on social media services. The study focused on identifying the formats and content strategies with which right-wing extremists or right-wing populist conspiracy influencers address young users on the net.

21 active influencers with significant audience range (e.g. more than 10,000 followers on YouTube or TikTok) and high recognition in the scene were selected, and nine of them were categorized as "conspiracy influencers" on the basis of their own self-depiction. jugendschutz.net then examined their presence as "media brands" across a number of different platforms. To this end, their presence was observed and assessed both on large platforms frequented by young people and on services used as alternative platforms. In addition to the content posted by influencers, user comments were also examined in the study.

Conspiracy influencing: Everyday topics and lifestyle serve as a lure

Well-known influencers enjoy star status and have access to millions of users via social media with a mixture of purported insights into their private sphere,

content that caters to the everyday environment of their audience, and marketing directed at particular target groups. Especially among children and adolescents, influencers are extremely popular, and their content becomes a part of daily life. The content creators aim at establishing a "brand" and influencing (consumer) behavior. The mechanisms of concealed advertising and indirect selling pitches – which can already be problematic when directed at young people as consumers¹ – come to bear when the communicative tools of influencers are appropriated by others who peddle conspiracy myths and instigate anti-democratic sentiment.



Fitness and conspiracy ideologies: a conspiracy influencer exercising in a park – an activity recommended as an element of "anti-NWO" living.²
(source: YouTube)

¹ Cf. [Nadja Enke et al.: Studie zu Werbepraktiken und direkten Kaufappellen an Kinder in sozialen Medien. Ein Forschungsprojekt im Auftrag der KJM](#) (Study on advertising practices and sales pitches directed toward children on social media. A research project initiated by the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media).

² NWO = New World Order, cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Order_\(conspiracy_theory\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Order_(conspiracy_theory))

Alongside their conspiracy narratives, conspiracy influencers address other everyday topics such as recreational and sport activities. They also favor humoristic content. With it, they not only demonstrate their accessibility and try to establish a bond with their audience. Imitating, in their propaganda, the topical mix common to influencers and spiking that with conspiracy narratives makes those narratives seem less drastic: the combination of lifestyle ambiance and ideologically motivated, partly anti-democratic content allows the ideology to be perceived as harmless. The aim is to normalize extremist thinking and offer additional topical features that can potentially bring the audience into closer contact with the extremists and the conspiracy narratives they disseminate.

Cross-media interlock taps into media habits of young people

A large number of conspiracy influencers employ different formats on various platforms simultaneously to propagate their content. These can be terse text statements on a livestream and in short video clips, or lengthy audio and video podcasts lasting 60 minutes or more. Nonetheless, for each caster there is usually a main service platform and format in which messages are first presented, and from there they are cross-medially circulated and advertised via other platforms where the caster is also active. Further enhanced by the use of trendy audio-visual elements, conspiracy-ideological content is distributed in this way beyond the community where it originated and is purposefully brought into wider online circulation.

High output of text content: Twitter, Telegram, Gettr

Shorter written items can be found on text-based services, such as Twitter and the alternative platforms Gettr³ and Telegram. Usually, these texts are accompanied by sharepics that function visually as eye-catchers. These items are used for timely comment on current events. Due to the fact that such postings can be produced and published with very little effort, they generate a constant high volume of content output.



Cryptic allusions are used deftly to weave new crises and conflicts into the fabric of existing conspiracy-ideological narratives.⁴
(source: Gettr)

There are some conspiracy influencers who post several dozen items of this type per day, thus ensuring that their followers receive constant input. This strengthens the audience bond with the influencer, whose content is established as part of a daily digital routine. The text items are also used as cross-medial advertising for the influencers' content on other platforms – for livestream formats such as 'just chatting', or for uploaded videos.

