

Antisemitism on Social Media

Edited by **Monika Hübscher**
and **Sabine von Mering**

ANTISEMITISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Antisemitism on Social Media is a book for all who want to understand this phenomenon.

Researchers interested in the matter will find innovative methodologies (*CrowdTangle* or *Voyant Tools* mixed with discourse analysis) and new concepts (tertiary antisemitism, antisemitic escalation) that should become standard in research on antisemitism on social media. It is also an invitation to students and up-and-coming and established scholars to study this phenomenon further. This interdisciplinary volume addresses how social media with its technology and business model has revolutionized the dissemination of antisemitism and how this impacts not only victims of antisemitic hate speech but also society at large. The book gives insight into case studies on different platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram. It also demonstrates how social media is weaponized through the dissemination of antisemitic content by political actors from the right, the left, and the extreme fringe, and critically assesses existing counter-strategies.

People working for social media companies, policy makers, practitioners, and journalists will benefit from the questions raised, the findings, and the recommendations. Educators who teach courses on antisemitism, hate speech, extremism, conspiracies, and Holocaust denial but also those who teach future leaders in computer technology will find this volume an important resource.

Monika Hübscher is a PhD Candidate at the University of Haifa, Israel, and Research Associate at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany.

Sabine von Mering is Professor of German and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Director of the Center for German and European Studies, at Brandeis University, USA.

“This book is an essential guide to a modern disgrace that threatens everyone, not just Jews. Just when we are congratulating ourselves about supposedly sophisticated ideas or technologies, what often happens is that brutish, forceful impulses get a path cleared. Antisemitism was the ancient, enduring proving ground for ridiculous, deadly paranoias in European cultures; now the old methods have become profitable accelerants for hate on social media.”

Jaron Lanier, Computer Scientist and Author, USA

“*Antisemitism on Social Media* is a timely and urgently needed investigation into today’s manifestations of antisemitism. The book shows vividly how social media has become a disturbingly powerful engine of antisemitic hatred and conspiracy theories. A must-read for everyone who wants to understand the dangers of modern-day antisemitism.”

Julia Ebner, Bestselling author of *Going Dark. The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, and Senior Research Fellow and Counterterrorism Advisor, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, UK

“Social media is absolutely central to the way that contemporary antisemitism is generated, disseminated, and operationalised around the world, and this volume is a valuable and enlightening contribution to our understanding of how and why this happens. Importantly, the breadth of chapters recognise the variety in how antisemitism manifests online, including antisemitism in mainstream politics and society, online networks of violent anti-Jewish extremists, and the intersection of antisemitism with broader conspiracist movements that threaten democracy.”

Dave Rich, Director of Policy, Community Security Trust, UK

“This timely, disturbing and all-too-necessary book shows from a global perspective how antisemitism has taken hold within contemporary social media. The authors document the antisemitism of conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Islamists; discuss the implications of omnipresent hate speech; and propose counter measures. Their scholarship illuminates the internet’s darkest corners and exposes the vulnerable underside of the digital revolution.”

Jonathan D. Sarna, University Professor and Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History; Director, Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, Brandeis University, USA

“The internet offers unprecedented ways of spreading antisemitic hate speech and conspiracy myths. Too often have we witnessed that illegal or otherwise harmful content online can lead to hate crime in the real world. Understanding the sources, as well as the instruments and ways this dangerous content travels and is amplified, is essential for platforms, policy makers, law enforcement agencies and users. With its thorough analysis, *Antisemitism on Social Media* offers innovative ideas to all those engaged in counter-actions to address online antisemitism.”

Katharina von Schnurbein, European Commission Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life

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*Edited by Monika Hübscher
and Sabine von Mering*

First published 2022
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-032-05974-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-05969-3 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-20049-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003200499

Typeset in Bembo
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

To the memory of our heroine Esther Bejarano, ל"ג



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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FOREWORD

Moshe Zimmermann

About 150 years ago, antisemitism became a new, modern name for an old prejudice – the hatred of Jews. This concept proved most effective after 1879, when it was introduced by a German journalist called Wilhelm Marr and immediately propagated by a well-known and respected German historian Heinrich von Treitschke. The most extreme expression of Jew hatred, the “Final Solution,” could not have been conceived and carried out without the word “antisemitism” serving as its battle cry.

From the start, antisemites were looking for the most effective ways to propagate and disseminate their beliefs and slogans. Marr was critical of the tactics used by his disciple, Theodor Fritsch, of repeating arguments more than once. Fritsch answered bluntly: We don’t need new arguments; we better repeat what we said again and again until we have reached the maximum audience. He was right, of course. Not only did he publish a popular compendium called *Handbook for the Jewish Question*, but, year after year, he also printed and distributed thousands of stickers and leaflets propagating antisemitic messages. Josef Goebbels followed in Fritsch’s footsteps, preparing the ground for the “Final Solution.”

Prejudices become dangerous only when they are effectively spread or when they become implementable with the help of something like an instruction manual. In our days we must acknowledge the fact that the most effective instrument for achieving this aim is the “electronic stickers” on social media. Antisemitism is one of the prejudices that enjoy a renaissance on social media, leaving behind the instruments that made it so effective in the past, including newspapers, flyers, and pamphlets.

The contributions included in this volume direct the reader's attention to the dangerous potential of antisemitic agitation on social media. They also help overcome the confusion created by the ongoing debate about the nature of today's antisemitism.

The editors had a clear goal – to establish a new interdisciplinary field of research on antisemitism. Their work makes it unmistakably clear that research and in-depth analysis of antisemitism on social media is indeed imperative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to our wonderful contributing authors, who realized this book with us during a global pandemic.

Monika Hübscher: I want to thank Sabine von Mering for realizing this project with me. The book profited greatly from her knowledge, positivity, and solidarity. Despite many challenges, her guidance, curiosity, humor, and strength turned this into an enriching and wonderful experience for me. It's not always enjoyable to share a dinner table with someone who constantly thinks and talks about antisemitism, its potential lethal danger, and the dark sides of social media. Thanks to Robert Lanz and, most of all, Dean Kormas for continuing to have meals with me. I have received lots of encouragement and affirmation for my research on antisemitism on social media from Prof. Moshe Zimmermann. For this I am very grateful. Prof. Nicolle Pfaff, Prof. Ullrich Bauer, Prof. Boris Zizek, and Hendrik Andermann-Zoltan have motivated me through discussing antisemitism on social media with me and helped me sharpen my arguments. Dr. Saskia Fischer has encouraged me to undertake this project and supported me with advice in times where I thought that this project is undoable. My coauthors Vanessa Walter and Sophie Schmalenberger have enriched my knowledge with their expertise. Marc Hermann-Cohen, Dominik Goertz, Mona Corsmeier, Henriette Fischer, Marvin Masella, and Fatma Bilgi have discussed antisemitism on social media with me repeatedly and supported the idea for this book from the start. The writings of Jaron Lanier, Victor Klemperer, James Baldwin, and Moshe Zimmermann have been a great source of inspiration for my research for this book. Esther Bejarano inspired me to keep researching, and, in the face of the inevitable fight against antisemitism, to have courage and never lose hope.

Sabine von Mering: This has been an unusual time to work on a project across continents and time zones. I'd like to thank Monika for placing her trust in me when she first approached me to work with her on this volume. It has been

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both a pleasure and a great privilege to get to know her. I have learned a tremendous amount from her, and I am inspired by her determination, dedication, and incredible research acumen. Although I am senior in years and experience, Monika is the one who envisioned, shaped, and directed this project from start to finish. Her vast knowledge of both antisemitism and social media and her understanding of the needs for and functions of appropriate research methodologies have made this volume what it is. I would also like to thank Robin Feuer Miller for her wisdom and sage advice during the initial proposal stage and for her feedback on our chapter. I don't know anyone else in academia who has a department chair who cares as much as Robin does. Thanks also to the Theodore and Jane Norman Fund for supporting the index. We are writing this volume at a time of escalating climate chaos around the globe. The connections between the climate emergency and the rise of racism and antisemitism, right-wing extremism, and even fascism are becoming more and more obvious. In view of destruction and denial, my climate activist and water protector friends are focusing instead on building a movement founded on compassion, solidarity, and love. That is what inspires me to keep working for a better future.

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INTRODUCTION

Sabine von Mering and Monika Hübscher

This introductory volume instigates a significant and much-needed shift within the field of antisemitism studies, namely, toward a comprehensive focus on antisemitism on social media. It introduces crucial research methodology for this new field and educates about antisemitism on social media in its various forms from an interdisciplinary perspective. The conclusions provide relevant data to policy makers and officials within the social networks and help NGOs, Think Tanks, and civil society to develop appropriate counter-strategies. We compiled this volume to reach not only antisemitism scholars but also those in the field of technology, social media studies, and computer science. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the research field of antisemitism on social media and emphasizes the role of technology and business model of the platforms in the dissemination of antisemitic content. Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering summarize the state of scholarship on the matter, identify research gaps and challenges, and provide recommendations to advance the study of antisemitism on social media. Armin Langer assesses the conspiracy collective QAnon, which has gained a disturbingly large and surprisingly diverse following in the United States and throughout the “Western” world since its inception in 2017, with most of its activities taking place on social media. Langer argues that QAnon social media posts employ some archetypical elements – such as notions of secret elites and kidnapped children – that reflect historical and ongoing antisemitic conspiracy myths. His chapter provides an overview of the history and presence of QAnon and investigates the most prevalent forms of antisemitism in QAnon posts on Twitter and Telegram. Sophie Schmalenberger and Monika Hübscher analyze social media posts of Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) about May 8, the day of Nazi-Germany’s defeat in 1945, which members of the AfD have been exploiting for revisionist purposes. With the help of the mixed-methods software MaxQDA, Schmalenberger and Hübscher develop a code system that

identifies antisemitic cues. Their results lead them to formulate a definition of tertiary antisemitism in extension of the established concepts of primary and secondary antisemitism. The AfD, they find, uses social media strategically to communicate a revisionist interpretation of World War II and the Holocaust by employing antisemitic cues rather than explicit expressions of antisemitism. Finally, the authors identify four rhetorical strategies present in the AfD's social media communication that normalize, mainstream, and vindicate antisemitism. Jakob Guhl turns the focus to the other side of the political spectrum in his chapter about antisemitism in Facebook pages of members of the (left wing) UK Labour Party between 2015 and 2019. After Jeremy Corbyn was elected as the leader of the Labour Party in September 2015, the United Kingdom experienced major public debates relating to concerns about antisemitism in the Labour Party. Guhl points out that social media dynamics were often at the center of these discussions, but there has been little systematic, large-scale analysis of the phenomenon up to now. His analysis shows that online antisemitism within pro-Labour communities, though relatively small in volume, remains easily accessible and is not always called out. Monika Hübscher partnered with Vanessa Walter for Chapter 5, in which the authors describe a recent incident of an antisemitic troll attack in Germany that they had witnessed live on YouTube and which they use as the basis for the analysis of methods and goals of antisemitic trolling through a combination of qualitative discourse analysis and digital textual analysis with the help of the digital tool suite *Voyant*. The authors also suggest how to deal with the phenomenon of troll attacks. Cassie Miller examines the contemporary neo-Nazi accelerationist network in the United States and its use of social media to spread propaganda and radicalize new adherents. Miller shows that the movement is deeply antisemitic and promotes the use of violence to bring down Western democracies which its followers believe are under Jewish control. The chapter traces the growth of the network from the fascist Iron March forum that was created in 2011 to the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division established in 2015, and, finally, to The Base, a violent, antisemitic accelerationist network formed in 2018. Though all these entities are now defunct, Miller shows that a vast, networked accelerationist movement remains extremely active on alternative social platforms like Gab and Telegram. Navras Aafreedi's is the first scholarly undertaking to present an analysis of antisemitic rhetoric in Urdu, the language spoken by millions of Muslims in South Asia, on YouTube. His case study of Muslim cleric Israr Ahmed illuminates how YouTube is utilized to disseminate antisemitic conspiracy myths in Urdu and describes YouTube's astonishing silence about antisemitism on its platform in Urdu. Aafreedi also attempts to understand why this phenomenon in South Asia has so far failed to attract the attention it needs and suggests some remedial measures to counter the threat. Hendrik Gunz and Isa Schaller turn the attention back to Germany, where a vocal protest scene emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic on the streets as well as on social media, replete with comparisons to Nazi-Germany, conspiracy topoi, and antisemitic narratives. Gunz and Schaller zoom in on Attila Hildmann, who

within less than a year turned from celebrated vegan chef and popular talk show guest to aggressive agitator who is not only spreading blatant, Holocaust-denying antisemitism through his social media accounts but also literally calling on others to kill Jews. The results of their investigation confirm that video hosting services like YouTube and the messenger Telegram, often used to mobilize protests, represent an important resource for analyzing antisemitism. Their study also proves that a combination of a hermeneutical approach and frequency analysis is useful when working with multiple platforms and analyzing large amounts of diverse data, as well as for contextualizing the characteristics of narrative structures of conspiracy beliefs.

While most chapters are written by social scientists, Hendrik-Zoltan Andermann and Boris Zizek provide a humanistic approach to the topic through a close reading of one antisemitic meme to show in detail the risky potential of such visual communication of antisemitic content, shared widely on social media. Their tool is the qualitative method of objective hermeneutics. The authors meticulously reconstruct the latent layers and structures of meaning and messages conveyed in the antisemitic illustration to show why such memes are particularly suitable for transporting antisemitic messages. Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri draw our attention to TikTok, the fastest-growing application today, with 1.2 billion active users. Their study is based on a systematic content analysis of TikTok videos and highlights the alarming presence of extreme antisemitic messages in video clips, songs, comments, texts, pictures, and symbols present in content posted on TikTok. Unlike on other online social media platforms, they explain, TikTok users are almost all young, mostly children and teenagers. Since TikTok is owned by a Chinese company, Weimann and Masri suggest that it is less open to regulation, public pressure, and measures to defend users from hateful, violent, and dangerous content. Another concern raised is that TikTok does not apply its own Terms of Service with regard to hate speech and other offensive content. In Chapter 11, Quint Czymbek takes yet another approach as he conducts and then analyzes interviews with three Jewish social media users, who were asked about their experience with and their reactions toward antisemitism on social networks. Czymbek focuses on four questions: how the respondents make use of social networks, the forms of antisemitism they experience, where they encounter antisemitism, and which counter-strategies they use. In a team effort, Gunther Jikeli, Damir Cavar, Weejeong Jeong, Daniel Miehling, Pauravi Wagh, and Denizhan Pak present progress they have made on crafting a definition of antisemitism that can be used for automatic detection of antisemitic messages on social media. They conclude that it requires not only a comprehensive understanding of the history of antisemitism and its (re)current forms but also a comprehensive dataset that is labeled with a clear definition of antisemitism. They call this labeled dataset their “Gold Standard” and suggest that it can be used by algorithms to identify antisemitic messages. The results of their study show that the percentage of antisemitic messages in conversations about Jews on Twitter is significant. From May to August 2020, counting live

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tweets only, every seventh tweet in conversations about Jews was found to be antisemitic. Yfat Barak-Cheney and Leon Saltiel write as experienced practitioners with the World Jewish Congress about the role of civil society organizations in dealing with antisemitic hate speech on social media. They map the types of interventions and methods employed by civil society for combating antisemitism on social media and make recommendations for the role of civil society with a focus on reporting antisemitic hate speech and monitoring compliance of social media platforms with their own hate speech policies. The authors explain why the expertise gained by organizations, academics, and other institutions must be a guiding path in informing legislation, designing guidelines, and improving policies. In their view, reliance on civil society reporting of antisemitism should be replaced with concrete legislation and a stronger emphasis on enforcement by social media platforms themselves. In the volume's final chapter, Michael Bossetta challenges some of the conclusions presented in other chapters based on a survey of existing quantitative research on antisemitism and social media and argues that there is actually much less antisemitism on social media than commonly perceived. He discusses how specific components of platform design help explain why antisemitism is likely to surface on some platforms but not others and compares the design of major social media platforms to online forums. Ultimately, the chapter argues that future research on antisemitism and social media should approach studying antisemitic content across online spaces, with specific attention to the effects of such content on users' potential for radicalization.

This book is a starting point. We look forward to the research into antisemitism on social media that others will undertake, inspired by this volume.

1

A SNAPSHOT OF ANTISEMITISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2021

Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering

Introduction¹

The culmination of antisemitism into a genocide is a testament to how technology has been weaponized in history: the Nazis used the technology of IBM's Hollerith machine for the identification of Jews and other minorities (Black, 2001). In Nazi Germany, the radio, newspapers, and movies that were shown in the smallest villages helped disseminate antisemitic propaganda, which set up the conditions for the mass murder of millions. In fact, technology has played a crucial role in genocide since the industrial revolution. The dissemination of hateful propaganda through radio had a major influence on Hutus who murdered their Tutsi neighbors in Ruanda in the 1990s (Carlson, 2021, pp. 14–25). The invention of social media marks a transition from one-way communication of linear mass media (such as newspapers and the radio) to mass communication by user-driven creation and dissemination of content. Through algorithm-driven technology, which serves to generate profit, the dissemination of hate thus got a major upgrade. In 2018, a devastating UN report underlined the role of Facebook in enabling the unrestricted spread of hate speech which led to genocidal violence against the Muslim Rohingya community in Myanmar (UN Human Rights Council, 2018). Against this terrifying backdrop, and in view of the fact that everyone who is on social media is potentially able to circulate hate on a large scale, we take a look at antisemitism on the platforms. This chapter outlines how social media's technology and business model are able to amplify antisemitism. After looking at available removal and counter-strategies and their limitations, the chapter turns to the scholarship on the matter and identifies research gaps and challenges, followed by a set of recommendations.

Technology and Business Model

Due to the business model and algorithm-driven technology of social media, we are confronted with an unprecedented dissemination of antisemitic hate on an unknown scale. Because social media is available wherever there is internet connection, it is impossible to know how much antisemitic content is generated and disseminated since it appears in many modes and languages. Antisemitism on social media manifests as memes, gifs, videos, vlogs, and comments, and many other multimodal formats in which people and institutions are attacked for being Jewish, because of their actual or supposed affiliation with Judaism or because of their affiliation with Jews. The generation and dissemination of antisemitism are made possible and reinforced by each social media platform's features, such as liking, sharing, and commenting, and are often mixed with disinformation and other forms of prejudice, such as misogyny (cp. Hübscher et al., 2019).

Social media is also the place where Jews feel most directly confronted with antisemitism.² In 2018, more than 10,000 Jews in 13 countries, including Germany, were registered for the EU study “Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism. Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crimes against Jews in the EU.” The study, which collected everyday experiences and perceptions of antisemitism, shows that 89% of Jews surveyed rated antisemitism as the most problematic on social media, even before experiences with antisemitism in public places, in the media, and in politics (FRA, 2018). Another report generated by the Community Security Trust documents anti-Jewish attacks in the United Kingdom in 2019 and not only records an increase in antisemitic incidents in general, but also shows that antisemitism is most commonly communicated on social media (CST, 2019, p. 35). Hate speech on social media can be a precursor to hateful violence in real life. According to a CBS news report, the shooter of the massacre at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh on October 17, 2019, who killed 11 and wounded 6 others, had posted antisemitic comments against the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) on the “free speech” platform Gab, utilized mostly by the extreme right. He accused HIAS of aiding immigrants “that kill our people” (Pegus, 2018).

With the help of cheaply available social bots and organized troll farms,³ social media can be used to target Jewish people and institutions on a large scale. During the 2016 presidential election campaign in the United States, 800 Jewish journalists were followed and harassed on Twitter in an organized troll attack with antisemitic content. The majority of the hate messages that were signed with pro-Trump slogans were aimed at ten Jewish journalists who were targeted daily by around 1,600 trolls (Green, 2016). This example shows how antisemitism can be weaponized on social media for political campaigns, to polarize, and above all to intimidate. Additionally, the manifestos written by the perpetrators of terror attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions have been circulated widely on social media (Amend, 2018).

Social media companies like to claim that they are merely offering a platform for users to connect with others, but all social media content is moderated by

algorithms and edited, e.g., through removal by content moderators (Gillespie, 2018, p. 5 ff). Most social media users are unaware of the fact that what they are seeing on their social media is decided by algorithms who adapt content to the users' online behavior⁴ (Lanier, 2018, p. 6; also cp. Nield, 2020). Furthermore, users subconsciously learn that outrageous content, such as Holocaust denial, creates buzz (attention) in the form of reactions (likes, dislikes, comments, and shares), which in turn is profitable (Lanier, 2018, p. 13). All content, also hateful and polarizing content like antisemitism and Holocaust denial, creates profit for social media companies. As Roger McNamee, one of the early investors in Facebook, now one of its strongest critics, said in the PBS Frontline documentary *The Facebook Dilemma*

polarization was the key to the model, this idea of appealing to people's lower-level emotions, things like fear and anger, to create greater engagement, and, in the context of Facebook – more time on site, more sharing, and therefore more advertisement value.