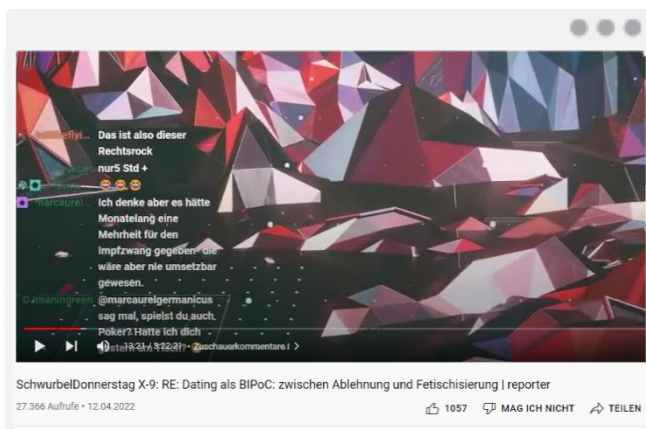
³ Gettr is a social media service founded in 2021 in the USA, roughly modelled after Twitter and advertising itself as a defender of freedom of speech on the net, which is supposedly threatened.

⁴ Trans.: "This topic has been everywhere for days: Ukraine and the political power struggle between Russia and America. But only a few people understand the actual background of this conflict, which has been going on for years." (February 2022)

Formats that attract the young: 'just chatting' and short clips

'Just chatting' is a general term for a format in which creators, during a livestream, react to questions and suggestions their followers submit in a chat that appears in a sidebar. The format originated in the online gaming world, where it is a well-established form of communication among video-game streamers and their community, particularly via the platform Twitch. The 'just chatting' format aims at bonding between the community and the individual creators, at the formation of digital groups, and at strengthening feelings of community.

At the same time, 'just chatting' sessions also often serve to generate income, as in many of them the audience can donate money and is repeatedly called on to do so by the conspiracy influencers. The sessions take place live on platforms such as Twitch, Gettr or DLive. Later, a session will often be re-uploaded onto another platform, e.g. YouTube.



'Just chatting' formats not only serve to bond a community. Participants also enter into exchanges with one another and form networks via chat. (source: YouTube)

Short clips are brief video segments that are either produced deliberately in this form or spliced together using material from other videos – in the latter case, often to advertise much longer videos. Originally, the platform TikTok paved the way for the short clip format. Since then, the same function has become available on other platforms, including Instagram,

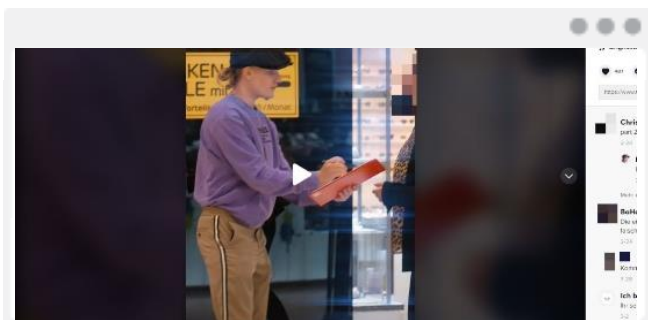
Facebook, or YouTube. It's common for short clips to play on certain meme trends, that is: they build on the audience's background knowledge of popular culture. Due to these meme trends, the music currently promoted by the platform's algorithm, their brevity, and easy options for sharing, short clips manage to reach an audience outside of the ideological bubble in which they originate.

Almost every conspiracy influencer maintains, alongside their main format, channels for short clips. Primarily, these help to increase audience range and serve as advertising for the main channels; transporting actual content is secondary.

Trend platform TikTok: adapted to the habits of young users

On TikTok itself, there are only a few proprietary channels run by conspiracy influencers, but their content appears nevertheless. Their podcasts or videos on other channels are re-recorded by users, on their smartphones, and then uploaded onto TikTok in starkly reduced fidelity.

One exception to this is presented by the conspiracy influencers "Ketzer der Neuzeit" ('Heretics of the Modern Age'). They maintain their own TikTok channel with more than 10,000 followers, where they regularly post new content. It is characterized in particular by a strong focus on the formal composition of content and by its orientation towards trends within the influencer scene. Therefore, the formats most frequently appearing on their TikTok channel are prank videos and what they call "street surveys". The former are videos in which, under false pretenses, they approach or accost or irritate persons in public, while filming with a hidden camera. In the "street surveys", pedestrians are confronted with conspiracy-ideological statements and questions, with the video makers pretending to be reporters.