(PBS, 2018)⁵

Social media businesses depend on user-generated posts for their revenue. There are two revenue streams: users generate content, which, if it creates a lot of buzz, becomes more attractive for advertisers, which in turn means more revenue for social media companies. However, often revenue is derived from advertisements based on users' personal data, which social media companies collect and monetize. Once collected, it is impossible to prevent that data from being abused by bad actors, the police, or the government. Data protection experts have been warning about this for years. Here are a few recent examples of minorities specifically being targeted: the Russian state is surveilling students' social media accounts regarding LGBTQ activity (Baume, 2020); in Pittsburgh, police surveilled social media accounts of Black Lives Matter activists (Riehl, 2020). There is no reason to believe Jews could not also become targets.

Social media algorithms are adaptive and favor content with lots of engagement. The buzz from engagement with negative, harmful, or hateful content creates something that Chamath Palihapitiya, Facebook's former vice president of user growth called "dopamine-driven feedback-loop," which he fears has a massive negative impact on society (Brown, 2017). To exemplify, it can be said that antisemitic content, when it is liked and shared and commented on, constitutes social validation and reward for the user who posted it, and, thus, social media encourages the creation and dissemination of hateful content, such as antisemitism. A recent study shows how Facebook, with the help of a "stimulus-response loop," prioritizes incendiary content, such as hateful speech and visuals, which subsequently becomes normalized. The study further shows how recommendation algorithms, a feature of many social media platforms, lead users toward consuming more extreme content (Munn, 2020). It can be concluded that through algorithmic selection, elevation, and recommendation of content

that has lots of engagement (which often contains incendiary content), social media companies shape and manipulate users' perception of what is acceptable.

Social media companies also provide digital infrastructure to extremists. Despite deplatforming efforts, terror organizations are continuously and extensively using Twitter and YouTube more or less openly. Recently, accounts of the so-called Islamic State have been found on the relatively new social media platform TikTok, which is mostly used by children and young adults (Wells, 2019). The extreme right has successfully utilized several platforms and their technology to recruit followers and to widely disseminate hateful content so extensively that social scientist Julia Ebner has called them "radicalization machines" (2020). Efforts to tackle hate speech in general and antisemitism in particular have been irresponsibly ineffective, and the resources dedicated to these efforts have been inconsequential in light of the astronomical profits some platforms have accumulated. As the number of incidents where a connection between hate content on the platforms and offline violence seems to exist continues to mount, the task of removing hateful content is left to algorithmic hate speech detection and the problematic concept of content moderators (see below).

Counter-strategies

Artificial Intelligence (AI) to Remove Hate?

Antisemitism on social media exemplifies the difficulties of algorithmic hate detection, which could also be called "AI to remove hate." To detect antisemitic hate on social media, AI has to be fed with antisemitic keywords and content. But with constant changes in technology and changing restrictions to combat hate, expressions of antisemitism also adapt. Thus, AI needs to adapt continuously as well, in addition to the challenge of having to be fed with antisemitic keywords and examples in virtually all languages, and staying up-to-date on forms in which antisemitic expressions occur. Another challenge is that algorithmic detection by keywords does not discriminate between hateful and educational content. This became apparent in efforts to educate about the Holocaust to counter Holocaust denial on the platforms. Educational content ended up being removed because of the platforms' community standards on hate speech due to AI's inability to distinguish Holocaust denial from Holocaust education (Sales, 2021). There is another issue with AI and that is bias, because as mathematician Cathy O'Neil said in an interview with NPR in 2018: "Algorithms embed existing bias into code." AI can never be ethical. It can only reflect the algorithms' creators – mathematicians and computer scientists who are still predominantly white, cisgender, and male (cp. O'Neil, 2017, p. 3).

In addition to using automatic hate speech detection, social media companies rely on users, Think Tanks, and NGOs that deal with the matter to flag and report hate. The project "Decoding Antisemitism" at the Center for Antisemitism Research Berlin combines qualitative antisemitism studies with

machine learning and quantitative research in German, English, and French (ZfA/KCL, 2021). This pioneering project has a lot of potential. However, relying solely on artificial intelligence to solve this issue is problematic, for the reasons explained above. Moreover, there is no process that prevents content that has been removed – whether detected by AI or by a content moderator – from simply being posted again.

AI has mostly been trained to detect hate speech and is in its infancy with regard to detecting hateful visuals. While it may currently be able to detect symbols like swastikas, it might take a long time until it can identify the semiotic complexity of an antisemitic meme.⁶

Content Moderation

In a 2021 report, researchers at the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) evaluated antisemitic content on Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram for six weeks. As a result, CCDH found that the social media companies acted on less than 84% of the reported antisemitic incidents on their platforms. Altogether the CCDH collected 714 antisemitic posts, which had been viewed a shocking 7.3 million times by social media users. There is an excess of violent content on social media, including livestreams and videos of rape, murder, suicides, beheadings, and torture. This may be one reason why antisemitic hate speech is not being treated as a top priority. The failure to remove antisemitic content from the platforms may also lie in the fact that the responsible content moderators are not encouraged and educated appropriately. The earlier-mentioned study by the CCDH shows that Facebook removed only 14 out of 129 posts (10.9%), Twitter 15 out of 137 (11%), TikTok 22 out of 119 (18.5%), Instagram 52 out of 277 (18.8%), and YouTube removed 11 out of 52 (21.2%) reported antisemitic content (CCDH, 2021).

Despite being ineffective at getting hate off the platforms, content moderators still play a crucial role in deciding what gets removed. Facebook, for example, currently employs around 15,000 content moderators worldwide (Simon and Bowman, 2019). In contrast, a study by the World Jewish Congress shows that every 83 seconds, antisemitic content is posted on all social media platforms (WJC, 2016). This shows that content moderation is clearly inadequate and cannot be the solution. The WJC study is based on search results for antisemitic keywords. Therefore, the number of actual cases must be much higher because allusions, irony, and coded forms of antisemitism are not recorded (Hübscher, 2021, p. 103). These staggering numbers beg the question of how to tackle antisemitism on social media.

Counter-speech

Against the backdrop that antisemitism on social media is amplified by the platforms' technology and business model, the question arises why there is still a big emphasis on counter-speech and reporting content by users. All platforms

encourage their users to report hateful content, although antisemitism is currently not even listed as an independent option to flag (Hübscher, 2021, p. 108). The reported content is then evaluated by content moderators who, if necessary, initiate measures to remove the posts based on a platform's community guidelines (*Ibid*, p. 106). Several NGOs and Think Tanks encourage users to engage in counter-speech to combat antisemitism. A recent study on counter-speech by Jewish organizations below antisemitic posts shows that the opposing comments have longer and stronger engagement on Twitter (Ozalp et al., 2020). However, counter-speech does not remove antisemitic hate speech. It actually elevates the visibility of antisemitic posts through engagement with it. Those who use counter-speech also tend to fall into the trap of using violent language themselves in their efforts to attack antisemitism, which actually only creates more hateful content.

State of Research

A brief overview of the work that has been done so far will show where research is needed most. Already in 2008, Andre Oboler described “Antisemitism 2.0” as a combination of technology and a new social environment in which antisemitism is spread with unprecedented effectiveness (Oboler, 2008). Antisemitism no longer has any geographical or linguistic boundaries on social media (Web 2.0), and multimodal posts generate new forms of disseminating hate. Oboler published a second report in 2016, called “Measuring the Hate,” which found the most antisemitic content on YouTube (41%), at that time the platform most popular among young people (Oboler, 2016). Monika Schwarz-Friesel’s long-term study “Antisemitism 2.0 and the Cybercult of Hate” found that antisemitism had normalized, qualitatively radicalized, and intensified. However, this study does not distinguish between content in emails, on websites, and on social media (Schwarz-Friesel, 2018). Given the differences between the underlying technologies, making this distinction is very important. The Community Trust Service report on antisemitism in the United Kingdom from 2008 to 2018 shows a high increase in antisemitic statements on social networks for 2018 (CTS, 2018). The 2019–2020 report by the Israeli Kantor Center on global antisemitism indicates that attacks on Jewish people had increased by 22% from 2018 to 2019 (2020, p. 26), accompanied by a sharp rise in antisemitic incidents on social media, such as the dissemination of the anti-Jewish documents of the Halle assassin on the platforms (2020, p. 33). What the reports on the amount of antisemitism on social media usually have in common is the lack of a clear methodology. In contrast, the report “Best Practices to Combat Antisemitism on Social Media” submitted to the US Department of State Office of Religion and Global Affairs includes the methodology and finds that there is a need for a clearer legal framework and cooperation between scholars, practitioners, and policy makers (ISCA, 2017). The briefing paper “Hosting the ‘Holohoax’: A Snapshot of Holocaust Denial on Social Media” by Jakob Guhl and Jakob Davey for the Institute for Strategic

Dialogue (2020) that gives insight on the phenomena also includes a comprehensible methodology of how each platform was investigated. In continuation of his reports from 2008 and 2016, in his most recent publication, Oboler (2021) looks at the issue at the global level and argues that it needs global political efforts, education of the public, and research funding to combat antisemitism on the platforms.

While the majority of the output is reports and analyses from Think Tanks, NGOs, and research institutes, there are some quantitative and qualitative studies on antisemitism on social media by individual researchers. Allington and Joshi's (2020) analysis of comments under British conspiracy believer David Icke's YouTube videos concludes that the video-sharing platform elevates content of antisemitic conspiracy fantasies. Allington, Buarque, and Flores examine both right-wing and left-wing antisemitic conspiracy fantasies on YouTube and find that YouTube users respond to latently antisemitic content with explicit antisemitic expressions (2021). That antisemitic insinuations can incite and lead users to reproduce antisemitism and even call for violence is also a key finding of Hübscher's analysis of Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*'s Facebook post (2020). Allington also conducted research into Facebook groups associated with the British Labour Party. In the discourse on Facebook, based on a survey of attitudes toward Jew and Israel, users reject the existence of antisemitism within the party and expel those who want to challenge antisemitism (2018).⁷ The research team around Günther Jikeli et al. (2019) shows how the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism can be applied to analyze tweets.⁸ The paper is part of a research project at the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism at Indiana University Bloomington, for which the interdisciplinary team of scholars created an annotation portal. Everyone who is interested can have a try at annotating tweets that might be antisemitic or not.⁹

The quantitative study "Antisemitism on Twitter: Collective Efficacy and the Role of Community Organizations in Challenging Online Hate Speech" shows that when antisemitic hate speech is countered on Twitter, the positive counter-post attracts more engagement (Ozalp et al., 2020). While the study shows positive effects of counter-speech, there is no qualitative analysis of the arguments employed in the counter-speech. Further, it should be underlined again that counter-speech does not prevent antisemitic content to appear on social media.

The dearth of available scholarly investigations contrasts sharply with the urgency of the issue. Though some academic articles deal with antisemitism on social media, as of now, only a few conferences and scholarly lectures have been dedicated to this issue, which is often dealt with instead in a way that disregards the specific dynamics of social media, and the possibility to disseminate antisemitic content to large audiences. Not surprisingly, the lack of scholarship on antisemitism on social media is thus reflected in the inadequate response to antisemitic content on the platforms from the social network companies themselves, and by insufficient or ineffective counter-strategies from politics, nongovernmental organizations, and educational institutions.

Research Gaps

Antisemitism on social media as an object of study provides countless opportunities for scholars, given how many large gaps there are where research is needed. There are numerous directions scholarships could take. Here are just a few examples. There are no studies to date of how antisemitism on social media is perceived, especially by non-Jewish users. Up to now, existing scholarship is also limited to Western countries. This is why an international effort is needed that engages scholars across linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries in research on antisemitism on social media. Such efforts would also hopefully lead to more research on the intersection of antisemitism with other forms of hate. The spread of disinformation on social media has received some scholarly attention. However, there have been no investigations of the connection between antisemitism and disinformation on social media. Most of the scholarly attention has been given to explicit forms of antisemitism. Still, it must be assumed that implicit expressions of antisemitic narratives, tropes, and cues are common and especially dangerous due to their normalizing potential.¹⁰ These examples highlight yet again that the complexity of the issue requires interdisciplinary research. Qualitative and quantitative research into effective counter-measures to antisemitism on social media is also badly needed. The majority of research so far has been focused on antisemitic hate speech. However, a lot of content on social media is not speech. Especially the newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok specialize in images and videos and are most prominent among children and young adults. Thus, research into visual expressions of antisemitism and their perception is also urgently needed. As are studies of how antisemitism is expressed on mainstream social media in comparison to fringe platforms, messengers, and other hybrid networks. There are many more avenues for scholars to explore, including the issue of antisemitic memetic warfare, the weaponization of antisemitic hate speech in political discourse, gender-specific antisemitic hate, the targeting and trolling of Jewish political leaders, and also the questions surrounding who benefits (monetarily and otherwise) of antisemitism on social media. Research on how expressions of antisemitism on the networks adapt to technology and restrictions is also needed, given that social media technology constantly evolves, and new platforms will certainly go online in the future.

Research Challenges

The reluctance of researchers to engage in this work is understandable, given the obstacles. Researching antisemitism on social media requires engaging with the issues surrounding social media technology, which is not easily accessible to or written for humanities and social science scholars, and the technologies are also constantly changing. Qualitative studies must be backed up with quantitative analysis with the help of sophisticated software. Access for scholars to social media data is unregulated. Facebook for example partners with researchers they select

and grants them access to their data. Recently, Facebook excluded researchers who investigated the use of political ads on the platform, which has drawn a lot of concern and critique from within the tech and academic community (Edelmann, 2021). Twitter is more transparent: on their developer platform, Twitter has published comprehensive information of what the platform provides to researchers at institutions and universities after they apply. Research projects can outsource their social media data collection to specialized firms. However, this also means there is an increase in the needed funding to conduct research on antisemitism when it is focused on social media. One way to avoid such outsourcing and the related costs would be cooperation between faculty in computer science, linguistics, and antisemitism studies. Such cooperation should be encouraged and supported by universities and grant-making institutions.

Due to social media's global availability and their dependence on user-created content, publishing research on social media also comes with unresolved copyright issues, which academic publishers and journals will hopefully be able to address in the near future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite being crucial to the dissemination of antisemitism, the technology and business model of social media has largely been overlooked. The majority of sources available on antisemitism on social media are published by NGOs, Think Tanks, and research institutes and focused mostly on frequency and descriptions of antisemitic incidents on the platforms. But there is also a small but promising body of individual papers by interdisciplinary teams and with a qualitative focus. While discourse analysis of antisemitic expressions against the backdrop of the history of antisemitism is crucial, the underlying technology and business that drives the dissemination of antisemitism on social media cannot be omitted. University programs and academic institutions that deal with antisemitism need to begin to focus on social media and provide the relevant courses and research infrastructure. Because comprehensive research of antisemitism on social media needs additional training and access to often expensive research tools or outsourced data collection, funding for research projects needs to be provided accordingly. To avoid bias and to extend the scope of antisemitism research, there is a need for interdisciplinary and diverse research teams to investigate antisemitism on social media in many languages. Antisemitism represents a long tradition of violence and even genocide. Amplified by social media, antisemitism is weaponized and disseminated on an unmatched scale and is associated with offline violence. Its victims and all the victims of antisemitic violence deserve these efforts.

Notes

1 We would like to dedicate this chapter to the victims, their families, and everybody else affected by the terror attacks in Halle and Hanau in Germany. Our research is

motivated by the hope to contribute to the prevention of the circulation of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of violence on social media, and its effects on people in the real world.

- 2 On the perception of antisemitism, see also Chapter 11 in this volume.
- 3 Troll Farms are collectively organized attacks on social media that involve a large number of users who get paid for coming together with thousands of computers to attack specific targets with misinformation and hate speech (see Inside a Ukrainian Troll Farm – OCCRP for an example). For more information on troll attacks, see Chapter 5 in this volume.
- 4 Where they shop online but also offline, what they search, with whom they are connected.
- 5 Social media are big business. In July 2021, social media had 4.48 billion active users worldwide – approximately half the world's population, and more than twice as many as in 2015. [<https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>]. Facebook, which was launched in 2004, has 2.89 billion active users and is the biggest social network. The company reported revenue of \$26.17 billion for the most recent quarter, which was up 48% compared with the previous year. Facebook's net income grew by 94% to \$9.5 billion due to a 30% year-over-year increase in the average price per ad, and a 12% increase in the number of ads delivered [<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/28/facebook-fb-earnings-q1-2021.html>]. Altogether social network advertising revenue rose from \$21.49 billion in 2017 to \$36.14 billion in 2019, and is projected to reach \$50.89 billion by 2021 [<https://www.statista.com/statistics/271259/advertising-revenue-of-social-networks-in-the-us/>].
- 6 See Chapter 9 for a comprehensive reconstruction of an antisemitic meme. Further, we would like to thank Sophie Schmalenberger for her suggestions in this context.
- 7 For more on antisemitism in the Labour Party, see Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 8 See also Chapter 12 in this volume.
- 9 <https://annotationportal.com/>.
- 10 For more information on implicit forms of antisemitism and antisemitic cues, see Chapter 3 in this book.

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2

DEEP STATE, CHILD SACRIFICES, AND THE “PLANDEMIC”

The Historical Background of Antisemitic Tropes within the QAnon Movement

Armin Langer

Introduction

At the time of writing this, in the summer of 2021, the novel coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing global crisis. More than 200 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported worldwide, resulting in more than 4.6 million deaths. Authorities have responded by implementing travel restrictions, lockdowns, and facility closures to slow the disease’s spread. But the novel coronavirus pandemic and the government restrictions have also resulted in misinformation and conspiracy myths about the scale of the pandemic and the origin, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of the disease. Wittingly and unwittingly, false information has been spread by state media of countries such as China or Russia, by politicians, including heads of state of the United States and Brazil, by prominent individuals, and especially through social media (Davis, Fenton, Freedman, & Khiabany, 2020, pp. xii–xiii). Some people are convinced that the virus is a bioweapon accidentally or purposefully leaked from a laboratory, a population control scheme, or the side effect of 5G upgrades to cellular networks (Singh Jat & Singh, 2020, p. 43). One movement, in particular, gained much influence during this time: QAnon.

After introducing the origins and formation of QAnon, this chapter will give the historical background and context behind antisemitic conspiracy myths within the QAnon movement. While there is already a growing literature body on QAnon – and I will make use of this scholarship – the historical background of QAnon tropes has not been presented before. This chapter will examine some of the most potent antisemitic myths, such as the legends of a Jewish world conspiracy and blood libel stories, and show how these myths have persisted and been reproduced by QAnon. By creating this link between historical antisemitic canards and contemporary conspiracy myths reproduced by QAnon, I

wish to underline the continuity of antisemitism throughout the centuries into the current world of social media. Since the antisemitic content behind some of the QAnon myths is not always explicit, reviewing the historical background of these myths can help the reader understand the true nature and danger of the QAnon movement.

QAnon: An International Meta-Conspiracy

Starting on October 28, 2017, a user calling themselves Q began posting a series of messages on the anonymous imageboard 4chan.¹ In their post, Q, most likely an American individual or group, claimed to be a high-ranking government official with access to top, so-called Q level security clearance. Q wanted to inform the public about the “deep state’s” alleged war against US President Donald Trump. “Deep state” is a term that has been used to describe both real and imagined opponents of Trump. I will analyze this idea later on in this chapter. Q accused liberal celebrities and Democratic politicians of engaging in a child sex trafficking ring. Furthermore, Q claimed that Trump feigned collusion with Russians in order to enlist Robert Mueller to join him in exposing the ring and preventing a coup d'état by Democratic politicians Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton together with George Soros, a progressive Jewish philanthropist who is often demonized by the political right (Gallagher, Davey, & Hart, 2020, p. 3; Langer, 2021). Another forum where QAnon initially gained popularity was *Gab*, a far-right social media platform with a concept similar to Twitter.²

Since Q’s first post on 4chan, thousands of posts have been made in the name of Q. While QAnon began on 4chan, by 2020, most “Qdrops” – new drops of information – were announced on the imageboard *8kun*, a site comparable to 4chan. Whether the “Qdrops” were revealed by the initial user Q or by their followers, also known as “Anons,” is unclear (Greenspan, 2020). The increasing number of “Qdrops” led to the growth of conspiracy myths ranging from anti-5G and anti-vaccine messages to theories asserting that the world is ruled by pedophile elites who would engage in cannibalism and ritual child sacrifices (Gallagher, Davey, & Hart, 2020, p. 3). But QAnon did not gain its popularity only by being active on far-right portals. Soon, QAnon became active on mainstream platforms, too, especially on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As a result of Facebook and YouTube tolerating QAnon, the conspiracy myth could reach a wider audience than ever before.³

Ethnographer Brian Friedberg (2020) has suggested that “[t]he longer an infectiously bad idea goes undetected and undebunked, the more likely it is to spread and develop social importance.” Many QAnon keywords and topics are relatively unimportant from a scientific or journalistic point of view, such as adrenochrome. There is hardly any information on these subjects that is not coming from “Anons” themselves. This lack of confrontation with conspiracy myths created a void that is filled with QAnon disinformation. Since there are no or hardly any serious sources available, Friedberg argues, search algorithms will

present what is available, that is, the conspiracy myths themselves. Due to the mainstream platforms' toleration of these conspiracy myths, QAnon became an international phenomenon. The Anti-Defamation League recorded more than 3.3 million posts on Twitter referencing QAnon between October 2017 and January 2018 (ADL, 2020). In 2020, QAnon groups alone on Facebook had over three million members (Sen & Zadrozny, 2020).

But QAnon is not restricted to social media. "Anons" can be seen at populist rallies where they are recognizable by wearing the letter Q or holding a banner with that sign (Barker, 2020). WWG1WGA is a slogan that one can also see on QAnon adherents' T-Shirts and banners: QAnon believers commonly tag their social media posts with the hashtag #WWG1WGA, signifying the motto "where we go one, we go all" (Thomas & Zhang, 2020). Journalist Isaac Stanley-Becker (2018) noted after attending a Trump rally in Tampa, Florida, that believers of QAnon were "front and center" at the event. "As the president spoke, a sign rose from the audience. 'We are Q,' it read." Stanley-Becker observed and concluded that "QAnon crosses a new frontier."⁴

One of the characteristics of QAnon that contributed to its rapid success is its fluidity. It does not focus on one individual or group but spreads multiple conspiracy myths about numerous individuals and groups at once. QAnon has also been described as a "meta-conspiracy" for it weaves various conspiracy myths together, for instance, conspiracy myths about vaccines with that of a "deep state" (Gallagher, Davey, & Hart, 2020, p. 3; Schabes, 2020, p. 8). This fluidity made it easy to adapt QAnon to political contexts outside of the United States. After 2018, several new QAnon social media pages, groups, and accounts were created in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, and quickly amassed serious numbers of followers. One of the largest QAnon platforms in Europe was the German-language YouTube channel *Qlobal-Change*, created in October 2018 with over 105,000 subscribers in September 2020, shortly before YouTube shut down the channel. Another main QAnon resource in German-speaking countries is the site *Qlobal-change.blogspot.com*, which dates back to 2018. The site aims "to give people without the necessary language skills an insight into the Q-movement in the USA." European websites, including *Qlobal-change.blogspot.com*, assert that the "deep state" knew no borders and slowly morphed the original QAnon theories to target local representatives of the "international elites" using the already known QAnon themes, such as pedophilia or the advancement of New World Order (Labbe, Padovese, Richter, & Harling, 2020).

The rapid growth of QAnon was also fueled by the support of previously active conspiracy myth adherents and far-right figures. German R&B singer Xavier Naidoo, known for his propagation of far-right political views, has been a driving force behind QAnon in German-speaking countries. He published videos in 2020 on his Telegram channel that embraced QAnon and claimed that governments are using the pandemic to conduct a rescue operation to free children imprisoned by the "elites" (Metzger, 2020). Dutch filmmaker Janet

Ossebard produced a ten-part YouTube series under the title "Fall of the Cabal," which presented the core material on Q and the "cabal." Before coming out as an "Anon," Ossebard gained attention for spreading stories about crop circles having alien origins (van Erp, 2020). Other already existing outlets contributed to the spread of the QAnon in Europe too, such as the French UFO-believer portal *ExoPortail.com*, the Italian pro-Salvini YouTube channel *Dentro la Notizia* ("Inside the News"), the German edition of the portals *Epoch Times* and *Compact Online* or the German conspiracist platform *Pravda TV* (Labbe, Padovese, Richter, & Harling, 2020).

One of the earliest appearances of QAnon in Germany was the 2018 Bavarian State Election when QAnon supporters pushed the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* ("Alternative for Germany," AfD) party.⁵ But QAnon gained power in Germany, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Klara Sinha and Simon Schwarz (2020) noted, the pandemic proved to be a catalyst for conspiracy myths on social media platforms.⁶ QAnon played a crucial role in the rallies against the German government's COVID-19-related measures. They did not only mobilize people to join the protests but were also visible with their symbols at the events. Many "Anons" described themselves with the German word *Querdenker* ("unconventional thinker"), which, nota bene, also starts with a Q (Barker, 2020).

Antisemitic Dog-Whistle

The nonprofit Media Diversity Institute noted that "while much of the content monitored did not include overt antisemitism, many of those within the QAnon movement utilized antisemitic dog whistling" (MDI, 2020, S. 5). The term "dog-whistle politics," or simply "dog-whistling," refers to the use of messages embedded in speeches that seem innocent to a general audience but resonate with a specific public attuned to receive them. The term uses the analogy to the dog-whistle used by shepherds. These whistles' high-frequency sound is audible to dogs but not to sheep and humans. Dog-whistle politics uses code words that empower members of certain groups but might be overheard by the broader population (Haney López, 2014). For instance, as Bethany L. Albertson (2014) has shown, the phrase "family values" in a political campaign can function as "dog-whistle," since it empowers conservative Christian voters without alienating non-Christian voters.

Dog-whistle politics plays an essential role in promoting antisemitic tropes, as I have shown elsewhere (Langer, 2021; Langer, 2022). Such antisemitic dog-whistle politics references certain people, terms, and narratives that may appear vague and harmless without context, but which signal a form of antisemitic hate speech. Dog-whistle is constantly used as a tactic by QAnon to denounce prominent Jewish public figures and the global Jewry in ways that are all too familiar. Since the encoded language within QAnon might not be apparent at first sight, this aspect needs further explanation. In the following, this chapter will present

some of the most common QAnon conspiracy myths and show how they apply a coded or suggestive antisemitic language.

The “Deep State”

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the “deep state” narrative has been a core part of QAnon since its beginnings. The deep state theory suggests the existence of collusion within the US political system where the “deep state” constitutes a hidden government within and/or next to the legitimately elected one. QAnon sees the “deep state” in the opponents of Trump – but Trump and his “real-life” supporters refer to the deep state, too. Republican politician Newt Gingrich accused the Congressional Budget Office of being “part of the deep state” for criticizing Senate Republicans (Klaas, 2017, p. 168). *Fox News* anchor and Trump confidant Sean Hannity claimed that the judges who nullify Trump’s orders are part of the “deep state” and are “actively seeking to take out” the president. *InfoWars* host Alex Jones claimed that the rulings of these judges were part of a plot to assassinate Trump (Klaas, 2017, p. 176). President Trump himself called the State Department the “Deep State Department” during a briefing on the pandemic (Gross, 2020). Trump has often cited the “deep state” as a supposed obstacle to him and his allies (Frum, 2020). As if this weren’t enough, “Anons” accuse the “deep state” of being responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this chapter, I argue and provide proof that we can compare this essential QAnon narrative of a “deep state conspiracy,” that is also widespread outside of QAnon, to the idea of a Jewish world conspiracy. Such conspiracy stories about Jews plotting against non-Jews have been around for at least two centuries. They go back to a French Jesuit priest named Augustin Barruel, who envisioned a conspiracy of Freemasons and revolutionaries against Christian Europe (Burmistr, 2010). In 1806, Barruel received a letter by a certain Giovanni Battista Simonini, who congratulated the priest for unmasking the “infamous sects who prepare the ways of the antichrist,” but criticized him for neglecting the most powerful force of them all: The Jews (Markner, 2014, p. 311). Even though Barruel (1995, S. 130, 171) described the alleged conspirators as the “synagogue of impiety” and compared the philosophers of the Enlightenment to “blasphemous” Jews, he did not emphasize the Jews’ alleged role in the conspiracy. Simonini was not satisfied with Barruel’s antisemitic comparisons. He testified that both Freemasonry and the Illuminati were founded by Jews and served eventually the Jews’ domination. Simonini’s letter is one of the earliest examples of antisemitic world conspiracies (Markner, 2014, pp. 311–312). Soon, many others followed, envisioning a secret international Jewish world conspiracy (Burmistr, 2010; Langer, 2021, p. 170).

The wave of Jewish emancipation in the second half of the nineteenth century contributed to the proliferation of antisemitic conspiracy myths. By that time, the so-called Jewish international elite was considered a separate threat from the Freemasons (Byford, 2011, p. 46). Antisemitic conspiracy stories were also popular in Russia, where, in 1905, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was

published. The document's publishers asserted that the *Protocols* are the minutes of a late nineteenth-century meeting where Jewish leaders discussed their goal of global Jewish hegemony by subverting the morals of non-Jews, and by controlling the press and the world's economies. The *Protocols* were probably created by the Tsarist secret police and soon translated into other languages and distributed all over Europe and the world. In the period between 1920, when the *Protocols* acquired international fame, and the defeat of the Nazis in 1945, the book was outsold only by the Bible (Byford, 2011, p. 46).

Prior to the global spread of the Jewish world conspiracy narrative detailed in the *Protocols*, Jews in central Europe were accused of forming a "state within a state" (*Staat im Staate*). Historian Jacob Katz (1982, p. 192) noted that the term had already been used to stigmatize Catholics when it was introduced in an antisemitic context by Prussian Lutheran pastor Johann Heinrich Schulz in 1784. Schulz employed the term amid a public debate surrounding the publication of Prussian official Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's work *Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews* in 1781. Von Dohm placed the challenge of Jewish integration into the center of public interest. While von Dohm appealed for the Prussian state to guarantee equal rights for Christians and Jews, Schulz argued that Jews voluntarily separate themselves from the "Western" societies and form a separate, exclusive society by their adherence to the Jewish religious code. According to Schulz, Jewish religious norms were set up to be a barrier between Jews and non-Jews and to guarantee the Jews' separation (Katz, 1982, p. 134; Langer, 2020, pp. 102–104).

Prussian philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, one of the pioneers of the idea of a united German nation, also promoted the assumption that Jews would strive for the creation of parallel societies within the German states (Langer, 2020, pp. 103–104). Fichte contributed significantly to the popularization of this myth (Katz, 1982). According to historian Malachi Hacohen (2019, p. 180), in the course of the nineteenth century the argument of a Jewish "state within a state" became the central argument against Jewish emancipation. This charge was repeated in virtually every nineteenth-century emancipation discussion. The accusation of Jews trying to build a state within a state remained even throughout the centuries and served as fertile soil for a series of conspiracy myths about Jews plotting against non-Jews. I have written more extensively about this conspiracy myth elsewhere (Langer, 2020).

Although I am not aware of previous scholarship that pointed out a connection between these two narratives, I argue that the "state within the state" trope complements the narrative of a "Jewish world conspiracy." Both these theories promote the idea of the existence of a secretive group that works according to their own rules, separately from the majority. Both theories assume that the works of this small, secretive group go against the interest of the majority. The "state within a state" and the "Jewish world conspiracy" theories overlap even when it comes to defining who the members of this secretive group are – the Jewish community.

Historian Norman Cohn (1966) showed how powerful the myths of a Jewish world conspiracy were. Cohn asserted that they served as a “warrant for genocide” in the Nazi period. I would argue that the antisemitic myths of a Jewish world conspiracy have not lost their relevance even today – and QAnon is proof of that. QAnon is part of this tradition and reproduces these antisemitic myths when discussing a “deep state” conspiracy. However, antisemites have not always been as explicit as the authors and promoters of the *Protocols* or the above-mentioned German intellectuals opposing Jewish emancipation. Often, antisemitic authors come to express their conspiracy myths by using code words instead of accusing Jews outright. The first code word for the Jewish world conspiracy described in the *Protocols* was “the Rothschilds” – a code word that is still frequently used today, also by “Anons.”

The Rothschilds and Soros

Ever since the nineteenth century, the banking dynasty of the Rothschilds has been the epitome of the international Jewish conspiracy. For antisemites in the nineteenth century, the Rothschilds combined Jewishness, financial wealth, and international connections. They loomed as a symbol of the rising power of Jews under modern capitalism. The anti-Rothschild conspiracy myths blended antisemitism with anti-capitalism and anti-modernism. Claims, for example, that the Rothschilds were behind the creation of sinister secret and semi-secret organizations have been featured in most modern and even contemporary New World Order conspiracy stories. Even though the family failed to establish a solid outpost in the United States and their branches remain centered in Europe even now, the image of the Rothschild family has been adopted by American antisemitic actors, too (Byford, 2011, pp. 104–106; Langer, 2022). “Anons” often refer to the Rothschilds as well.

The notion of the Rothschilds’ alleged power resonates up to the present day, even though the banking dynasty declined in the twentieth century and none of the current family members are particularly well-known for their politics or social activism. According to the S&P Global Market Intelligence data, the Rothschild & Co investment bank – which was created in 2003 after the merger of the British and the French branches of the family – is not even among the 100 largest banks worldwide (Garrido & Chaudhry, 2019). Nonetheless, the Rothschilds were accused of financing the spread of the novel coronavirus and a series of other manipulations. QAnon supporters claim that the Rothschild family is deeply involved in the “evil project of billionaires” and are “exploiters of the pandemic” who own the COVID-19 “patents” that were supposedly used to manufacture the disease. To emphasize the Rothschilds’ alleged hidden agenda behind COVID-19, “Anons” often refer to the pandemic as “plandemic” (MDI, 2020, S. 8).

Many “Anons” do not only use the antisemitic code of the Rothschilds but also refer to American Jewish philanthropist and businessman George Soros.

Even though the Soros conspiracy myths have been around since the early 1990s, they did not gain international prominence till two decades later, as I have shown elsewhere (Langer, 2021). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán turned Soros into public enemy number one in 2013, portraying the billionaire as an enemy of the Hungarian people in posters and attack ads disguised as public service announcements. During the 2015 so-called migration crisis, Orbán falsely claimed that Soros brought the Muslim refugees arriving in Europe to de-Christianize the continent. This narrative has been taken over by nationalists and populists all over Europe and the United States (Langer, 2021; Langer, 2022). Since then, Soros, an individual whose Jewish origin is widely known, has often been cast as a puppet master who manipulates national events for malign purposes. In the antisemite's phantasy, George Soros fulfills a similar role to that of the Rothschilds. This might explain why Soros and the Rothschilds are often mentioned together in QAnon content (MDI, 2020, S. 8).

The "Anons" frequently refer to Soros. A QAnon Facebook video refers to George Soros as "the face of globalism" and the "evil creature." QAnon followers accused Soros of financing Omaha Native American political activist Nathan Phillips, who is known for his role in the January 2019 Lincoln Memorial confrontation in Washington, D.C., with teenagers wearing MAGA hats (Procházka & Blommaert, 2019, pp. 18, 21). QAnon framed the World Health Organization (WHO) as one of the "global" elite's vehicles to gain and/or maintain control. In their narrative, the WHO is run by Bill Gates and supported by the Rothschilds and Soros (MDI, 2020, S. 8).

Jewish public figures are singled out also by non-US QAnon groups. While American "Anons" focus on Soros and the Rothschilds, their French counterparts – for instance – portray Jewish-French public intellectuals Jacques Attali and Bernard Henri Lévy as associates of the Bilderberg group and blame them for conspiring in various forms of global domination, including those of a "New World Order" (MDI, 2020, S. 14). Besides, QAnon adherents often use the term "cabal" to describe the alleged intrigues of the elites. Wittingly or unwittingly, they are making use of a term that has been a motif of the antisemitic canon for centuries. The word cabal derives from Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical and spiritual interpretation of the Hebrew scripture. In Hebrew, Kabbalah means "receiving" or "accepting," denoting the secret level of Jewish exegesis. In non-Jewish European culture, Kabbalah became associated with occult doctrine and began to mean a group of plotters (Dan, 2006, p. 7). QAnon's decision to label the "international elites" as a "cabal" is further proof of antisemitic dog-whistling within the movement.

The use of hashtags is a unifying coding system for QAnon. Their posts include particular hashtags, such as #GeorgeSoros or #NWO, to promote the idea that Jews are trying to take over the world. In addition, they will tag non-Jewish "puppets" of these Jewish individuals (MDI, 2020, S. 14, 23). The use of the term "marionette" or "puppet" is a common antisemitic trope that paints the "Jew" as the puppet master pulling strings behind the scenes to their own profit.

The depiction of Biden as Soros' puppet is a recurring image in QAnon posts (see, e.g., Direct to the People, 2020). The same happens with other non-Jewish opponents of Trump.

Hollywood and the “Adrenochrome Harvesting”

One part of the “secret international elite” that is involved in the sacrifice of children is the “Hollywood elite.” By 2020, QAnon followers were advancing a story that “Hollywood elites” were engaged in “adrenochrome harvesting,” in which the hormone adrenaline is extracted from tortured children’s blood to be oxidized into the psychoactive drug adrenochrome. Adrenochrome is a drug used in medicine to slow blood loss by promoting clotting in open wounds. During the COVID-19 pandemic, “Anons” promoted the story that a big number of “liberal Hollywood” celebrities had come down with the novel coronavirus due to a tainted batch of adrenochrome (Adams, 2020).

The conspiracy myth of the secret drug adrenochrome that can prolong one’s life can be traced back to American author Hunter S. Thompson (1998, p. 132). Thompson wrote in his 1971 psychedelic novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “[t]he adrenaline glands from a *living* human body. [...] It’s no good if you get it out of a corpse.” That is, only through the sacrifice of a living human being can one extract adrenochrome. The idea was popularized in director Terry Gilliam’s 1998 film adaptation of the book. A YouTube clip of the scene with actor Johnny Depp taking adrenochrome has almost two million views, numerous comments pointing out how the Hollywood “elites” “put the truth right in front of our faces to mock us” (Movieclips, 2011). While many “Anons” seem to believe that adrenochrome is an existing drug used by the “elites” to extend their lives, it is noteworthy to remember that Gonzo journalism, Thompson’s writing style, is based around exaggeration of real-life events. Adrenochrome cannot reanimate the aging “international elites,” and Thompson did not actually believe that such a life-extending drug exists and admitted having made the whole thing up (Adams, 2020; Friedberg, 2020).

Many of the “Hollywood elites” accused of committing these crimes against children are not Jewish. QAnon believers accused, for instance, Oprah Winfrey of being a key figure in their alleged vast sex trafficking ring. Nonetheless, the critique of the “liberal Hollywood elites” is rooted in antisemitism. As early as in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan complained about the “immoral films being produced by the ‘Jew-controlled’ Hollywood film industry.” The *Dearborn Independent*, a newspaper owned by industrialist Henry Ford, claimed that there was a “Jewish supremacy” which was under the control of the “Jewish manipulators of the public mind.” Even in the 1970s, Jews were accused by the American far-right of promoting “anti-Christian and anti-American pictures” (Gillis, 2017, pp. 267, 280). In 1964, 50% of Americans believed that “the Jews” controlled Hollywood; in 2008, this number went down to only 22%. But this is still a high number, as Anti-Defamation League chairman Abe Foxman pointed out.

Although it is true that Jews are disproportionately represented in the American creative industry, Foxman said, the idea that “the Jews” control Hollywood is “very dangerous” (Stein, 2020). These antisemitic legends resonate well with QAnon’s claim of Hollywood actors harvesting adrenochrome from children.

Blood Libel and Ritualistic Sexual Abuses

During the novel coronavirus pandemic, Google Trends showed significant spikes in searches for adrenochrome. In July 2020, QAnon held the first “Child Lives Matter” protest in Hollywood to “expose” child trafficking, advertising the event with references to adrenochrome. Friedberg (2020) warned that “[a] centuries-old anti-Semitic myth is spreading freely on far-right corners of social media – suggesting a new digital Dark Age has arrived.” Legends of Jews killing Christian children and using their blood in rituals date back to at least the twelfth century. For centuries, when a Christian child went missing, it was common to blame the local Jews, even when there was no evidence of their involvement. Some Christians asserted that the Jews used children’s blood as an ingredient for the Passover unleavened matzah bread or believed that the wine that Jews drink at the Passover Seder celebrations was, in reality, blood. Others claimed that Jews used children’s blood as medicine or aphrodisiac. These myths are also known as “blood libel” or “ritual murder charge” and had frequently led to mob violence and pogroms and, occasionally, to the decimation of entire Jewish communities (Teter, 2020).

“Hurting children is one of the worst things you can say someone is doing. It’s an easy way to demonize your enemy,” said historian Kathryn Olmsted (Breland, 2019). This might explain why blood libel theories have not yet disappeared, as Jewish studies scholar Magda Teter (2020, pp. 1–2) noted. Teter listed a few recent blood libel cases: In 2015, British Neo-Nazis commemorated Little Hugh, allegedly a victim of ritual murder. Facebook took down a page called “Jewish ritual murder” only in 2019. The far-right terrorist who killed a Jewish woman in the Poway synagogue in 2019 invoked another alleged minor victim of Jewish ritual murders, Simon of Trent, in his online manifesto.

The blood libel is a recurring example of the QAnon dog-whistle. Under the hashtag #SaveOurChildren, QAnon has repeatedly claimed that there is an international network of elites abusing children for ritual purposes. In this regard, QAnon builds on a 2016 conspiracy myth known as Pizzagate. This myth asserted that Hillary Clinton and other prominent Democratic Party figures were running a child sex ring in tunnels beneath the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C.’s residential Chevy Chase neighborhood. The Pizzagate story has led to two attacks to date: One Pizzagate believer fired a gun in the restaurant in 2016, and another one set a fire in the restaurant in 2019. Even though no one was hurt in these incidents, they reveal the power of conspiratorial paranoia (Shermer, 2020). These attacks also show how powerful centuries-old antisemitic tropes can be.

The blood libel theory is connected to further conspiracy myths about the “elites” performing sexual crimes on the children involved in the rituals. QAnon updated the Pizzagate theory: While “traditional” Pizzagate believers claimed that the liberal elite’s sexual crimes were reduced to a Washington D.C. pizzeria, the “Qdrops” expanded this theory and claimed that this pedophile ring went international, involving sexual criminals from many countries, ranging from Hollywood to Europe (Neiwert, 2020, p. 85). Connecting ritual murder to sexual crime is not new. Accusing Jews of sexual crimes is part of the antisemitic canon. At the turn of the twentieth century, antisemites portrayed Jews as if they possessed over-abundant sexual drives and ran prostitution rings. Jews were linked to sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis, and to corrupt sexual morals. Antisemitic pamphlets claimed that the Jews’ circumcision caused sexual abnormalities (Rose, 2016, S. 14). The infamous German weekly *Der Stürmer* (1923–1945) sold the most copies when it ran special editions on alleged Jewish sex crimes and ritual murders (Bytwerk, 2005, p. 687). Accusations of ritualistic sexual murders engaged the public a century ago just as they engage social media users today.