In so-called street surveys, pedestrians are integrated into the content posted by conspiracy influencers.
(source: TikTok; original not pixelated)

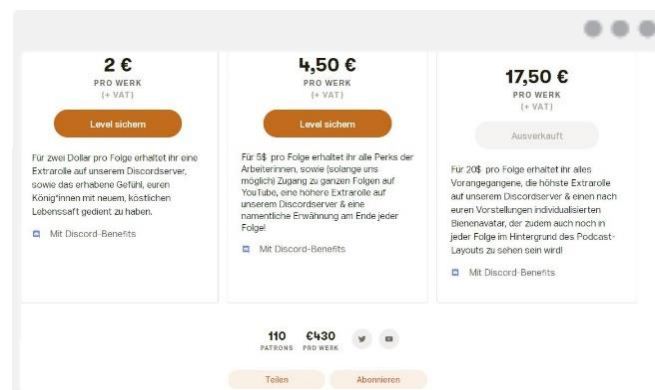
In their lifestyle content, the two channel hosts portray themselves in their everyday lives, with which children and adolescents can identify: meeting friends, playing sports, or attending cultural events. The conspiracy-ideological content is only injected sporadically and in coded form.

Podcasts: popular media format promotes community bonding

Podcasts are, overall, the dominant format for output of the influencers who were studied.⁵ Conspiracy influencers usually offer an audio or video or video format that can be subscribed to, in which they lecture on set topics, talk with guests, or conduct interviews.

On average, the podcasts reviewed by jugendschutz.net are between one and two hours long. They can be accessed as a stream, a download, or video on demand. Typical platforms are YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. In order to avoid deletion, casters also fall back on key alternative services, such as [odysse.com](https://www.odysse.com), [frei3.de](https://www.frei3.de), or [gegenstimme.tv](https://www.gegenstimme.tv). Because they nonetheless wish to benefit from the wide audience range of mainstream services, they post links and teaser videos there, leading users to the material on alternative platforms.

⁵ Right-wing extremists and conspiracy ideologists have appropriated a format that is very popular among young people. For more on this, see the article (in German): [Podcasts: Rechtsextreme Adaption eines beliebten Medienformats](#) ('Right-wing extremist adaptation of a popular media format').



Conspiracy influencers finance their propaganda activities, among other methods, via paid subscriptions.
(source: Patreon)

The considerable length of these podcasts and the corresponding listening or viewing habits of users make it possible to treat a topic in more breadth and depth than it could be in a short clip. The topics are classical conspiracy narratives or statements on current political issues and events seen from the perspective of a conspiracy narrative. Since the podcasts are pre-produced, there is no interaction with the audience, and the authors have no need to reckon with contradiction or discussion that might question their world view. However, it is characteristic for podcasts that they create a para-social situation, in which certain forms of direct address suggest to the audience that a communicative eye-to-eye encounter is taking place.

Prominent examples include the podcast "Die vulgäre Analyse" ('Vulgar Analysis', which has since been terminated) or "Die Honigwabe" ('Honeycomb') which is streamed weekly on Gettr. On a regular basis, current societal topics are taken up and re-interpreted in a propagandistic context. As was the case with 'Vulgar Analysis', the posture is misogynist, homophobic und anti-queer, an extension of the sexist and misanthropic internet troll culture.

Talking-head videos: monologs packed with conspiracy narratives

Increasingly, recorded monologs and video appeals posted by influencers are to be found on video platforms. They vary greatly in length, from a few minutes to several hours. These so-called “talking-head videos” are usually presented as lectures with images edited in for variety, illustrating or emphasizing what is being said. By using this popular format, conspiracy influencers associate themselves in aesthetic terms with the content posted by well-known internet personalities, e.g. Rezo, who has reached millions of users with his talking-head videos.