Discussion: Recognizing and Challenging Antisemitism on Social Media

Conspiracism is growing all over the world, with populist politicians validating its believers.⁷ That is especially true for QAnon and the United States. Communication Studies scholar Megan Condis (2018, p. 102) has suggested that Trump gained alt-right political legitimacy by repeating and retweeting their memes and talking points on social media and in various interviews. The *New York Times* reported that Trump, as US President, promoted conspiracy myths in 1,710 of his tweets between January 2017 and October 2019. This is just one example of how conspiracy stories have infiltrated mainstream media and political rhetoric in recent years. Trump’s willingness to refer to conspiracy myths normalizes these myths and exposes vulnerable individuals to misinformation (Shear, Haberman, Confessore, Yourish, Buchanan, & Collins, 2019). Trump even had his photo taken with QAnon-promoting TV and radio host Michael “Lionel” Lebron (Hassan, 2019, p. 190). In December 2019, Trump retweeted the QAnon hashtag #WWG1WGA to his almost 70 million followers. In August 2020, Trump openly embraced QAnon and said in a White House briefing: “I don’t know much about the movement other than I understand they like me very much, which I appreciate” (Liptak, 2020; Relman, 2019). During the 2020 presidential election campaign, Trump repeatedly refused to condemn QAnon (Berman, 2020). This did not come as a surprise to many observers since, to paraphrase mental health counselor Steve Hassan (2019), QAnon is a form of “cult of Trump.” Thus, I argue, as president of the United States, Trump helped to legitimize and normalize antisemitism.

Conspiracy myths are often downplayed as the implausible fantasies of fringe groups of society. Even authorities and political scientists tend to describe

QAnon as “a fringe conspiracy theory” (Spaulding et al., 2019, p. 31; FBI, 2019). Nevertheless, a nontrivial 15% of Americans – 23% of Republicans – believe in QAnon myths (PRRI, 2021). There is a growing number of people making real-world, and at times violent, decisions based on QAnon content shared on social media. Conspiracy myths have an extraordinary power to motivate people to action. Antisemitic social media content can lead to hate crime and violence against Jews and other minorities, their allies or people perceived to be members of these groups (Gallagher et al., 2020, p. 3). Knowledge derived from an analysis of QAnon and antisemitic narratives among “Anons” can have significant public safety impacts, as well as impacts on protecting democratic institutions (Tangherlini et al., 2020, p. 34). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2019) labeled QAnon a domestic terror threat, observing that conspiracy myths “very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts.”

The FBI (2019, p. 1) warned that QAnon has already mobilized extremists who viewed “the activities of alleged conspirators as an existential threat that can only be stopped through drastic, or even violent means” (FBI, 2019, p. 7). In June 2018, QAnon supporter Matthew Wright drove his armored vehicle onto a bridge close to the Hoover Dam on the border between Nevada and Arizona, engaging in a standoff with the police. Wright sent Trump letters that included QAnon’s motto, “for where we go one, we go all” (Hassan, 2019, p. 191). In April 2020 train engineer Eduardo Moreno derailed a train, hoping to crash it into the US Navy Hospital Ship Mercy, docked at the Port of Los Angeles. Moreno wanted to draw attention to a COVID-19-related conspiracy, espoused by “Anons,” that the ship was taking COVID-19 victims to Guantanamo Bay (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 62). In the same month, the New York Police Department arrested Jessica Prim with a car full of knives threatening to kill Democratic presumptive presidential nominee Joe Biden. Prim’s Facebook page was full of QAnon references (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; McKay, 2020).

Violent cases of hate crimes driven by conspiracy myths are not a new phenomenon. Yet, as the formerly mentioned FBI (2019, pp. 4–5) report stressed, social media enables promoters of conspiracy myths to reach a greater audience at a faster pace than before. Steven Hassan (2019, p. xvi), too, emphasized the threat of the internet on young adults and stated that “through the media and the internet, people can be indoctrinated – and even recruited – on their smartphones and in their homes.” The “Anons” have been key actors in promoting disinformation related to COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd. In the 2020 US elections, there were 14 congressional candidates on the ballot expressing support for QAnon. The study also observed a significant increase in QAnon presence on Facebook and Instagram. One explanation for this surge was that people were spending more time on social media as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns (Gallagher et al., 2020, p. 3).

Social media platforms need to cooperate with antisemitism experts and implement a no-tolerance policy against antisemitism and other forms of hatred to prevent further acts by far-right terrorists radicalized on these platforms. But before they are able to define which posts fulfill the definition of antisemitic hate speech, they have to engage in the analysis of the narratives of these conspiracy myths. By presenting historical examples of the antisemitic canards that QAnon reproduces today, this chapter showed how QAnon promotes antisemitism.

Notes

- 1 4chan is a site that at the time of its 2003 launch focused on Japanese anime and manga. Today, it also devotes sub-sites to topics like “Weapons,” “Sexy Beautiful Women,” and “Politically Incorrect” (Conway et al., 2019, p. 11). Since 4chan does not require registration and anyone can post even without a username, it attracts many who wish to remain anonymous. It claims to have over 22 million monthly visitors, whose majority are assumed to be young men. 4chan is widely known for its “no rules” policy and for tolerating users’ posting of illegal content, including video recordings of animal and child pornography, threats and records of actual violence, misogyny, and racism. Q posted on the site’s “Politically Incorrect” (also known as /pol/) board. The /pol/ posts serve, in particular, the far-right, especially with their “ironic” memes attracting, and indeed indoctrinating, many young adults (Condis, 2018, pp. 102–106). The American human rights advocacy organization Southern Poverty Law Center warned of “a young generation of far-right activists raised on the internet [...] where the classic tenets of white nationalism [...] flourish under dizzying layers of toxic irony” (Hankes & Amend, 2018).
- 2 *Gab* became known to the wider audience after the report came out that the far-right terrorist who killed 11 people in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was active on *Gab* (Conway, Scrivens, & Macnair, 2019, p. 10; ISD, 2019, p. 27).
- 3 It should be noted that after the 2016 presidential election, when Facebook failed to recognize and eliminate disinformation pages, the platform developed a new algorithm that showed users on their newsfeed more posts coming from groups than from pages. By prioritizing groups and curbing the reach of media pages, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (2018) intended to promote “meaningful social interactions.” However, since Anons were active in Facebook groups, they received even more attention than before. YouTube’s recommendation algorithm played a key role in online radicalization too. Technology journalist Kevin Roose (2019) showed that if a user starts on YouTube with one QAnon video, the platform will suggest more, increasingly radical QAnon content. There are financial interests behind this algorithm: The longer YouTube keeps the users on their side, the more ads they can show the user and generate profit. The social media giants did not realize the danger of QAnon and/or prioritized profit and let QAnon spread. They started to eliminate QAnon content finally in the second half of 2020.
- 4 While there are real people who follow QAnon, many QAnon users are believed to be bots linked to Russia. According to the DC-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Russian government played a significant role in amplifying the QAnon conspiracy (Spaulding et al., 2019, pp. 31–32).
- 5 The London-based think tank Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2019, p. 23) observed that accounts spreading QAnon content often boosted pro-AfD campaign hashtags at the same time, for instance, by using hashtags such as #DrainTheSwamp, #HilaryForPrison, and #DrainTheDeepState together with pro-AfD hashtags

such as #linksliegenlassen ("#forgetabouttheleft"), #MerkelMussWeg ("#MerkelMustGo"), and #AfDwirkt ("#AfDworks"). The German QAnon movement is just one example of a new online sub-culture that is deepening ties between QAnon and the international far-right (ISD, 2019, pp. 23–24, 26).

- 6 During the COVID-19 crisis, QAnon has started to pique broader public curiosity all over Europe. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue analyzed 155,705 tweets in Spring 2020 with the hashtag #ChineseCoronavirus and found that three of the top ten hashtags used most in those posts were also tagged with #QAnon, #QAnon2020, and/or #QAnon2018 (ISD, 2020, p. 7). Facebook data from public groups and public pages shows an increase in posts mentioning the adrenochrome drug (ISD, 2020, p. 6).
- 7 Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum (2019) explained the rise of QAnon with the theory of a new type of conspiracism. Muirhead and Rosenblum stated that while classic conspiracy myths are supported by some alleged evidence, more recent conspiracy stories are asserted without even an attempt to find facts that would support them. On social media, it is not evidence that counts but much more the number of retweets, re-posts, and likes.

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3

TERTIARY ANTISEMITISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS OF GERMANY'S ALTERNATIVE FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

Sophie Schmalenberger and Monika Hübscher

Introduction¹

On May 8, 1945, after Germans had waged six years of war and genocide, the Nazi regime surrendered. In today's Germany, May 8 plays an important role in the commemoration of the Holocaust and World War II. Until the arrival of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) on the political scene in 2013, this was a consensus shared across all major political parties. The AfD has led to a dramatic shift: Now narratives that focus on German victimhood while deflecting and relativizing German guilt are being promoted by a party represented in all 16 state parliaments, and (since 2017) in the federal parliament as well.

Claiming to be the victim of "political correctness" and censorship in the "mainstream" media, the AfD uses social media strategically to circumvent journalistic gatekeeping and critique. Indeed, the AfD is the most successful party on German social media in general and appears to dominate Facebook in particular (Via and Heidi, 2021, p. 12). Social media provide an environment where AfD personnel can communicate their far-right ideology (Krämer, 2017), including historical revisionist and antisemitic messages (Hübscher, 2020) directly to (potential) supporters. In this chapter, we show how antisemitic cues are communicated by AfD personnel on the occasion of May 8, 2020. The 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe provided an occasion for the AfD to challenge the official narrative of German liberation by trying to rebrand the day as marking German suffering (Schmalenberger, 2021). Relying on the mixed-methods software MaxQDA for the analysis of selected social media posts, this contribution explores how this reinterpretation includes antisemitic cues, how these cues are communicated, and how they provide a breeding ground for antisemitic ideologies. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the antisemitic cues implied in AfD officials' social media posts on occasion of May 8, 2020?
- 2) What rhetorical strategies are used to communicate antisemitic cues?
- 3) How do social media users react to the respective posts?

To approach these questions, this chapter starts with a brief discussion of the role of May 8 in the official German memory culture, antisemitism within the AfD, and the AfD's strategic use of social media. Afterward the methodological approach and the analytical framework, as well as the material selected for analysis, will be introduced. This is followed by a presentation of the main findings regarding antisemitic cues and rhetorical strategies inherent to the AfD's social media posts. Additionally, to show how antisemitic cues are perceived, an exploration of respective user reactions is presented.

May 8 and German Postwar Memory Culture

The speech delivered by federal president Richard von Weizsäcker commemorating the 40th anniversary of May 8, 1945, in the German parliament was an important milestone in the state's official memory culture. Promising the German people redemption through remembrance he claimed that on May 8, 1945, the Germans had "not been defeated but liberated by the Allies from the inhuman system of Nazi tyranny" (von Weizsäcker, 1985). This marked a turning point in post-1945 West Germany. After decades of collective amnesia, remembering the Holocaust and World War II now became an act of memory political self-empowerment (Jureit and Schneider, 2011, p. 39): Instead of suppressing the past, the commemoration of Holocaust victims became the core of a new national self-understanding of modern Germany as a community of reformed perpetrators who had learned from their past (Forchtner, 2016). Since von Weizsäcker's speech, thus, May 8, 1945, is framed as the day of liberation in the dominant memory cultural narrative, a day that gave Germany the opportunity to become a better version of itself. May 8 thus marks a central date in the program of Germany's "memory theatre" (Bodemann, 1996; Czollek, 2018), featuring rituals such as wreath-laying ceremonies and speeches of high-ranking German politicians that symbolically commemorate the (Jewish) victims of the Holocaust and World War II.

AfD and Antisemitism

The AfD has repeatedly tried to frame incidents of primary antisemitism (Benz, 2016) within the party as isolated cases or misunderstandings (Pfahl-Traughber, 2016; Salzborn, 2017, p. 33ff), while accusing critics of aiming to defame the AfD. In reality, however, the party tolerates antisemites within its ranks, as illustrated by the case of AfD member Wolfgang Gedeon, who promoted narratives of an alleged Zionist world conspiracy in public statements and writings for many

years. Gedeon's eventual exclusion from the party in 2020, rather than indicating a changed mindset, is widely viewed as an attempt to save the party's reputation (Salzborn, 2018, p. 89). Secondary antisemitism, namely, attempts to trivialize and relativize the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes, are intrinsic features of the AfD as becomes apparent in the AfD's basic program, which states for example that "German memory culture, currently confined to National Socialism should be replaced by a broader perspective on history that includes the positive and identity-forming aspects of German history"² (AfD, 2016, p. 48, translated by the authors). This revisionist programmatic paradigm has also been poignantly expressed in statements by former AfD chair Alexander Gauland, who trivialized the Nazi rule as mere "bird shit in over 1,000 years of our German history"³ (AfD Bundestagsfraktion, 2018, translated by the authors), or the AfD leader in the state of Thuringia, Björn Höcke, who claimed that the Germans were the only people who would erect a memorial of shame in the heart of their own capital, and demanded a "180-degree turn" (Oltermann, 2017) in German memory politics.

As strategic provocations, these reinterpretations of Germany's twentieth-century history aim to break existing taboos in public discourse and mainstream historical revisionist and antisemitic interpretations of the German past (Wodak, 2015, 2019). To deflect accusations of right-wing extremism and antisemitism (Wodak, 2015, p. 95ff), the AfD symbolically distances itself from Nazi Germany (Salzborn, 2018, p. 78ff). Moreover, the inner-party group "Jews in the AfD," the creation of the Office of Antisemitism Commissioner as well as statements declaring the AfD's support for the Israeli government function as symbolic shields to legitimize and normalize the party's far-right positions. The party directs its criticism exclusively at Islamic forms of antisemitism (Grimm and Kahnmann, 2017, p. 51ff) and thus simultaneously defies accusations of Nazism and legitimizes the AfD's Islamophobic political positions.

While selected incidents of primary and secondary antisemitism and the general historical revisionist ambitions and statements of the AfD have thus been the subject of academic elaborations (Salzborn, 2016; Pfahl-Traughber, 2016; Salzborn, 2017; Grimm and Kahnmann, 2017; Salzborn, 2018; Schmalenberger, 2021, forthcoming), a systematic analysis of less direct, implicit ways in which the AfD promotes an antisemitic worldview is missing. We argue that social media is the primary space where the AfD disseminates forms of antisemitism that are more indirect and thus harder to identify, yet also rather pervasive and thus not less dangerous.

The AfD on Social Media

The AfD has been called Germany's social media party due to its strategic use of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other platforms to spread their ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant messages and other far-right ideological elements (Via and Heidi, 2021, p. 13). The party's success on social media in general and on

Facebook in particular (Diehl et al., 2019; Davis, Livingston, and Hindman, 2019) is no coincidence. In 2017, the party hired the Texas-based advertisement agency Harris Media, a company that is behind provocative and aggressive campaigns of far-right candidates around the world, to help with their digital strategy (Via and Heidi, 2021, p. 13). Social media allow the AfD to circumvent journalistic gatekeeping and enjoy full control over their statements, including the ability to block or delete critical counter-speech. In the absence of restrictions, social media enable the AfD to leave hateful speech on their profiles, guided by the party's ideal of freedom of speech. The use of social media by the AfD is central to their strategic communication and enables the party to use (combinations of) audio-visual (videos), visual (images), and textual elements to get their message across. The AfD has a much higher content output on social media than any other German party (Davis et al., 2019), and their posts have a high recognition value not only due to the sensationalist, antagonizing, and defamatory language and imagery but also due to the majority of posts sharing a distinctive design (Hübscher, 2020; Davis et al., 2019, p. 3f.).

Scholarly insight into how the AfD promotes antisemitism and historical revisionist interpretations of the German past on social media is scarce. Hübscher (2020) has pioneered uncovering how leading AfD politicians have used physiognomic stereotypes of Jews, most infamously known from antisemitic caricatures in the NS magazine *Der Stürmer*, to defame their (social-democratic) political opponents on Facebook and thus normalize antisemitic ideologies in social and political discourses. Moreover, senior AfD politicians have trivialized the historical realities of World War II and the Holocaust by strategically using references to German resistance fighters and tried to reproduce the image of a morally uncompromised German military (Wehrmacht) while omitting the Holocaust (Hübscher, 2020, p. 27). With this posturing, AfD members aim to portray themselves as present-day moral resistance against an allegedly totalitarian regime under Chancellor Merkel, and try to rearticulate a positive relation to the actual criminal past of the German Wehrmacht (Hübscher, 2020).

In the following sections, we will present a systematic analysis of the AfD's social media activities on the occasion of May 8, 2020, the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. The ambition is to develop a framework that is able to not only identify openly antisemitic messages but also to systematically capture the less explicit ways in which an antisemitic worldview is perpetuated through revisionist interpretations of German history.

Conceptual Approach to Data

Following the Jerusalem Declaration of Antisemitism (JDA, 2021), we see antisemitism as a multifaceted phenomenon of passed on anti-Jewish stereotypes and conspiracy myths that in the past culminated in the Holocaust and continued in modified forms afterward. Owing to the Nazification of all parts of German society in the Nazi era, antisemitic tendencies were also transferred to

the German post-Holocaust society. Despite Germany's ongoing educational effort, Germans continue to be socialized in a society shaped by centuries of antisemitism, with antisemitic knowledge, aesthetics, and social practices (Schäuble and Scherr, 2009). This expresses itself in stereotyping and othering of Jews (primary antisemitism) and the downplaying and denial of the Holocaust (secondary antisemitism). Owing to the fact that the case studies presented in this chapter relate to the Holocaust, antisemitism directed toward Israel plays no role in this particular study, but is also persistent in German society.

Caused by the significant role that social media have today, antisemitism researchers also point to the important part that respective platforms play in the creation and mass distribution of antisemitic content (cp. Lange et al., 2019). So far, however, there has been no conclusive evidence of how antisemitism is perceived on social media. First insights into the perception of antisemitism on the platforms can be drawn from the analysis of the comments under antisemitic posts, as this chapter shows. In the course of this research, we were able to identify primarily implicit and veiled forms of antisemitism. Therefore, the focus turned to antisemitic cues rather than obvious expressions of antisemitic stereotypes and antisemitic worldviews. We conceptualize antisemitic cues as textual or visual elements that do not explicitly express hatred against Jews or trivialize the Holocaust but rather hint toward interpretative patterns and narratives constitutive of an antisemitic worldview and can result in a susceptibility to explicit antisemitism.

With regard to how antisemitic cues are communicated, we explored the rhetorical strategies employed by AfD personnel in their social media posts. Whereas others have focused on discursive strategies that capture how "us" and "them" groups are discursively constructed (cp. Wodak and Forchtner, 2014; Wodak, 2015; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016), our idea of rhetorical strategies focuses on how antisemitism is made to appear harmless, innocent, and legitimate.

Primary Sources

Suitable posts were selected based on our monitoring of the social media activities of relevant AfD personnel on May 7 or 8, 2020, on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We selected posts in the form of text-based posts, vlogs, and image-text combinations that directly or indirectly refer to the commemoration of the anniversary of May 8. As this chapter offers an explorative study as the first step toward a more systematic framework for studying implicit forms of antisemitism on social media, only six posts from that sample were finally incorporated into our analysis. While this small sample is not representative of the AfD's overall social media activity on May 8, 2020, the posts illustrate how the AfD personnel instrumentalizes the day to communicate antisemitic cues (Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1 Characteristics of Primary Data Sources

Name	Position	Date	Post	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Views
Enrico Komning	Member of the Federal German Parliament representing (from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania)	8.5.2020	Vlog on Facebook	64	22	32	1,863
Stephan Prottschka	Member of the Federal German Parliament (from the state of Bavaria)	7.5.2020	Vlog on YouTube	138 likes 23 dislikes	80	—	3,916
Nicole Höchst	Member of the Federal German Parliament (from the state of Rhineland Palatinate)	8.5.2020	Facebook Post	359	202	178	
Martin Sichert	Member of the Federal German Parliament (from the state of Bavaria)	8.5.2020	Facebook Post	986	81	375	
Georg Pazderski	Chair of AfD faction in the Berlin State Parliament	7.5.2020	Vlog on Facebook and YouTube	416 YouTube: 479 likes, 11 dislikes	Facebook: 66	57 YouTube: 121	YouTube: 2,865 Facebook: 9,011
AfD Bayern ⁴	AfD Faction in the state of Bavaria	8.5.2020	Post on Twitter	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

Methodology

Since a coding system that captures specific forms of historical revisionist, guilt-deflecting antisemitism did not exist, we developed a preliminary system in the hope that it will inspire further research on the matter. The development of the coding system was loosely guided by the research on antisemitism in letters to the German Jewish council and the Israeli embassy in Berlin (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinhartz, 2012) and the novel coding system Becker (2018) developed for his analysis of reader's comments in different online news media.