On the alternative platform “WirTube” (‘WeTube, for all free-thinking people’), the conspiracy ideologist Schrang rants about supposedly powerful string-pullers who he claims are manipulating the government. (source: WirTube)

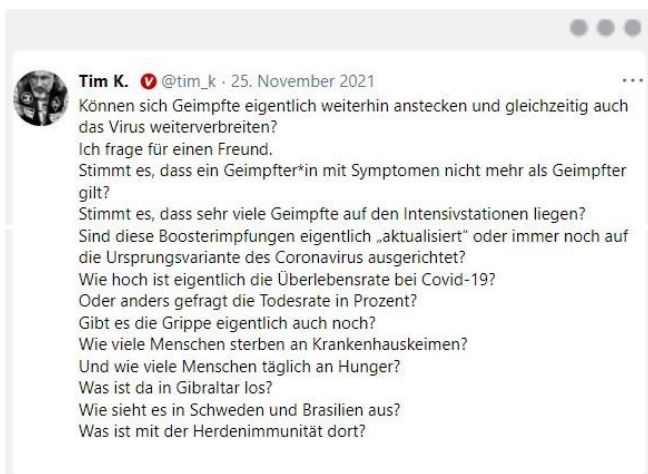
Just as in podcasts, in talking-head videos the speakers address current political or societal events, which are interpreted and categorized in keeping with conspiracy ideologies. It is not uncommon that references are included to the speakers’ own publications, which are said to promise deeper insight into the issues that are being discussed. In addition, merchandising products such as t-shirts or mugs are advertised; the sales contribute to financing the influencers’ work.

The conspiracy influencer Heiko Schrang, for example, has about 170,000 subscribers on YouTube and

produces, alongside conspiracy-ideological items, more or less innocuous content on topics related to meditation and esoteric themes. His YouTube appearances serve predominantly as teasers with which he draws attention to his postings on alternative platforms and to his books, e-books, and audiobooks. In these publications, he explains historical and political developments in terms of conspiracy-ideological narratives and the so-called “new world order” (NWO). The publications can be purchased on his own publishing website or in his online shop; links to both are provided.

Subtle and suggestive: the communicative strategy of conspiracy influencers

In their communication, conspiracy influencers are usually quite subtle. Particularly on larger platforms, they rarely post statements that expressly hold specific groups of people responsible for grievances or accuse them of being conspirators. The conspiracy narrative itself is, in general, merely suggested. Blending in symbols or music recognizable as signifiers, or giving the audience a knowing look suffices to transport the intended context. In addition to these references easily identifiable to “insiders”, which presuppose a certain background knowledge of conspiracy ideology, influencers frequently apply the rhetorical technique of a series of questions: vaguely formulated, pseudo-critical, but in fact tendentious questions are stacked into a barrage. The (biased) answers are implicit, to be found in the context of the surrounding content.



A barrage of tendentious questions – whose answers are (supposedly) left up to the users.⁶
 (source: Gettr)

Young people who themselves do not belong to the conspiracy-ideological community or who regard its perspective as plausible may see some appeal in this type of apparently critical/provocative pitch. This might be the case when their own doubts about authority and conventional views, typical for their age and developmental phase, resound with the influencers' content. A glance at the comments reveals that suggestions, intimations, and rhetorical questions are, in fact, understood and often echoed directly by community members. Anti-semitic accusations – for example, that “the Jews” are to blame for various crises, or even profit from them – can be found there, along with assertions that the Federal Republic of Germany does not exist as a democratic state or is just a “corporate entity”.

Conspiracy influencers leave it to their followers to articulate their messages without inhibition, while trying to keep themselves covered and unassailable by being able to claim, if necessary, that they have been “misunderstood”. They do, however, become more explicit themselves on alternative platforms where there is hardly any supervision by moderators. Here, since the risk is minimal that their content or their entire profile will be deleted, they expressly voice their adherence to conspiracy ideologies, disseminating disinformation and opinions hostile to plurality and democracy.

Gray zone: no simple response to suggestions and allusions

Conspiracy-ideological content often is formulated in such a way that it does not quite fulfill the criteria for a violation of German laws protecting young people in the media. Even though many conspiracy fantasies are out-and-out absurd and are defamatory towards certain (groups of) people: in individual cases it is not always possible to discern clearly and simply at what point they extend beyond legitimate thoughts about political causes and effects and enter the realm of questionable or even harmful speculations. Drawing that line is made more difficult by the degree to which conspiracy influencers have perfected the technique of communicating through allusions and intimations: although it is clear to the “adepts” in the community what is actually intended, this type of content still allows for other interpretations.