Relying on the paradigms of grounded theory, a computer-aided open qualitative content analysis (Mayring and Fenzl, 2019) of six social media posts was carried out with the software MaxQDA. Several steps were necessary to achieve a coding system with which the social media posts could be systematically analyzed. We downloaded the Facebook and Twitter posts as PDFs and transcribed the vlogs. After uploading the files to MaxQDA, we conducted a systematic sighting of the material and a first round of inductive coding of antisemitic, historical revisionist statements based on the abovementioned research questions. The identification and development of codes and subcodes that capture different antisemitic expressions as well as codes for rhetorical strategies were based on the literature on primary and secondary antisemitism (see above). The code system captures expressions of antisemitism such as the implicit deflection of German guilt for the Holocaust, denial or trivialization of German guilt, or statements that underline German victimhood. In addition, we annotated the rhetorical particularities with the help of which the messages were presented as appealing, legitimate, or innocent.

We went through multiple rounds of refining, revising, renaming, merging, specifying, and deleting codes. We grouped similar codes together and developed a code system made up of different code categories, and respective sub-codes. Once the system was properly set up, the posts were deductively coded.

Context and Content of the Primary Sources

In 2020, commemorations of May 8 in Germany were accompanied by a debate about whether the day should be made a public holiday to celebrate the liberation of Europe and Germany from the Nazis as suggested by the chair of the German Auschwitz Committee, Esther Bejarano (Sternberg, 2020). In response, the honorary chair of the AfD, Alexander Gauland claimed that May 8 was no cause for celebration but an “ambivalent day,” a day of liberation “[f]or the concentration camp inmates [but] also a day of absolute defeat, a day of the loss of large parts of Germany and the loss of national autonomy” (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Three of the posts analyzed implicitly take up and reproduce Gauland’s statement in their social media posts, namely Georg Paszderski, Enrico Komning, and Stephan Protschka.

Paszderski’s vlog was recorded in front of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin that was destroyed in World War II and site of an Islamist

terror attack in 2016, thus serving as a reminder of the past and present German victimhood. Paszderski is speaking directly into the camera, perpetuating a revisionist account of German history that portrays Germans as innocent victims. Meanwhile he fails to mention the Holocaust, which attests to a lack of empathy with Jewish and other victims.

In another vlog posted on Facebook, Enrico Komning is standing in the German parliament speaking directly into the camera, addressing his followers personally. His speech is characterized by a strong focus on a historical revisionist narrative that constructs Germans as victims. He, too, does not mention the Holocaust.

In the next case study, Stephan Protschka's vlog posted on YouTube, Protschka is speaking directly into the camera. His speech is accompanied by somber instrumental music and images that seem to illustrate the expulsion of Germans from former Eastern territories, showing freezing children, crying women, an aerial view of a bombed-out city, and corpses lying in fields. In contrast, there are also pictures of famous Germans born in the former Eastern territories such as Immanuel Kant and Paul von Hindenburg apparently to underline German supremacy that was turned into German victimhood. His vlog perpetuates a revisionist interpretation of German involvement in World War II that stresses German victimhood and does not mention the Holocaust.

The post on Nicole Höchst's Facebook profile, our only female case study, is formulated as a response to a statement from President Steinmeier's remembrance speech on May 8, 2020.⁵ In his speech Steinmeier had said that because of Germany's responsibility for the "murder and suffering of millions" during the Holocaust and World War II, one can only love Germany with a broken heart. While admitting to an unspecific guilt, in contrast to Steinmeier, Höchst does not name the Holocaust and constructs the Germans as an exclusive ethno-national group that "looks into the mirror of the past, upright and filled with pride."⁶ For a German post-Holocaust politician, Höchst's statement represents a dramatic departure from the norm. She seems to want Germans to feel proud in spite of, or even – more disturbingly – because of the Holocaust.

Martin Sichert's Facebook post has no immediate connection or reference to the celebration of the end of World War II but was posted on May 8 and can thus be understood as implicit commentary on the occasion. It consists of a sentence on a red background which says: "Those who constantly accuse peoples of ancestral crimes are in the tradition of those who for centuries persecuted Jews for murdering Christ."⁷ He does not only fail to name the Holocaust but further equates Holocaust remembrance with antisemitism. The comments below the post will be examined in an excursus to show how his antisemitic statement is perceived by other users (see below).

Our last case study is the AfD Bavaria, who used the occasion to attack Chancellor Merkel in a tweet. The tweet consists of a text and image combination that equates contemporary Germany with the NS dictatorship and rejects Germany's official Holocaust commemoration. The image shows Chancellor

Merkel in a grey blazer, holding up her right arm, arguably resembling the image of an SS soldier doing the Nazi salute. The image is accompanied by the claim “May 8? Merkel’s stepping down from office would be a REAL day of liberation!”⁸

Findings

That the statements made in these posts do not constitute incidents of (explicit) primary or secondary antisemitism was the most striking observation during the several rounds of coding and recoding that we undertook. Antisemitic expressions in the form of cues in the AfD’s commemorative social media performances on the occasion of May 8 could not be identified by looking at the isolated statements or single words. Rather, the context, the liberation day, as well as what is not mentioned or commemorated in the AfD’s social media posts needs to be considered. While this inspired us to develop the concept of “tertiary antisemitism” to capture these rather implicit forms of antisemitism (see conclusion), it also hints toward the appropriateness of an inductive, deeply qualitative analysis as opposed to quantitative, automated analyses based on finding predefined keywords and phrases that would have been unable to register these implicitly antisemitic cues. Structured by the code system that we developed for our analysis, we will illustrate and summarize our main findings using quotes from the AfD’s social media posts. In the following, the antisemitic cues that we discovered will be presented as categories.

Category 1: Remembering Germans as Victims

The portrayal of Germans as victims related to May 8, 1945, is prevalent in the vlogs by Georg Pazderski, Enrico Komning, and Stephan Protschka, but also in the post by Martin Sichert. The AfD politicians refer to the expulsion of Germans from former Eastern territories, experiences of sexualized violence against German women by the Allied forces, the hardships of German Wehrmacht soldiers (including troops that played a crucial role in the extermination of the Jewish people), and generally portray Germans as historical victims. These narratives of German suffering tend to escalate into victim–perpetrator reversal where the suffering of Germans is indirectly equated with that of victims of National Socialism. The following social media post extracts exemplify different subcategories of this cue. These examples do not only illustrate the focus on German victims and the indirectness, omission, and downplaying of Nazi victims but also how the AfD implicitly advocates for a revisionist commemoration of German instead of Jewish victims. While remembering German war victims is not necessarily antisemitic per se, the antisemitic nature of the AfD’s social media posts arises from the fact that they commemorate Germans on a day that is reserved for the commemoration of Jewish and other victims of Nazi Germany. The Jewish and non-Jewish victims of the Nazis are not denied

but are only mentioned in passing and thus of secondary importance at best. Meanwhile victimized Germans and German losses emerge as protagonists in the AfD's interpretation of (the end of) World War II, as the examples below illustrate.

Subcode: Victim–Perpetrator Reversal

Es war das Ende großen Leids (Pause) des massenhaften Sterbens junger Soldaten an den Fronten. (Enrico Komning)	It was the end of great suffering (pause) the massive deaths of young soldiers on the front lines. (Enrico Komning)
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Subcode: References to Sexualized Violence against German Women

Massenweise Frauen und Mädchen wurden vergewaltigt. (Stephan Protschka)	Masses of women and girls were raped. (Stephan Protschka)
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Subcode: Reference to Expulsion of Germans

Mit [dem Ende der Nazidiktatur] begann aber auch für viele Deutsche das Leid erst richtig und mündete in der größten Vertreibungsgeschichte der Menschheitsgeschichte. 15 Millionen Deutsche wurden aus dem Sudetenland, Ostpreußen, Danzig, Pommern, Schlesien aus Ostbrandenburg vertrieben. (Stephan Protschka)	With [the end of the Nazi dictatorship] for many Germans, the suffering only began and culminated in the greatest expulsion of Human history. About 15 million Germans were expelled from the Sudetenland, East Prussia, Danzig, Pomerania, Silesia, and East Brandenburg. (Stephan Protschka)
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Subcode: General Myth of German Victimhood

Vernichtend waren die Schutz – und Rechtlosigkeit gegen die Siegerwillkür, die Gebietsabtrennungen und Vertreibungen, das Elend der Kriegsgefangenen in den Rheinwiesen, die Teilung des Landes und der Errichtung einer neuen Diktatur in der DDR. (Georg Pazderski)	Destructive were the lack of protection and law against the arbitrariness of the victors, the separation of territories and expulsions, the misery of prisoners of war in the Rhine meadows, the division of the country, and the establishment of a new dictatorship in the GDR. (Georg Pazderski)
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Category 2: Relativization / Trivialization, Denial, and Omission of the Holocaust

While some posts refer to “Nazi crimes”, “Jewish victims”, or use other euphemistic descriptions to refer to a vague, non-specified German guilt, none of the posts we analyzed explicitly names the Holocaust. While the omission of the Holocaust on occasion of the 75th anniversary is thus a pervasive feature, implicit denials, trivializations, and relativizations, and thus veiled secondary antisemitism, are present in the AfD’s social media posts as well. Stephan Protschka furthermore implicitly denies the Holocaust by claiming that ancestors of Germans have indeed been victims of the “greatest crime against humanity.” Instead of explicitly comparing the Holocaust with other genocides, AfD politicians equate the Nazi regime and its crimes either with contemporary Germany, with the GDR, or with Socialism, thus indirectly trivializing and relativizing the Holocaust and implicitly equating the AfD as today’s dissidents with Holocaust victims, as the excerpts below exemplify.

Subcode: Omission of the Holocaust

Wir leben mit dem Erbe. Mit der Schuld der Vergangenheit. Wir müssen Sorge dafür tragen, dass wir nie wieder eine derartige Schuld auf uns laden. (Nicole Höchst)

We live with this heritage. With the guilt of the past. We must see to it that we never again burden ourselves with such guilt. (Nicole Höchst)

Subcode: Holocaust Denial

Lasst uns daher heute gedenken an unsere Vorfahren, an unsere Väter und Mütter, an unsere Großeltern die Opfer des größten Völkerverbrechens geworden sind und uns für die heutige Zeit ein Symbol sind. (Stephan Protschka)

Let us therefore remember today our ancestors, our fathers and mothers, our grandparents who were victims of the greatest crime against humanity and who are a symbol for us today. (Stephan Protschka)

Subcode: NS Comparisons

Nie wieder, Missbrauch staatlicher Machtstrukturen. Nie wieder Verfolgung von Minderheiten. Nie wieder Gewalt gegen Andersdenkende. Nie wieder Sozialismus, egal ob rechts oder linksradikal geprägt. (Georg Pazderski)

Never again exploitation of the state’s power structures. Never again persecution of minorities. Never again violence against dissidents. Never again Socialism, no matter if radical right or left. (Georg Pazderski)

Category 3: Deflection of Guilt

This category illustrates statements made by AfD personnel portraying Germans not as historic perpetrators but as an innocent collective that did not contribute to the rise of the Nazi regime and was not complicit in the Holocaust or other (war) crimes. This perpetuates the myth of most Germans having been oblivious of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes and that, despite the many resistance movements that fought against the Nazis, Germans apparently had no possibility to prevent the war and the Holocaust. Often these narratives culminate in stories about Germans being victims of National Socialism themselves. This happens especially in the context of German suffering that, according to AfD personnel, began with the collapse of Nazi Germany. This de-emphasizes the guilt and responsibility of the Germans for the Holocaust and also implicitly replaces Jewish with German victims. Instead of Germans, the Allied forces are marked as the sole perpetrators, raping German women and allegedly running concentration camps. In the narrative hinted at by AfD personnel, it is thus not German guilt but the crimes of others against an innocent German population that come to define World War II from a German perspective, as the two following posts from Stephan Protschka illustrate most clearly.

Subcode: Collective Innocence

Der Verlust der Demokratie, der Verlust der Meinungsfreiheit, die Kriminalisierung der Opposition, mündet schnell in einer Diktatur und führt zu einer Katastrophe eines ungeahnten Maßes. Dies geschah sehr plötzlich und schnell über Nacht. Es kann uns aber auch heute noch treffen. Schleichend und langsam, so dass kaum jemand davon etwas mitbekommt.
(Stephan Protschka)

The loss of democracy, the loss of freedom of expression, and the opposition's criminalization quickly leads to a dictatorship and leads to a disaster of unimagined measure. This happened very suddenly and quickly overnight. But it can still happen to us today. Creeping and slowly, so that hardly anyone notices it. (Stephan Protschka)

Subcode: Allied Forces as Perpetrators

Massenweise Frauen und Mädchen wurden vergewaltigt. Vielerorts wurden Konzentrationslager weiter betrieben, diesmal von den Siegermächten. (Stephan Protschka)

Masses of women and girls were raped. In many places concentration camps continued to exist, this time operated by the victorious powers. (Stephan Protschka)

Category 4: Germans as Ethno-national Collective

Throughout the case studies of AfD's social media posts, Germans are portrayed as an ethno-national collective. Ethno-nationalism is the idea that every people (*Volk*) belongs to a certain geographical territory and that different peoples should not mix. This ideology enables a reimagining of the German people not as a collective of former perpetrators but as a collective connected through blood relations, German virtues, and traditions. This connects to the ethno-nationalist (*völkisch*) ideology essential to the Nazi regime which is inherently antisemitic because it excludes Jews from belonging to the German nation. According to the AfD personnel, it is not the extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany, but the kinship and rootedness in German ancestry that become the defining characteristics of the modern German nation, which ultimately excludes Jews and other minorities. Furthermore, those who celebrate the defeat of the German nation on May 8, 1945, as well as those who acknowledge German guilt and commemorate NS victims are excluded from the *we-group*, as becomes apparent in the examples below.

Subcodes Ethno-national We-Group

Mein Herz schlägt für [...] diese geduldigen, vertrauensseligen, gastfreundlichen, starken, intelligenten, kreativen, fleissigen, optimistischen, charakterstarken (...) Menschen. Ungebrochen, ungestüm, ungezähmt. (Nicole Höchst)	My heart beats for [...] those patient, trusting, hospitable, strong, intelligent, creative, hard-working, optimistic, incorruptible (...) people. Unbroken, impetuous, untamed. (Nicole Höchst)
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Subcode: Enemy Marking

Der achte Mai für mich persönlich ein Tag des Gedenkens und Erinnerns es ist kein Fest, wie die Linken in Berlin ausgerufen haben. (Stephan Protschka)	For me personally, May 8 is a day of commemoration and remembrance; it is not a festival, as the left in Berlin have proclaimed. (Stephan Protschka)
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Subcode: Exclusion from the We-Group Due to Acknowledgment of Guilt

Wenn Sie ihr Land nicht lieben können, Herr Steinmeier, dann treten Sie zurück. (Nicole Höchst)	If you can't love your country, Mr. Steinmeier, then resign. (Nicole Höchst)
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Rhetorical Strategies

In the course of our inductive coding/analysis, we were able to identify the following rhetorical strategies that help to present and transport antisemitic cues in the AfD's social media posts:

Strategy 1: Mimicry

Mimicry refers to the rhetoric-performative appropriation of established ways of remembering stemming from the official German memory culture. Sentence structures or formulations are copied, but filled with narratives that implicitly or explicitly differ from and challenge the hegemonic interpretation of the German past. The most illustrative example for this strategy is the reappropriation of the established phrase “Never Again (Holocaust!)” and references to the “lessons learned” (Forchtner, 2016) from the Nazi past.

Nie wieder Missbrauch staatlicher Machtstrukturen. Nie wieder Verfolgung von Minderheiten. Nie wieder Gewalt gegen Andersdenkende. Nie wieder Sozialismus, egal ob rechts oder linksradikal geprägt. Nur das kann unsere Lehre aus dem verheerenden zweiten Weltkrieg sein. (Georg Pazderski)	Never Again, abuse of state power structures. No more persecution of minorities. Never again violence against those who think differently, never again Socialism, whether right-wing or left-wing extremists. Only that can be our lessons from the devastating World War II. (Georg Pazderski)
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Strategy 2: Decontextualization

This category refers to the strategy of mentioning historical events (such as German expulsion or the end of World War II) or facts (mass rape of German women) as detached from their immediate historical context and cause (e.g. Holocaust and German war of aggression). This strategy primarily contributes to an overall omission of the Holocaust that is more subtle than established forms of Holocaust denial, relativization, or trivialization by right-wing extremist actors. These enable the construction of an image of German history where the Holocaust does not play a role and render the suffering and death of millions of Jews and other NS victims invisible or, as the post below exemplifies, equate it to the experience of the AfD as opposition party under the Merkel government.

Nicht der 8. Mai – Merkels endgültiger Rückzug aus der Politik wird einst als Tag der Befreiung in die Geschichte eingehen! AfD Bavaria	Not May 8 – Merkel's final withdrawal from politics will one day go down in history as the day of liberation! AfD Bavaria
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Strategy 3: Tokenism

In their social media posts, AfD politicians make strategic use of tokens, meaning that they purposefully employ referrals to well-known, popular historical or political personas, (representatives of) a minority group or the experiences made by one's family members. Those references have the aim of rendering a certain claim or interpretation of German history more legitimate and less extreme. This is exemplified by the two statements below where Paszderski uses his family background and former politician Theodor Heuss to give his statements more integrity, moral impunity, and truth value.

Als Sohn eines polnischen Zwangsarbeiters der selber Opfer der Nationalsozialisten wurde, lasse ich mir das nicht bieten (...) (Georg Pazderski) [...] am 8 Mai 1949, fand der spätere erste Präsident der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der FDP Politiker Theodor Heuss, für uns deutsche die richtigen und noch heute gültigen Worte. (Georg Pazderski)

As the son of a Polish forced laborer who was himself a victim of the National Socialists, I will not stand for this and demand: Never Again (...) (Georg Pazderski) [...], on May 8, 1949, the future first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, the FDP politician Theodor Heuss, found the right words for us Germans that are still valid today. (Georg Pazderski)

Strategy 4: Preemptive Defenses

Beyond tokens, the AfD uses other rhetorical means that anticipate and aim to preemptively disprove, undermine and delegitimize accusations from the political opponent and thus provide a statement with legitimacy, (moral) impunity, and let it appear as less extremist. This includes, among others, symbolic demarcations from Nazi Germany or, after making a historical revisionist statement, claiming to act with nonextremist, good intentions and only stating historical facts, as the example below illustrates.

Es geht mir nicht darum die Schuld der Deutschen am zweiten Weltkrieg zu relativieren. Es geht mir darum, dass wir aus der Geschichte lernen und das können wir nur wenn wir die gesamte Geschichte kennen. (Stephan Protschka)

My aim is not to relativize the Germans' responsibility for World War II. My aim is that we learn from history and we can only do that if we know the whole story. (Stephan Protschka)

Excursus: Exploration of the Perception of Antisemitic Cues in Social Media Posts: Analysis of the Comments

In the following, we give insights into how antisemitic cues in Martin Sichert's Facebook post are perceived by the commentators.

The comments under the original post that says “Those who constantly accuse peoples of ancestral crimes are in the tradition of those who for centuries persecuted Jews for murdering Christ” (see above) confirm and reproduce the antisemitism of the original post in form of deflection of guilt, Holocaust comparisons, and allegations of a “cult of guilt.” They demand an end of the tradition of Holocaust commemoration in Germany and claim that Holocaust memory is unfair. Furthermore, we find comments reproducing explicit antisemitic stereotypes such as Jews being greedy, having profited from the Holocaust, or as being to blame for their own persecution and several references to common antisemitic conspiracy myths. The comments differ from the antisemitism expressed in the post of AfD personnel in that they articulate antisemitic messages rather explicitly. Indeed, the original post by AfD politician Sichert appears to have encouraged other users to express primary and secondary antisemitism. Antisemitic cues in the AfD posts escalated into classic antisemitic stereotypes that were essential to the demonization and persecution of Jews in National Socialism and were a means to legitimize their murder. In conclusion, this exploration of user comments illustrates that due to the socialization with antisemitic knowledge, the antisemitic cues in the AfD’s posts are understood and reproduced, and encourage expressions of explicit antisemitism (cp. Hübscher, 2020, p. 20).

Conclusion

Overall, our findings provide further evidence that the AfD can be considered an antisemitic party (Salzborn, 2018). Based on our findings, however, we conclude that the AfD on social media communicates antisemitic messages that cannot be fully captured with the concepts of primary or secondary antisemitism. We therefore developed a definition of tertiary antisemitism that is best understood as an extension of primary and secondary antisemitism. Tertiary antisemitism has been defined as antisemitism connected to Islamist antisemitism in some scholarship. However, we disagree, as the term suggests a continuity from primary beyond secondary antisemitism, thus implying a historical and cultural connection to the Holocaust and National Socialism. Thus, we propose the following definition:

“As an extension of primary and secondary antisemitism, tertiary antisemitism is an implicit form of antisemitism that seeks to paint a revisionist picture of German history in which the Holocaust is fragmented, marginalized, or omitted. The antisemitic character of tertiary antisemitism emerges in the context of respective statements and is often grounded in the nonmentioning of Jewish and other Holocaust victims and the implicit replacing of Holocaust and other NS victims with German victims. Tertiary antisemitism makes use of specific rhetorical strategies such as mimicry, decontextualization, tokenism, and preemptive defenses that contribute to the mainstreaming, normalization, and vindication of antisemitism.”

Tertiary antisemitism does not differ from secondary antisemitism in terms of its historical revisionist content and aim, but in its form as it refrains from direct comparisons and explicit relativizations. It de-emphasizes the Nazi crimes by not naming the Holocaust, thus making it insignificant. Due to its implicit nature and the rhetorical strategies employed to communicate it, tertiary antisemitism is poised to contribute powerfully to the normalization of antisemitism, specifically on social media, as respective statements are not clearly identifiable and therefore won't be found by AI or other existing means to combat antisemitism on respective platforms. Indeed, the antisemitism that tertiary antisemitism refers to arises from the systematic omission of the Holocaust on occasions where the official (German) memory culture commemorates it, and implicitly replaces or/and equates Jewish victims with narrations of German innocence and victimhood.

What must be underlined is that tertiary antisemitism as promoted by the AfD does not so much emerge from or appeal to the extremist fringes of society but to narratives and memories within the German mainstream. Deflections of collective guilt and myths of German innocence have been present within Germany's postwar memory landscape (Salzborn, 2020), particularly when it comes to mediatized and fictionalized narratives (Kansteiner, 2019; Salzborn, 2020) and personal and family memories (Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall, 2002). The latter is reflected in the 2019 MEMO study (Rees et al., 2019, p. 14), revealing that 70% of Germans believe that their ancestors had not been perpetrators in Nazi Germany, and a majority claiming that their ancestors had either been (36%) or helped (29%) victims of National Socialism – evaluations that contradict historical realities. What makes tertiary antisemitism dangerous is that it perpetuates already existing desires to "draw a line" under Holocaust commemoration and expresses these desires less explicitly, thus making them seem less extreme.

Our findings illustrate that tertiary antisemitism is communicated on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II by a select group of AfD personnel on social media where they circumvent journalistic gatekeeping or critical confrontation and evaluation. Social media thus enable the AfD to create a (memory cultural) environment in which a "Germany without the Holocaust" can be imagined through a historical revisionist interpretation that implicitly rejects Germany's role as perpetrator as well as the status of the Holocaust as a defining historical event and Germany's commitment to remember it.

The dangerous antisemitic potential of the AfD thus does not only lie in the scandalous, explicitly revisionist, and antisemitic statements made by AfD officials but in the AfD's ability to strategically use social media to cultivate an alternative memory cultural environment that constitutes the breeding ground for an antisemitic worldview. A preliminary exploration of comments under one AfD Facebook post suggests that tertiary antisemitism is indeed understood as well as reproduced by other Facebook users and escalates into primary and secondary antisemitism.

Further research is necessary to reach a comprehensive understanding of how social media users react to the antisemitic cues offered by the AfD. Research into the perception of tertiary antisemitism on social media is urgently needed to develop not only technological counter-strategies but also pedagogical tools to confront it. Moreover, journalists and educators must be sensitized to these more implicit forms of antisemitism in order to recognize and dismantle them instead of giving respective AfD statements a platform.

Notes

- 1 We would like to express our gratitude to Sabine von Mering for her generous and constructive support during the writing process and to Christoffer Kølvraa for his valuable and helpful feedback on an early draft of this chapter. Furthermore, we would like to thank Danger Dan for his inspiring and motivating music, as well as Volksverpetzer, Belltower News, and everyone else who is actively engaged in the fight against the extreme right in Germany and the rest of the world.
- 2 Original German: “Die aktuelle Verengung der deutschen Erinnerungskultur auf die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus ist zugunsten einer erweiterten Geschichtsbetrachtung aufzubrechen, die auch die positiven, identitätsstiftenden Aspekte deutscher Geschichte mit umfasst.”
- 3 Original German: “nur ein Vogelschiss in unserer über 1000-jährigen Geschichte.”
- 4 The Tweet was later deleted by the AfD Bayern but captured by the authors.
- 5 A link to a news article about Steinmeier’s speech is included in the post.
- 6 Original German: “Ungebrochen, aufrecht und voller Liebe blicken wir in den Spiegel der Vergangenheit (...).”
- 7 Original German: “Wer Völkern ständig die Verbrechen der Vorfahren anlastet, steht in der Tradition jener, die jahrhundertelang Juden wegen der Ermordung Jesus verfolgten.”
- 8 Original German: “8. Mai? Merkels Rücktritt wäre ein ECHTER Tag der Befreiung!”

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4

“EVERYONE I KNOW ISN’T ANTISEMITIC”

Antisemitism in Facebook Pages Supportive of the UK Labour Party¹

Jakob Guhl

Introduction

The “ancient hatred” against Jewish communities has grown exponentially in recent years, both in institutional politics, online discourse, and targeted violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2020; CST, 2021; Comerford and Gerster, 2021). Crucially, hostility toward the Jewish community is not confined to far-/alt-right and Islamist groups, but increasingly prevalent in left-wing discourse.

The existence of antisemitism on the left may appear counter-intuitive, given that for many left-wing writers, activists, and scholars, universalism, anti-racism, and the emancipation of all human beings are core principles of their worldview. Nevertheless, there is a long history of antisemitism within socialist movements and states, from the ambivalent stances among Enlightenment thinkers toward Jewish emancipation, antisemitic sentiments expressed by some left-wing philosophers during the nineteenth century, simultaneously anti-Zionist as well as antisemitic Soviet propaganda in the twentieth century all the way to the present-day conflation between Israeli politics and Jews, who are frequently held vicariously liable for the actions or even the existence of Israel (Spencer and Fine, 2018). This comes in a context in which Israel has become perceived by many on the left as an outpost of Western colonialism and imperialism (Rich, 2018b, pp. 19–20). Besides Israel-related antisemitism, Jews are often cited as emblems of the global elite and a minority thought to be privileged and influential. Antisemitism is therefore often perceived to be less of an issue than other forms of racism (Pagano, 2018).

As David Hirsh pointed out in his submission to the Chakrabarty Inquiry into antisemitism in the Labour Party,

antisemitism on the left is not only a reflection of the general prejudice that occurs throughout society, there is a specifically left-wing tradition of

antisemitism. ... Some on the left have always been tempted by the proposition that ‘the Jews’ stand between us and the good life.

(Hirsh, 2016, p. 1)

The perceived failure of centrist, technocratic governments over the last two decades has widened the scope of acceptable political discourse in Western democracies, both on the left and the right. This shifting of the “Overton window”² has not only resulted in a steady rise of far-right populism across Europe and North America, but also led to a return of far-left ideas into the mainstream discourse of several countries. One of the key symbols of this development was the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the UK Labour Party in September 2015.

While Corbyn energized a wide range of voters with his anti-austerity message and noninterventionist foreign policy agenda, there have been ongoing concerns about antisemitism in the Labour Party ever since, which led to major public debates in the United Kingdom and beyond. The intensity with which these issues were discussed among the British left, and the Labour Party in particular, reached new heights during Corbyn’s leadership (BBC, 2019).

This article analyzes left-wing antisemitism on social media, specifically public Facebook pages supportive of the Labour Party, in the United Kingdom since 2015, and explains its key dynamics. It finds that while none of the posts by the party pages themselves were clearly antisemitic, 56% of all comment sections contained at least one, and in the majority of cases more than one antisemitic comment, and that in 59% of the cases these comments went unchallenged. This does show that while online antisemitism within pro-Labour communities is relatively small in volume, it remains easily accessible and is not always called out.

By providing a data-driven analysis about the extent, narratives, and trajectory of left-wing antisemitism, this article seeks to address a severe evidence gap around these phenomena and aims to improve public discussion and understanding around antisemitic tropes, actors, and sentiment within left-wing movements. Hopefully, it will provide the evidence base for a serious debate on the issue, cutting through the various rumors, anecdotes, accusations, and conspiracies that currently prevent action.

Background: The Debates about Antisemitism in the Labour Party

Right from the early stages of Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, his critics voiced concerns about what they perceived as previous antisemitic remarks and tolerance for antisemitic individuals or movements. This included his description of the Islamist terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah (whom he had invited to Parliament) as “friends,” and Hamas specifically as “an organization that is dedicated towards the good of the Palestinian people and bringing about long-term peace and social justice and political justice in the whole region.”³ Other examples concerned his previous affiliation with the Iranian state media

outlet Press TV (Payne, 2016), his support for the antisemitic cleric Raed Salah (Jewish Chronicle, 2019), his previous engagement with the organization of the Holocaust denier Paul Eisen, of whose views Corbyn claimed to have been unaware of (Mendick, 2017), and his participation in the al-Quds rallies (Harpin, 2017).

While these statements and affiliations were known, the debates about antisemitism garnered greater public attention in 2016, when it was revealed that during the Gaza war in 2014, Bradford MP Naz Shah had posted an image that suggested the conflict could be solved by relocating Israel to the territory of the United States. This led to fierce criticism of Shah. Former London mayor Ken Livingstone, however, came to the defense of his Labour colleague. He acknowledged Shah's criticism had been

over the top, but it's not antisemitism." Livingstone added: "Let's remember when Hitler won his election in 1932, his policy then was that Jews should be moved to Israel. He was supporting Zionism – this before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews.

(Stone, 2016)

While Shah has apologized for the offense caused by her statements since, Livingstone had no regrets, despite his comments being widely criticized as "categorically false" (Snyder, 2016), or even trivializing Nazi atrocities (Simons, 2016). For Livingstone, the issue at hand was not antisemitism dressed up as criticism of Israel, but what he viewed as the alleged Zionist instrumentalization of the Holocaust. On Holocaust Memorial Day 2018, Livingstone appeared on Iranian state broadcaster Press TV to talk about the following question: "Has the Holocaust been exploited to oppress others?" (Times of Israel, 2018).

As we encountered in the Livingstone case, there was often a strange, instant, almost reflexive denial in reaction to charges of left-wing antisemitism, which were all too often turned down without further investigation. Furthermore, accusations of antisemitism became viewed as part of a "very well-orchestrated campaign by the Israel lobby to smear anybody who criticizes Israeli policy as anti-Semitic [sic.]," as Livingstone put it in the same interview. This has been termed the "Livingstone Formulation" by Hirsh (2010). Hirsh argues that accusations of antisemitism are all too frequently dismissed by subsuming even anti-semitic tropes, stereotypes, and the defense of evidently antisemitic actors under the all-encompassing umbrella of "criticism" of Israel. According to Hirsh, these antisemitic statements are viewed as acceptable by many on the left, as long as they can also be understood as critical toward Israel.

In another high-profile case in 2016, the vice chair of the pro-Labour activist group Momentum, Jackie Walker, alleged that Jews were the "chief financiers of the sugar and slave trade" (Elgot, 2019). Such allegations were reminiscent of the antisemitic claims made in the 1991 book *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, published by the Nation of Islam, which has been designated as a hate

group by the Southern Poverty Law Center due to its “deeply racist, antisemitic and anti-gay rhetoric.”⁴

When the Chakrabarty Inquiry into antisemitism and other forms of racism in the Labour Party (Chakrabarty, 2016) concluded in June 2016, those within the party who viewed the entire episode as nothing but a “smear campaign” were probably hoping that the issue had been resolved. However, less than two years later, a demonstration in March 2018 organized by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council drew hundreds of protesters, among them Labour MPs to take a stand against antisemitism in their own party and its leadership’s failure to distance itself from it in a convincing manner (Shirbon, 2018). Clearly, the debate about antisemitism in the Labour Party and on the British left more broadly had ceased to disappear.

Over the summer of 2018 in particular, numerous incidents from different periods resurfaced in which Corbyn, his close aides or his supporters were accused of antisemitic behavior themselves, or of tolerating antisemitic statements by others. In this context, Labour’s initial refusal to adopt the working definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHR.A)⁵ and all of its examples (Labour had initially only adopted 7 out of 11 examples), further heightened the debates about the party’s alleged failure to tackle antisemitism, especially as the UK government had already adopted the definition (BBC, 2018a).

For example, pictures emerged of Corbyn participating in a wreath-laying ceremony for the civilians killed by a 1985 Israeli airstrike. Based on a Morning Star article by Corbyn from 2014, the ceremony was likely also for two alleged organizers of the 1972 Munich Olympic attacks (BBC, 2018b). In the same summer, it was revealed that in 2012 Corbyn had defended the graffiti artist Mear One, whose mural “Freedom of Humanity” was removed by local authorities in the London borough of Tower Hamlets as it was criticized for perpetuating antisemitic stereotypes about Jews having a disproportionate, socially harmful influence on finance and politics. Corbyn later supported the removal of the mural, saying that “I sincerely regret that I did not look more closely at the image I was commenting on” (BBC, 2018c).

While many of the controversies surrounding antisemitism in the Labour Party at least indirectly related to Israel and Zionism, some argued that the term “Zionist” was increasingly used interchangeably to “Jew.” In August 2018, a video emerged of a 2013 speech by Corbyn in which he claimed that some Zionists “don’t want to study history” and “don’t understand English irony” despite having lived in the United Kingdom “for a very long time, probably all their lives.”⁶ As the historian David Rich pointed out in the House of Commons, it seemed unlikely that Corbyn was referring to non-Jewish Zionists such as Teresa May and Tony Blair when he referred to Zionists who supposedly fail to understand “English irony.”⁷

In 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) announced that Labour would be investigated to establish whether it had discriminated against its Jewish members, making it the second party ever to be probed by the

EHRC after the extreme right British National Party (BNP). The report summarizing the findings of the EHRC's investigation was published in October 2019. It found Labour responsible for unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination over antisemitism within the party, and evidence of (unlawful) political interference in the handling of antisemitism complaints throughout the period of the investigation (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020).

Polls conducted during these years show that the majority of British Jews became increasingly concerned about antisemitism within the Labour Party and the consequences it might have for them. According to a 2019 survey by the polling company Survation, 87% of respondents believed Corbyn was antisemitic, compared to 1% for Theresa May (Survation, 2019). In another survey conducted by YouGov for the Campaign Against Antisemitism, 42% of British Jews said they had considered leaving the United Kingdom due to antisemitism, with two-thirds of these referencing Labour leader Corbyn (Campaign Against Antisemitism, 2019). In July 2018, the three biggest Jewish newspapers in the United Kingdom published a joint editorial (Jewish Chronicle, 2019) in which they called the possibility of a Corbyn-led government an "existential threat to Jewish life in this country."

The phenomenon of antisemitism in the Labour Party, as well as the denial of its existence, or at least of its extent, was particularly disheartening for Jewish left-wing activists who felt like they were losing the support of a movement that they felt should be on their side. In his 2017 publication "Contemporary Left Antisemitism," the sociologist Hirsh expressed his pessimism about the trajectory of Jews within left-wing movements and the potential to reach a future in which antisemitism will eventually be defeated. Hirsh stated that

there is a sense in which people fighting other forms of bigotry have had the feeling that history is on their side... I do not feel like that with antisemitism. I feel that things are moving away from us, slowly but consistently, one step at a time.

(Hirsh, 2017, p. 254)

Despite their ultimate defeat during the 2019 general elections, Corbyn and the movement surrounding him have become an inspiration for left-wing activists and parties beyond the United Kingdom. If a normalization of antisemitism is to be prevented beyond the UK context, it will be crucial to gain a better understanding of antisemitism and its evolution within the UK Labour Party over the past years.

Approach

Social media dynamics were often at the center of discussions about antisemitism in the Labour Party. The online abuse by Labour supporters targeting Jewish (often female) Labour councilors and high-profile MPs such as Luciana Berger, Margaret Hodge, and Ruth Smeeth demonstrated how social media were weaponized to bully and intimidate those who had been critical of the leadership's handling of the

accusations.⁸ Similarly, it was revealed that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn had been a member of closed Facebook groups that contained a large number of antisemitic posts (Elgot, 2018). The few previous empirical studies of the phenomenon had qualitatively analyzed left-wing antisemitic discourses in a small number of online communities (Allington, 2018) or networks of pro-Corbyn accounts (CST, 2019).

The aim of the analysis conducted for this chapter was to add insights from a broader set of data and assess the volume of relevant content about Jews and Israel, as well as the prevalence and nature in antisemitic posts within Labour pages on Facebook between 2015 and 2019. Through the social listening tool Crowdtangle, a tool for the analysis of public Facebook pages and groups, I downloaded posts containing keywords relevant for the discussions around British Jews, Zionism, and antisemitism. Based on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, I subsequently distinguished between antisemitic and nonantisemitic content, but also between different types of narratives outlined in the definition.

Definition

In this chapter, I rely on the definition of antisemitism from the IHRA: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” In addition, I draw on the 11 examples provided by the definition which outline specific manifestations of antisemitism (e.g., Holocaust denial, dual loyalty, classic antisemitism, antisemitic expressions of anti-Zionism, myths about Jewish conspiracies).

List of Pro-Labour Facebook Pages

For this chapter, I drew on a list of 39 pro-Labour pages collated by colleagues of mine at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue during a project analyzing disinformation in the lead-up to the 2019 UK general elections. The list includes official party pages from across the United Kingdom, pro-Corbyn pages, as well as pro-Labour groups such as Momentum. These pages had between 601 and 1,600,000 followers, with an average of 41,630 followers, and the median follower number being 4,442.

Keyword Search

Using Crowdtangle, a Facebook-owned tool that provides access to the posts of public pages and groups on the platform, I used the following keywords to identify posts relevant to discussions about Jews and Israel:

“antisemite,” “anti-semite,” “antisemites,” “anti-semites,” “antisemitic,” “anti-semitic,” “antisemitism,” “anti-semitism,” “antizionism,”

"anti-zionism," "antizionist," "anti-zionist," "Black September," "Board of Deputies," "CAA," "Chakrabarti Inquiry," "Chris Williamson," "Community Security Trust," "CST," "Definition of antisemitism," "EHRC," "Ephraim Mirvis," "Freedom for Humanity," "Hajo Meyer," "Hamas," "Hezbollah," "Hobson," "Holocaust," "IHRA," "International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance," "Israel," "Israeli," "Jackie Walker," "Jew," "Jewdas," "Jewish," "Jews," "JLM," "Jonathan Sacks," "Judaism," "JVL," "Ken Livingstone," "Labour Against the Witchhunt," "Louise Ellman," "Luciana Berger," "Margaret Hodge," "Mear One," "Mossad," "Mural," "Palestine," "Palestine Liberation Organization," "Palestinian," "Passover Seder," "Paul Eisen," "Pears Institute," "PLO," "Quds Day," "Rabbi," "Ruth Smeeth," "Shoah," "Smear Campaign," "Working Definition," "wreath laying," "Zionism," "Zionist."

I then downloaded two datasets of posts from the list of Labour Party pages mentioned above. The first dataset contains all posts by the 39 Labour pages over the time period from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2019 (91,069 posts), while the second dataset contains all posts that contain any of the keywords I put together that relate to Jews and Israel put together (2,098 posts, 2.3% of the total). Just as a broad comparison, the percentage of posts in the year since Corbyn's successor Keir Starmer became the leader of the Labour Party was 2.2% (443 posts of 19,994 overall).

While there will undoubtedly be keywords missing from the list that would have resulted in further relevant posts, the most important keywords should be covered. Similarly, the qualitative analysis of the posts that included any of the keywords suggests that there were few "false positives" that were not relevant to the themes that I was looking for. Using these two datasets, it was possible to establish an approximate relative share of posts on the Labour pages that make reference to Jews or Israel. Instead of relying on the absolute number of such posts over time, this metric takes into account the varying levels of activity and increasing number of Labour pages that were created over time, therefore avoiding making false inferences from the rising number of absolute posts over time.

Volume of Posts about Jews and Israel over Time

In terms of the volume of posts, the biggest peak came in August 2018 (7.2% of all posts were related to discussions around Jews and Israel) when the ongoing controversies about antisemitism in the Labour Party coincided with the Gaza border protests, Passover, and Corbyn's visit to Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, as Figure 4.1 shows. The second-biggest peak (6.2% of all posts) followed the BBC Panorama segment in July 2019 in which whistleblowers from the Labour Party had accused key officials within the party's leadership, including Seumas Milne and Jennie Formby, of actively undermining disciplinary processes related to allegations of antisemitism (Ware, 2019). April (4.7%)

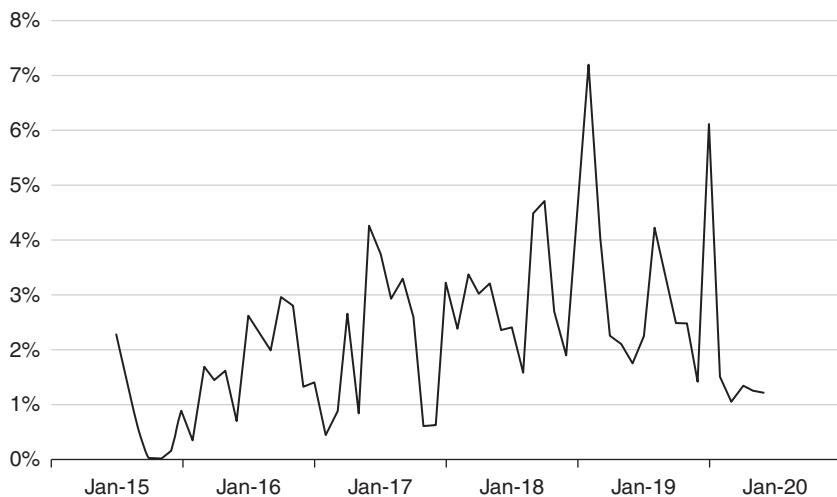


FIGURE 4.1 Mentions of Keywords Related to Jews and Israel in UK Labour Facebook Posts, January 2015 to December 2019.

and March (4.5%) of 2018 also saw bigger spikes, likely caused by the March 2018 demonstration co-organized by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council, the discussion about the Mear One mural, and the revelations that Corbyn had been a member of Facebook groups containing antisemitic posts. An early peak in December 2016 (4.3%) coincided with Hanukkah, and contained little in relation to antisemitism in Labour, while the February 2019 rise (4.3%) came after a group of seven MPs left the Labour Party over their dissatisfaction with the leadership's handling of Brexit and the allegations of antisemitism and founded the Independent Group, which later became Change UK (Chakelian, 2019).