⁶ Trans.: „Can vaccinated people infect others and spread the virus further? Asking for a friend. Is it true that a vaccinated person with symptoms is no longer considered to be vaccinated? Is it true that there are a lot of vaccinated people in intensive care? Are these booster shots “up to date” or still targeting the original virus variant? How high is the real survival rate with Covid-19? Or, the other way around, what is the death rate in percent? Does the flu still exist? How many people die of MRSA infections in hospitals? How many people die of hunger every day? What is going on in Gibraltar? What do things look like in Sweden and Brazil? What about herd immunity there?”

In the framework of the research described here, jugendschutz.net was not able to single out unequivocally illegal content – for example, cases of demagoguery/hate speech or Holocaust denial –, neither in statements of influencers nor in the comments. Only in a few instances was a categorization as ‘detrimental to development’ indicated, and this content was deleted by providers after having been reported. It was not possible in the course of the study to ascertain whether users, in their comments, imitated the communication strategy of the influencers and consciously avoided prosecutable violations when voicing their extremist or conspiracy-ideological views, or whether the service providers or possibly even the channel hosts themselves had deleted material that was considered harmful to young people or liable to criminal prosecution for other reasons. However, jugendschutz.net observed again and again that, particularly in heated, polarized topical discussions, followers’ comments tend to escalate and overstep the boundaries of what is legally permissible, for example in the comment area of livestreams.⁷ This includes conspiracy-ideological interpretations and positions.



Banks, big tech, and ‘Jewish circles’ – what is merely alluded to by the channel hosts is made explicit in the comments: the anti-Semitic narrative of a Jewish world conspiracy. (source: YouTube)

It is also indisputable that conspiracy mongers are more cautious when posting on mainstream platforms, in order to avoid having their content deleted or their accounts shut down. The latter would result in the loss of a large number of followers. Also, it is clear that service providers adjust their Terms of Use to limit the advance of conspiracy-ideological content. In 2020 YouTube, for example, expanded its Guidelines concerning hate speech and harassment to include content that makes individuals or groups the target of conspiracy theories and incites violence against them. Like Instagram, YouTube has also banned misinformation relating to Covid-19.⁸


In instances where explicit violations are discovered, it is essential that those responsible be held accountable. However, in the majority of cases, no responsible parties subject to German jurisdiction can be identified. This makes it all the more important that service providers fulfill their duty to react quickly and reliably to complaint reports or become proactive themselves, either through closer moderation of content or by (further) tightening and more precise formulation of their Terms of Use.

Brace young people against conspiracy narratives and disinformation

Considering the wide and insurmountably complex area in which anti-democratic conspiracy ideologues are active, defensive strategies on a very basic level are called for – particularly pertaining to children and adolescents. If they are to be able to brace themselves against disinformation and conspiracy narratives, young people need to be supported in developing media literacy and the ability to evaluate information critically.

⁷ For more on fleeting content and escalating exchanges in comment sidebars, see [Report: Flüchtige Hasspropaganda](#) (English version: [Fleeting Hate Propaganda](#)).

⁸ Additional information on adjustments to the services’ Terms of Use in the course of the Corona pandemic is provided in [Bericht 2020/2021: Rechtsextremismus im Netz](#) (English version: [Report 2020/2021: Right-wing Extremism on the Internet](#)).



It is essential that they be enabled to judge independently whether assertions and supposed proof of secret plans and dark intrigues are credible. It is also imperative that awareness be raised and cultivated concerning the damage that can be done by certain conspiracy-ideological statements and patterns of interpretation: beginning with the loss of trust in democratic processes and extending to unbridled hate directed toward individuals and groups.

On the internet, there are suitable support services that are free of charge. The interactive online learning space [Wiebkes wirre Welt](#) (approx.: 'Wiebke's weird world'), for example, explains to children and adolescents how conspiracy narratives work. Organizations such as [Correctiv](#) or [Mimikama](#) address the problem of misinformation. Support for persons who have already been influenced by conspiracy narratives is provided by the initiative [Sekten-Info-NRW e.V.](#)

Further information



www.jugendschutz.net

Reporting violations



www.jugendschutz.net/en/make-a-report

About jugendschutz.net

jugendschutz.net is the joint center of the German Federal Government and the federal states tasked with 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 states' Media 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/en/make-a-report

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