How Common Was Antisemitism within These Groups?

To keep the qualitative data analysis manageable, a randomized sample of 100 posts was created in Excel. I subsequently analyzed whether the posts by the pro-Labour pages themselves or any of the comments in reaction to them constituted antisemitic speech through the lens of the IHRA working definition. In addition, I recorded what type of antisemitism was voiced in pro-Labour pages on Facebook, and whether there was any pushback by other users to such comments.

The analysis of the sampled posts and the comment sections below revealed a number of interesting patterns:

- First, none of the posts by the party pages themselves clearly fell under the IHRA definition or any of its examples of antisemitism.

- Second, while none of the posts were clearly antisemitic, 56% of all comment sections contained at least one, and in the majority of cases more than one, comment that clearly fell under the definition of antisemitism. Nevertheless, even in the comment sections in which there were several antisemitic comments, they always constituted a very small percentage of the overall discussion.
- Third, there may be a connection between the length of the comment section and the likelihood that they will contain antisemitic comments. While the average comment section that contained at least one antisemitic comment had 440 comments, the comment sections that did not contain such comments were significantly shorter (average of 273 comments). It should be noted, however, that I identified comment sections with only 15 comments overall that contained antisemitism and comment sections with almost 1,500 comments that did not.
- Fourth, 41% of the antisemitic comments were challenged by other users. This does show that online antisemitism within pro-Labour communities did not always go unchallenged. It suggests, however, that too often, and in fact in the majority of cases, it likely did go unchallenged.

From these findings, a nuanced picture emerges in terms of the prevalence of antisemitism within pro-Labour Facebook pages. While many followers of these pages and supporters of Labour will have found that antisemitism is relatively rare within these discussions, it is very unlikely that they would not have come across such comments. Nevertheless, it appears likely that the antisemitism they encountered was not always challenged, leading critics of the party's handling of antisemitism allegations to interpret this failure as tolerance toward such attitudes.

What Types of Antisemitism Were Found within These Groups?

Based on my analysis of posts and comments in the pro-Labour pages through the lens of the IHRA working definition, the most frequent type of antisemitism found in the comment sections of Labour pages were conspiracy myths, alleging Jews' control the media, economy, government or other societal institutions (35.7% of all antisemitic comments), comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis (25%), denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination (14.3%), and holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel (10.7%). There were individual examples of using the symbols of classic antisemitism, Holocaust denial, accusing Jews of wrongdoing of non-Jews, making stereotyping accusations toward "lying Jews," and accusations that Jewish citizens are more loyal to Israel than to the interests of their own nations. One comment appeared to express support for the antisemitic terrorist group Hezbollah and the Iranian regime.

The following sections provide a more in-depth analysis of the specific examples of antisemitic content identified.

Conspiracy Myths

Conspiracy myths alleging that powerful Jews yield a socially harmful and disproportionate influence over political and economic affairs, for example by controlling the media, economy, government, or other societal institutions, were the most frequently encountered type of antisemitic content in the comment sections of UK Labour Facebook pages.

The posts identified included claims that the 2013 Sarin gas attack committed by the Assad regime in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta was staged on behalf of the “Israel Lobby,” that the UK media was controlled by the Zionists, or that Israel was secretly behind ISIS. Some posts also referred to the allegations that Jewish financiers were the driving force behind the transatlantic slave trade, or claimed that the Rothschild family, a frequent target of antisemitic conspiracy myths, continues to yield a disproportionate influence over the economy and the UK’s political establishment. One comment also referenced the USS Liberty incident during the Six-Day war in 1967, during which an Israeli aircraft had accidentally attacked a US Navy ship, killing 34. The incident has become a popular conspiracy myth among antisemitic communities online, including the far-right Groypers led by the Holocaust denier Nicolas J. Fuentes in the United States.

Such comments seem to have also triggered reflection among some Labour supporters about the problem of antisemitism within the party. Below a post centered around a video by the pro-Corbyn alternative media outlet Novara Media (which has itself been criticized by some observers for its role in Labour’s antisemitism crisis) debunking popular conspiracy myths, one user expressed his concern about what he viewed as conspiratorial replies to the video in the comment section: “I watched the video and thought surely we don’t need this, surely no one believes these … then I read your comments. … We do have an antisemitism problem if you truly mean what you write here.”

Comparing Contemporary Israeli Policy to That of the Nazis

The second most frequently encountered type of antisemitism were comparisons, and often equations, of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis. While some of these comparisons may have been caused by a lack of consideration for the hurt that such offensive comparisons may cause, in other cases commentators deliberately referenced the exact text of the specific IHRA example about Nazi analogies. This suggests that they were deliberately aiming to equate the Holocaust with the human rights abuses suffered by Palestinians as a consequence of Israeli policies or the behavior of its security services.

Examples of comparisons between contemporary Israeli policy to that of Nazis include terms of abuse such as “ZioNazi,” claims that all that was missing from the uniforms of Israeli soldiers were the letters “SS,” but also statements even more explicitly equating the two: One comment that defended Ken Livingstone’s remarks about Hitler having supported Zionism argued that “we

need to take a position on Palestine because what the Israelis are doing there is no better than what Hitler did to the Jews." Another comment claimed "a generation of people cannot remember what happened to their parents/ grandparents during the Holocaust" and now "inflicts the same horrors on another group of people." In one final example, a user claimed that "Israel is the new Nazi state. How they can behave this way after what Nazis did to Jews?"

Denying the Jewish People Their Right to Self-Determination

Denying the Jewish people the right to self-determination, for example by claiming that a state of Israel is a racist endeavor, which goes beyond calling specific policies of the Israeli government racist, may constitute a form of antisemitism, according to the IHRA. Such content was found below a post by the pro-Labour campaign group Momentum that promoted "That's Funny, You Don't Look Antisemitic," a 1984 book about left-wing antisemitism by Steve Cohen. One comment claimed that Israel was aiming at creating an all-white country made up purely of European and American Jews and that Zionism was therefore merely a synonym for ethnic cleansing. Similarly, another user expressed surprise that the "condemnation of European migrants who are oppressing indigenous semites in their ancestral land" would be considered anti-semitic. Other comments (presumably consciously) used the language used in the examples of IHRA definition to argue that "Israel is de facto a racist endeavor and those who seek to justify or support it are the real anti-semites [sic.] and racists."

Other examples were found below a post centered around the response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's criticism of Jeremy Corbyn's participation in the wreath-laying ceremony for Black September operatives. Corbyn had argued that Netanyahu's claims were false and that the killings during the Gaza border protests in 2018 should be condemned instead. This led one Corbyn supporter to criticize Netanyahu for tweeting "without fact-checking," and describing the Israeli prime minister as "the leader of a so-called country." The implication here is of course that Israel is not a "real" country, but an artificial construct. While the case can, of course, be made that states are always social constructs, the fact that Israel is singled out as an artificial country implies a double standard, and a denial of Israel's right to exist and Jewish people's right to self-determination.

Holding Jews Collectively Responsible for Actions of the State of Israel

Holding Jews, including non-Israelis, responsible for the real or perceived wrongdoings of the Israeli government is a form of Israel-related antisemitism that was found within the comment sections of pro-Labour Facebook pages. In early 2019, for example, the staunchly pro-Corbyn MP Chris Williamson was expelled from the party over his comments that were interpreted as downplaying the extent of antisemitism within Labour. In a post about the case, a Jewish Labour member who expressed support for Williamson's eviction (interestingly, while still

continuing to tacitly support Corbyn) was attacked for being offended about antisemitism, when he really should be offended by what “Jews are doing in Israel.”

Following the killing of the Palestinian medic Rouzan al-Najjar by the Israeli Defense Forces during the 2018 Gaza border protests, a user claimed to have just written to the Labour MP Margaret Hodge about the incident, asking others to also write her, sharing her (alleged) email-address in the post. Hodge, who is Jewish, was targeted as she had criticized Corbyn and his handling of the allegations of antisemitism within Labour.

Below the same post, another comment stated: “[I]f you ever dare speak out against Jews, you’re fucked.” It should be noted however that this comment was challenged by another user arguing that this was a false and counter-productive way of putting it, arguing that “nobody needs to speak out against Jews. We need to speak out against Israel.”

Other Types of Antisemitic Content

There was a range of other types of antisemitic content identified. The comments described in the following section were less prominent, but are in some cases (e.g., Holocaust denial) particularly extreme. Below a post by Corbyn commemorating Holocaust memorial day, one user replied: “[I]t was a WORLD WAR [sic.] everyone suffered.” In one case, a user also claimed that the Holocaust had not taken place and was merely “Zionist propaganda” that was not worth commemorating. Under a post showing the alleged killing of a Palestinian child at the hands of Israeli security forces during the second Intifada, one reply read that “thousands have died in the UK under tory austerity, blood money is what they feed on. This poor child is just another victim of their greed.” While being somewhat nebulous in its exact meaning, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that the user was drawing on tropes that are similar to those of the antisemitic blood libel myths that accused Jews in the Middle Ages of murdering (Christian) children in order to utilize their blood for ritual purposes. Similar language was used to describe the “racist, illegal and blood thirsty occupier that stole Palestine.”

In some cases, reactions to posts by Labour pages about Israeli human rights abuses descended into dehumanizing language such as claims that “they don’t belong in the human race” or allegations that Jews, Israelis, or Zionists (often, this is not specified) adhered to supremacist ideologies. As one user put it: “In many of their eyes, they are purer than most humans and we all deserve death. It’s as if the hangover of WW2 has reversed roles.”

Denialism, Deflections, and the Allegations of a “Smear Campaign”

Many within the Labour Party argued that claims around antisemitism were merely a “smear campaign,” which became one of the key obstacles in addressing the issue head-on. In its final report investigating allegations of antisemitism in

the Labour Party, the EHRC found the party legally responsible for harassment in 2 cases (with 18 further borderline cases). One of the types of antisemitic conduct that amounted to unlawful harassment was suggestions that complaints of antisemitism are “fake” or “smears.” The EHRC argued that claiming Jewish party members were “deliberately making up antisemitism complaints to undermine the Labour Party” may amount to antisemitic behavior.

Denials about the presence or the extent of antisemitism within the Labour Party were unsurprisingly found in all the comment sections analyzed for this chapter. Unfortunately, it is almost always very difficult to assess whether these comments were directed toward Jewish members, and if these Jewish members were accused of acting deliberately in order to harm the Labour Party. While such comments were therefore not classified as antisemitic unless they also fall under the IHRA definition for other reasons, the following section will nevertheless provide some of these examples which provide important context about one of the most common themes with the discussions about antisemitism within Labour.

In many cases, such comments did not deny that antisemitism existed within the Labour Party, but disputed that it was worse than in other parties, and alleged that the Conservative Party and the “right-wing press” were disproportionately focusing on antisemitism within Labour for political purposes. To back up such claims, they frequently cited surveys such as the Campaign Against Antisemitism’s 2017 survey that showed fewer members of the Labour Party agreed with certain antisemitic statements than members of the Conservative Party.

As mentioned above, claims that the allegations of antisemitism in Labour were exaggerated were found in every single comment section analyzed. These included claims that Labour should “*stop taking the bait and move on*” in response to party posts that promised stronger action against antisemitism within the party. Others claimed that the crisis would not exist without the constant coverage and false accusations levelled against Corbyn and his aides by “the media.” Frequent criticism was voiced against the role of the BBC, which was accused of intending to undermine the leadership of Corbyn, thereby betraying its commitment to impartial reporting.

The apparent fatigue that many Labour supporters felt about the discussions relating to antisemitism would at times result in the use of antisemitic symbols. One comment in response to a post about antisemitism used the triple parenthesis symbol, which is used as code to highlight the Jewish identity of individuals, groups, or institutions by antisemites and to express boredom about the issue. Others claimed that they were “*proud to be antisemites*” if this meant being critical of Israeli human rights abuses against the Palestinian or that they “*could not give a shit if someone calls Corbyn or the Labour party antisemitic*.”

Many other comments sought to immediately direct attention away from the topic of antisemitism. One post about an incident on a university campus in the United States, in which a Swastika had been sprayed on the office doors of a Jewish professor, may serve to illustrate this point. While many users expressed

shock about the incident, or solidarity with those affected by antisemitism, there was a significant number of replies that sought to minimize or even disprove the incident. These included posts which argued that Swastikas had a very different meaning in the context of Eastern religions, others which alleged that “Zionists” may have painted the Swastika themselves and also posts that complained about the fact the post in question focused on the United States, not the United Kingdom.

Another post, in which Corbyn had called out an antisemitic hate crime against a Rabbi in London, similarly led to reactions that immediately tried to redirect attention away from the problem of antisemitism. This included posts arguing that while the hate crime was “terrible,” Labour supporters should not “be bullied and coerced into never daring to criticize the Israeli government.” Others (judging from the users’ other comments, unironically) blamed the BBC’s coverage of antisemitism for putting antisemitic ideas “into the heads of right-wing thugs.”

One comment that was met with great support alleged that the alleged prominence of antisemitism in public discourse was a sign that sinister forces were at play:

Did some research. Please can someone explain to me why there is an IHRA and why they have so much clout in British politics? Why is one group of people upheld above all others? This seems entirely unfair and undemocratic.

Limitations

There are a number of important limitations to the retrospective analysis of public Facebook pages.

- First, posts and comments may have been edited or deleted by those who originally published them, or removed by the moderators of the respective pages.
- Second, due to the data access provided by the Facebook-owned Crowdtangle analysis software, researchers unfortunately only have systematic access to the posts by public pages and groups on the platform. Comments below these public posts, or any content from closed groups, are not systematically, and in many cases ethically, accessible. These groups may contain more explicit examples of antisemitism; however, an investigation by the *Sunday Times* in April 2018 found more than 2,000 examples of antisemitic, abusive, and violent posts targeting Jewish MPs and activists in private pro-Corbyn groups on Facebook (Kerbaj et al., 2018).
- Third, some of the most vicious antisemitic statements, attacks, and threats made using social media will likely have come through direct messages to the individuals targeted. Extensive reporting exists about the cases of antisemitic

- abuse suffered by Labour members critical of antisemitism within the party, as well as Jewish individuals who were not part of the party in the first place.⁹
- Lastly, since the downloaded data is unstructured text, the distribution of different elements within the sample of 100 randomly selected posts may not correspond to the actual distribution within the population (all posts). It is therefore difficult to guarantee that the sample is truly representative. Nevertheless, the sampling ensures that posts and comments analyzed represent a random cross section of posts by Labour pages relevant to Jews and Israel.

These limitations suggest that through the retrospective analysis of these public debates on social media, we can only gain access to the tip of the iceberg in terms of online antisemitism among the supporters of the Labour Party and that the true extent of the issue is likely bigger than outlined here.

Conclusion

This article analyzed left-wing antisemitism within public Facebook pages supportive of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom since 2015. The findings show that, within the sample analyzed, the posts by the pages themselves were not antisemitic and many followers of these pages and supporters of Labour will have found that antisemitism is relatively rare within discussions relating to Jews and Israel. On the other hand, it was easy to still find antisemitic material in more than half of the comment sections analyzed, suggesting it is very unlikely that users participating in these discussions would not have come across such comments. In addition, it appears that antisemitism was not always sufficiently challenged when it was expressed in these public fora. This may have contributed to the perception of the critics of the party's handling of antisemitism allegations that Labour supporters were too tolerant of antisemitism.

The antisemitic comments that are available today consist of different types of antisemitism. The most prominent are conspiracy myths alleging Jews control the media, economy, government, or other societal institutions; comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis; denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination; and holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel. While Israel-related antisemitism was clearly the most common, the type of antisemitic comments found went beyond discussions about Israel and Zionism.

The obvious fact that criticism of a government should not be equated with bigotry against people is an insufficient response to the fact that critics of Israel sometimes draw on antisemitic tropes, express support for antisemites, deny the Jewish people's right to self-determination, and hold Jews collectively accountable for the actions of the Israeli government. The same dynamic has been shown in surveys as well. A 2017 poll by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and the Community Security Trust (CST) found that "86% of those who do not hold

any anti-Israel attitudes do not hold any antisemitic attitudes either; whereas, among those holding a large number of anti-Israel attitudes, only 26% do not hold any antisemitic attitudes” (Staetsky, 2017, p. 7). These findings demonstrate that while it is possible to be extremely critical of Israeli policies without being antisemitic, there is often a correlation between criticism of Israel and agreement with antisemitic statements. The analysis for this chapter shows that between 2015 and 2019, supporters of Labour too often failed to thread that line, and failed to challenge others who failed to do so.

Notes

- 1 Comment from a user in pro-Labour Facebook group during a discussion about antisemitism in the party.
- 2 The “Overton Window,” named after American political analyst Joseph P. Overton, describes the range of ideas and policies that are considered acceptable within mainstream political discourse at any given moment in time.
- 3 The video of the remarks about Hamas and Hezbollah from a 2009 speech held in front of the Stop the War Coalition is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQLKpY3NdeA>.
- 4 “Nation of Islam.” Southern Poverty Law Center – Extremist Files. Available online: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam>.
- 5 Full text of the IHRA definition is available online: <https://www.holocaustmemembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.
- 6 The video of the remarks about “English irony” is available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2018/aug/24/jeremy-corbys-2013-remarks-on-some-zionists-not-understanding-english-irony-video>.
- 7 Antisemitism and the Left – Dr. Dave Rich, House of Commons, December 2018 (From 11.00 onwards). <https://soundcloud.com/user-771239343/antisemitism-and-the-left-dr-dave-rich-house-of-commons-december-2018>.
- 8 Some of the coverage of these attacks includes Kentish, B. (2019). ‘The abuse made me physically ill’: Luciana Berger reveals toll of fighting antisemitism while Labour MPs refused to stand by her. *The Independent*, [online] Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/luciana-berger-labour-antisemitism-jeremy-corbyn-election-latest-liberal-democrats-finchley-a9196696.html>; Times of Israel (2019). Jewish candidate for UK Labour Party bombarded with anti-Semitic death threats. *Times of Israel*, [online] Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-candidate-for-uk-labour-party-bombarded-with-anti-semitic-death-threats/>.
- 9 See endnote 8.

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5

ATTACKS ON DEMOCRACY?

A Troll-Attack on YouTube

Monika Hübscher and Vanessa Walter¹

Introduction²

Troll attacks are becoming more and more frequent on social media. Trolls are people who organize to disrupt, for example, an event held on social media through targeted dissemination of hate speech and disinformation. The technology of social media allows the trolls to post an enormous number of comments for free, at high speed, and with an incomprehensible reach. Events, scholars, and multipliers who work against antisemitism are subjected to attacks on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in particular. Trolls, mostly from the right to right-wing extremist spectrum, register for events or go to freely accessible events in order to then flood them with inappropriate content in the form of videos, pictures, and comments with the goal to derail the agenda. The trolls are not actually interested in conveying their opinion through discourse. Their real goal is to generate emotions and reactions by breaking taboos in order to polarize factual debates and provoke populist comments (Marwick and Lewis, 2017, pp. 4–7; Hardaker, 2010, pp. 236–238; Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, 2014, p. 97).

Antisemitic troll attacks deny the Holocaust, spread conspiracy myths, and deplore an imagined censorship of freedom of expression. People belonging to certain groups are insulted and often threatened in an antisemitic, racist, Islamophobic, misogynous, and queer-hostile manner. Already in 2017, the 5,000-user troll factory *Reconquista Germanica* caused quite a stir in Germany as part of political warfare. With the use of targeted strategies, they influenced the political discourse on social media during the 2017 federal election by creating hashtags and ensuring that they were trending. They attacked and incited against politicians from mainstream parties and incited against refugees and other minorities with a massive number of posts on all social media platforms (Martin, 2018).

The following four examples show how troll attacks are aimed directly at Jews. In 2019, there was a massive troll attack with fake Jewish profiles on Facebook and Twitter. The goal of the right-wing trolls from the 4chan platform was to use Jewish profiles to circumvent the censorship of Twitter and Facebook and thus be able to spread antisemitic conspiracy myths about the alleged Jewish influence on the world economy, the porn industry, and the media widely (Dolsten, 2019).

In the course of the renewed violence in connection with the Israel–Palestine conflict in May 2021, the Twitter account of the Central Council of Jews in Germany became the victim of an antisemitic troll attack in which Jews were threatened with death, allegedly out of solidarity with Palestine (Zentralrat der Juden, [Twitter] 2021).

During a Zoom event on Holocaust Remembrance Day 2020, the coauthor of this chapter, Vanessa Walter, experienced an antisemitic troll attack when the Israeli Holocaust scholar, Yad Vashem employee and son of Holocaust survivors, David Silberklang, delivered a lecture. Trolls had managed to control the Zoom meeting and drew a huge swastika across the entire screen. The audience as well as the organizers and Silberklang, visibly shocked and hurt, had no choice but to stop the lecture early.

In September 2020, an event organized by the *Kompetenznetzwerke gegen Antisemitismus und Rechtsextremismus* [competence networks against antisemitism and right-wing extremism] was also the target of a troll attack. These then newly established networks, in which various associations, foundations, and advocates from the field cooperate (among them, for example, the Anne Frank e.V. educational facility), organized a conference entitled *Antisemitism and Right-Wing Extremism. Attacks on Democracy*. This public conference, which was broadcast live on the video platform YouTube, was disrupted on two consecutive days with antisemitic posts in the live chat. As a result, genuine participants hardly ever spoke up or asked questions.

We took part in this conference as researchers and in the course of it witnessed the troll attack. Disturbed by the antisemitic comments, we decided to document the situation (also for potential charges to be brought against commentators), which ultimately led to this analysis.

Someone had posted the link to the live stream of the above-mentioned event in the Telegram channel of the right-wing extremist “Volkslehrer” [the people’s teacher]. The self-proclaimed Volkslehrer’ is a well-known agitator in the German right-wing extremist scene who repeatedly attracts attention through antisemitic and racist comments, which he disseminates in particular via Telegram and YouTube. Charges have been brought against him on numerous occasions, including for denying the Holocaust (Pointek, 2020).

It took some time until the organizers realized that the event had been deliberately disrupted, but then the chat moderators of the Anne Frank Educational Center (BAF) did their best to counter provocative comments, delete antisemitic content, and occasionally block antisemitic interlopers. The question arises,

however, whether the decision to moderate the chat was the best response on the part of the BAF, or whether there could have been a more effective alternative.

Therefore, in this chapter we analyze the antisemitic troll attack during the above-mentioned event using methods of digital textual analysis and the four characteristics of trolling (aggression, deception, disruption, success) according to Claire Hardaker (2010). Our specific research questions are: Why do trolls gather and attack an event against antisemitism in Germany? What are their goals? Which antisemitic expressions and codes do German trolls use? What are their backgrounds, and what is their context? Are moderation and counter-speech, as employed in our case study, suitable strategies to counter a troll attack?

At the end we recommend how to deal with antisemitic troll attacks in order to protect listeners and not give the trolls any space.

Current State of Research

Almost all research on troll attacks is published in English, and although trolling is also becoming more common in Germany, the phenomenon is not yet the focus of German academic discussion. To the best of our knowledge, there is no known scholarly analysis of a German troll attack. So far, primarily the media and research institutes such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) have reported on troll attacks. As early as 2002, when social media had not yet reached the mainstream, researchers analyzed a troll attack in a feminist forum (“web-based discussion forum”) and evaluated trolls’ comments and reactions to them. That case study already outlined strategies of trolling and the problems involved in dealing with it (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2002). With the popularization of social media, troll attacks have come more into the focus of research. On social media, troll attacks are a constant phenomenon, in part through the involvement of so-called troll farms whose disinformation campaigns have a broad reach and therefore generate increased attention.

One focus of research on trolls is their (automatic) detection. In the process, research is also carried out on the behavior of trolls in different settings (fora, social media, blogs, etc.). Trolls are also examined from a psychological point of view by asking whether specific traits of trolls correlate with certain personality traits (Navarro-Carrillo, Torres-Marín, and Carretero-Dios, 2021). Different approaches are used to detect trolls. Among other things, methods of sentiment analysis, natural language processing, or social network analysis are used (Tomaïuolo et al., 2020). For example, in 2010 researchers developed a troll detector based on so-called sentic computing, which uses affective and cognitive information from a sentence to determine the degree of “trollness” of posts (Cambria et al., 2010). In 2018, researchers developed a system for troll detection specifically for Twitter that combines many common approaches and achieves an accuracy of 95.5% (Fornacciari et al., 2018). In addition to the detection of trolls, research into the effects of trolling and possible reactions to it is important. Among other things, researchers have examined the importance

and involvement of trolls in the spread of disinformation in different contexts (Atanasov, De Francisci Morales, and Nakov, 2019; Golovchenko et al., 2020). Questions about the influence on discussion culture and discourses on social media also play an important role (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017; Stewart, Arif, and Starbird, 2018).

Methodology

Our qualitative case study is supported by a quantitative analysis by the *Voyant* tool suite (Sinclair and Rockwell, 2003). *Voyant Tools* is a web-based open-source application for performing digital textual analysis. The tool suite was developed in 2003 by Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell based on earlier analysis tools and is used in particular by digital humanities scholars. *Voyant* enables quantitative data analysis based on word frequencies and includes various tools with which we can analyze and visualize the corpus in different ways.

The corpus consists of antisemitic comments that we copied from the live chat during the troll attack on the event *Antisemitism and right-wing extremism – two sides of the same coin*. Because the trolls posted antisemitic messages at tremendous speed, and the chat moderators deleted some of them, there is no full corpus of the attack. In order to achieve a precise data analysis, the corpus was cleaned up with a stop word list and spelling errors corrected. The corpus comprises a total of 3,369 words and is therefore relatively small.

Therefore, the data analysis should be seen as a supplement to the contextualization and qualitative evaluation, which visualizes the influence of the trolls on the direction of the discussion. In addition, we would like to use our case study to show what working with visualizations and a quantitative way to deal with the content of a troll attack can look like. *Blended Reading* is used to combine quantitative exploration with qualitative *Fundstellenanalyse* (reference analysis).

The use of digital text mining tools such as *Voyant* can be used to help identify relevant text in the corpus (blended reading). In addition, the quantitative approach can be used to check the plausibility of theses that have emerged from the discourse analysis (close reading) (Dröge, 2020, p. 21; Lehmke and Stulpke, 2016, pp. 43–46 and p. 55). It would be exciting to further analyze the dynamics of troll attacks with digital textual analysis. In that context the relationship between troll and counter-speech or moderation comments could also be considered. Due to the small data corpus, we have refrained from such an analysis, but recommend the procedure for a deeper examination.

It is important to note that we do not analyze the entire live chat, but rather pick up specific topics as examples. In addition, antisemitism is also expressed implicitly or in coded form, which poses a challenge for the selection of search words. Because the selected search words are highly relevant and are already represent a framing, therefore, the classification of comments as antisemitic remains the task of the qualitative analysis.

The following truncated search terms, marked with a star, which were particularly noticeable in the troll attack, were used for the quantitative data analysis with Voyant: afd*, antisem*, islam*, muslim*, jud*, verschwörung*, loxismus*, volkslehrer*. The most common words in the corpus of the troll attack after clearing up the stop word list were words – apart from the word question – that were only ever used in the context of antisemitic statements: Frank (29), Anne (23), Bildungsstätte (20), antisemitism (19), Volkslehrer (17), question (14), jews (11), and afd (10).³ This also clearly shows that it is an antisemitic troll attack. The words Frank, Anne, and Bildungsstätte refer to the educational institution Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, which hosted the event. Volkslehrer, as already mentioned above, refers to a known antisemitic agitator, and AfD stands for the Alternative für Deutschland party, which is represented in the Bundestag and known for its antisemitic scandals.

The following five topics, which we will discuss in more detail in the course of the chapter, were taken up particularly frequently in the trolls' comments: (1) the alleged connection of Jews with money and power, (2) Anne Frank, (3) conspiracy myths, (4) Muslims and antisemitism, and (5) the “Volkslehrer” and the AfD.⁴

Qualitative Analysis

The construction of Jews as a homogeneous group facing the Germans in the tradition of National Socialism runs through all of the trolls' comments (Topkara, 2018). Commentator 1 writes: “Can one criticize” the Jews “as one can criticize” the Germans “or is that antisemitism?”⁵ The question of whether such a criticism would already be antisemitic degrades the historical dimension and danger of antisemitism in Germany’ and dismisses it as exaggerated.

In the comment “How should the chosen people deal with the goyim?”⁶ religious descriptions are taken out of their (religious) context and instrumentalized using terms such as “the chosen people” and “goyim” (non-Jewish people). With this, the trolls insinuate that Jews marginalize themselves. This and the division into Jews and non-Jews serve as a legitimization to discriminate against Jewish people.

Money and Power

The question from commentator 2 (in the chat with supposed real names),⁷ about the name of the richest family in the world, includes the traditional antisemitic stereotype of the rich Jews (Foxman, 2010). In response to this antisemitic allusion, the BAF moderators countered by naming the richest people in the world, with the moderators answering the question as if it were not in the context of the event or a troll attack. It should have been clear to the moderators that the troll wasn't interested in the answer. The moderator not only ignored the antisemitic content of the question, but also legitimized it by engaging in the exchange.

The attempt to counter-speech seemed like an invitation to the trolls, because further questions of this kind followed, such as whether at any point the Rothschilds had been the richest family in the world. Questions about the financing of the event also came up again and again in the chat. In this context, questions were asked about the speakers' fees and the amount of the BAF's annual project funding. Because of its name, the BAF seems to represent the supposed influence of Jews in the perception of the trolls. It was asked whether the speakers would also stand up for Jews if there was no government support for it. Commentator 3 asked: "When will the German debt and payments to Israel end?",⁸ and thus expressed the desire for a "final line" under the German process of coming to terms with the past and reparations payments after the Holocaust (Salzborn, 2020).

Several comments implied that "the Jews" as a group were actually benefiting from the Holocaust and were receiving unfair preferential treatment in Germany: "I just don't understand why 100,000 Jews in Germany need such a lobby, even though they don't have to fear any violence from the locals here."⁹ Although antisemitic incidents have increased in recent years, and antisemitism is being expressed more and more unreservedly and openly (VDK / RIAS Berlin, 2021, pp. 4–6; Bundesregierung, 2020, pp. 2–5; Poensgen and Steinitz, 2020, pp. 26–29), this is denied in the antisemitic commentary, and the blame for racism is placed instead on "foreigners." It is also assumed that there is one overpowering "lobby" for Jews, which is perceived as unjust. That there are many different lobbies for different matters in Germany is completely ignored.

The commentaries show in different ways how Jews are associated with power and money. At the same time, the existence of antisemitism and the resulting threat are denied, and work against it is delegitimized and interpreted as the supposed influence of Jews.

Anne Frank

Anne Frank was mentioned in several comments. For example, trolls asked whether Anne Frank was more afraid of the AfD or of Muslims today, to which another commentator replied that the AfD had a "Jewish wing" (Jews in the AfD) and that is why they could assume that she would have felt safe there (Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, 2020, pp. 1–15).

In addition to this instrumentalization of Anne Frank, antisemitic conspiracy narratives were also disseminated in relation to her diary. Anne Frank is a central figure in the culture of remembrance in Germany, and her story is well known through school lessons and film adaptations. The questioning of the authenticity of her diary is an obvious attempt to delegitimize the German memory of the Holocaust. Commentator 4 must also be understood accordingly when they asked "Why was Anne Frank's diary written with a ballpoint pen? It wasn't

invented until after her death”,¹⁰ as must Commentator 5, who followed up with the question: “Wasn’t Anne Frank the inventor of the ballpoint pen?”¹¹

Other comments address further conspiracy myths about Anne Frank, and thus imply a skepticism toward historical facts about the Holocaust. Another comment makes fun of Anne Frank’s fate in the form of a rhyme and thus expresses a lack of empathy toward the victims of the Holocaust.

The questioning of the facts of the Holocaust and the violation of the dignity of the victims represent an attack on German democracy, which is committed to the memory of the Holocaust. In order to avert such attacks, there is Section 130 of the Criminal Code (Section 130 Paragraphs 3 & 4 StGB). Why the moderators gave the trolls a forum on two consecutive days in an event called Attack on Democracy is inexplicable, especially against this background.

Commentator 6: “Anne Frank in the closet.” [the German word Schrank – closet – rhymes with Frank]¹²

Commentator 7: “Anne Frank’s sister Eva claims that the pictures from Bergen Belsen are fake”¹³

Conspiracy Myths

Regarding what was discussed in the live stream of the event, such as the “Querdenker” demonstration in Berlin against the COVID-19 restrictions in Germany, there were several references in the chat to so-called truth movements, which the trolls do not perceive as antisemitic.

Commentator 8: “I think these generalizations are wrong. Conspiracy theories are NOT antisemitic. Who comes to this conclusion? It is a normal theory that is scientifically tested.”¹⁴

Commentator 9: “What is antisemitic about it when you listen to scientific statements by Prof. Dr. Bhakdi and others.”¹⁵

Commentator 10: “Neither are conspiracy theories ‘right’ or ‘left’. They are mainly an independent movement. They call themselves the truth movement. You always have to judge individually.”¹⁶

The comments show that the flood of information on the internet and especially on social media makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from disinformation (Guess and Lyons, 2020, pp. 17–20; Ipsos, 2018, pp. 11–16). There is an obvious loss of trust in traditional media, in science, as well as in facts per se (Edelman Data & Intelligence, 2021a, pp. 24–26; Newman et al., 2020, pp. 14–16). Even if trust in science and the media in Germany has remained relatively constant in recent years (Wissenschaft im Dialog, 2020, pp. 10–20; Jakobs et al., 2021, pp. 152–154), there is distrust of the media. A survey by the market research company Edelman found in 2021 that 59% of Germans feel that the media does not do a good job when it comes to objective and non-partisan

reporting. In addition, more than two-fifths (43%; 59% globally) of respondents said that journalists and reporters deliberately want to mislead people with incorrect and exaggerated information (Edelman Data & Intelligence, 2021b, p. 2). Moreover, a long-term study on media trust by the University of Mainz shows that “the established media are condemned across the board, especially by those citizens who frequently consume alternative news sources on the social web and regularly write user comments on the websites of the established media” (Jakobs et al., 2020).

The comments downplay the danger and political dimension of conspiracy myths, which the trolls portray and normalize as scientific theories. Conspiracy myths are dangerous and have consequences. (Jolley, Mari, and Douglas, 2020, pp. 233–237) The assassins of Halle and Hanau, as well as the murderer of Walter Lübcke, had one thing in common: they were all susceptible to the antisemitic and racist conspiracy myth of population exchange, and referred to it explicitly. As a consequence, 14 people lost their lives in Germany in 2019, and many more were injured.

Muslims and Antisemitism

In their comments, the trolls instrumentalize antisemitism to express their hostility to Islam. Antisemitism in Germany is externalized and generally attributed to all Muslims (Hagen and Neuburger, 2020, pp. 11–13). To see the frequency with which word connections between antisemitism and Islam or Muslims¹⁷ occur in the chat, the tool *Bubblelines* from the tool *suite* mentioned at the beginning was used. The tool allows us to visualize the frequency and distribution of search terms and can be used to determine possible word connections.

The colored balls in Figure 5.1 visualize the mentions of a search term. The horizontal line shows the document history (chat history), specifying the total number of times the respective search term was mentioned in the corpus. A word context can exist when the differently colored spheres lie one below the other and are therefore close to one another. The size of the balls on the horizontal line shows the frequency of the search term in the corpus. In the graphic, the larger spheres show a double mention of the word, and the smaller spheres show a single mention. Accordingly, the graphic shows that the words Islam, Muslims, Arabs, and antisemitism appear together at certain points in the first half of the course of the document. It is noticeable that all mentions of Islam and Arabs are related to antisemitism.

The qualitative analysis of the places visualized here in the live chat confirmed these word contexts and showed that the questions about Muslim antisemitism should not be seen as a serious contribution to the discussion, but as a mere tactic to shift the focus of the event in the interests of the trolls. For example, the assertion by Commentator 11 that there is now more left-wing and Muslim violence, and more attacks on Jews by the latter, right-wing violence is deliberately downplayed. Some commenters ask deliberately ironic and sarcastic questions in

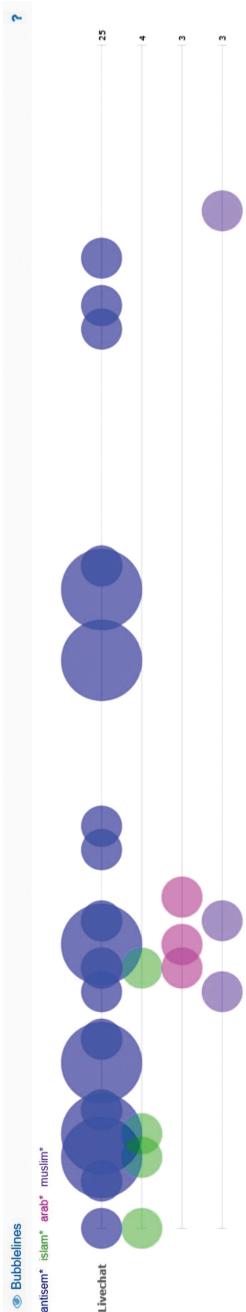


FIGURE 5.1 Externalization of Antisemitism. Source: Voyant Tools, Bubblelines, CC BY 4.0.

order to avoid accusations of racism or antisemitism. The actual antisemitic and Islamophobic message only emerges from the context.

Commentator 12: “Collective antisemitism from the Koran / Islam is concealed!”¹⁸

Commentator 13: “Is the issue of antisemitism among Muslim immigrants also going to be addressed?”¹⁹

Commentator 14: “In the Islamic world, antisemitism or anti-Judaism (because many Arabs are Semites themselves) are very widespread. But more and more people are being brought into the country from these countries.”²⁰

Commentator 15: “What about the antisemitism that Arabs are taught in elementary school?”²¹

Commentator 16: “There is now more left-wing and Muslim violence – the latter are also more often violent against Jews and that is classified as right-wing violence”²²

Commentator 17: “yeah … bad with antisemitism. What do Muslims have against Jews?”²³

Commentator 18: “How do you actually feel about the greatest antisemites in the Federal Republic. The Muslims?”²⁴

The “Volkslehrer” and the AfD

How online networks are transferred to the street can be seen well in the “Querdenker” [person who thinks outside the box] demonstrations, in which AfD members and the so-called “Volkslehrer” also took part (Rafael, 2020). The trolls in YouTube Live Chat repeatedly referred positively to the “Volkslehrer” and the AfD.

Commentator 19: “The people’s teacher is great! But the fear of talking to him is soooo great … all of your arguments would disappear into thin air”²⁵

Commentator 20: “Volkslehrer is top.”²⁶

The AfD and its connection to right-wing extremist actors and the party’s role in the normalization of antisemitism was mentioned again and again by the trolls and lamented as defamation.

Commentator 21: “Why is the right so often equated with right-wing extremism or even National Socialism in the media? For example, the constant designation of the AfD as Nazis disguised as satire”²⁷

Commentator 22: “Wow how people say in such a suggestive way that the npd disappears and people automatically go over to the afd … what nonsense.”²⁸

The trolls’ comments also included references to the American alt-right movement and the racist ideology White Supremacy. Several made references to the

term “loxism,” the antisemitic myth of Jews’ hatred of white people (Oboler, 2016, p. 39).

Trolls use different tactics. The so-called *whataboutism* is an argumentation technique in which counter-questions, as in the following comments, are intended to change the topic of the discussion in a targeted manner (O’Connell, 2020, p. 243).

Commentator 23: “Is there racism against white people too?”²⁹

Commentator 24: “What is Loxism?”³⁰

Commentator 25: “Do you include acts of violence against Germans among the racist acts of violence?”³¹

Findings

The analysis of the comments shows that so-called trolling is a targeted strategy for shifting discourse (Filietz and Marcks, 2020, pp. 132–141 and pp. 169–172). Right-wing narratives are articulated, repeated consistently and in a targeted manner, thereby caricaturing and shifting the actual meaning and focus of the event. The goal is to completely occupy the organizers so they must use all their energy to react to the trolls’ comments and are prevented from continuing with their original agenda. In our case study, this was shown on the basis of the five analyzed topics that were set by the trolls through their comments in the course of the live chat (Figure 5.2).

We used the *Trends* tool to visualize this influence on the discussion. With this tool, the course of selected terms can be traced in the entire document based on their relative word frequency. The Y-axis of the graph shows the word frequency in relation to the total number of words, and the X-axis shows the live chat – divided into equally sized segments. The relative frequencies of the terms in the segments are shown in each case by a colored graph. In the graphic it can first be seen that the graphs have different courses. It can be seen that, with the exception of the word antisemitism, all other terms are not consistently represented in all segments and all terms reach their quantitative climax in the chat at different times. It is noticeable that certain terms such as loxism, Muslims, or conspiracy appear in relatively short phases. The course of the individual graphs shows that some terms dominate certain segments of the chat. This tendency increases as the chat progresses and from segment 4 onward the relative word frequency of antisemitism remains lower than that of the other terms in the segments (AfD, conspiracy) until the end. The only exception is the term Volkslehrer, which, on the one hand, occurs most continuously in the chat alongside antisemitism (segment 4–10) and, on the other hand, remains under the word frequency of antisemitism up to segment 7. Instead, at its peak (at the end of the chat) it exceeds the high points of the other terms (measured by comparing the respective relative word frequencies) and reaches the same frequency as antisemitism at the beginning

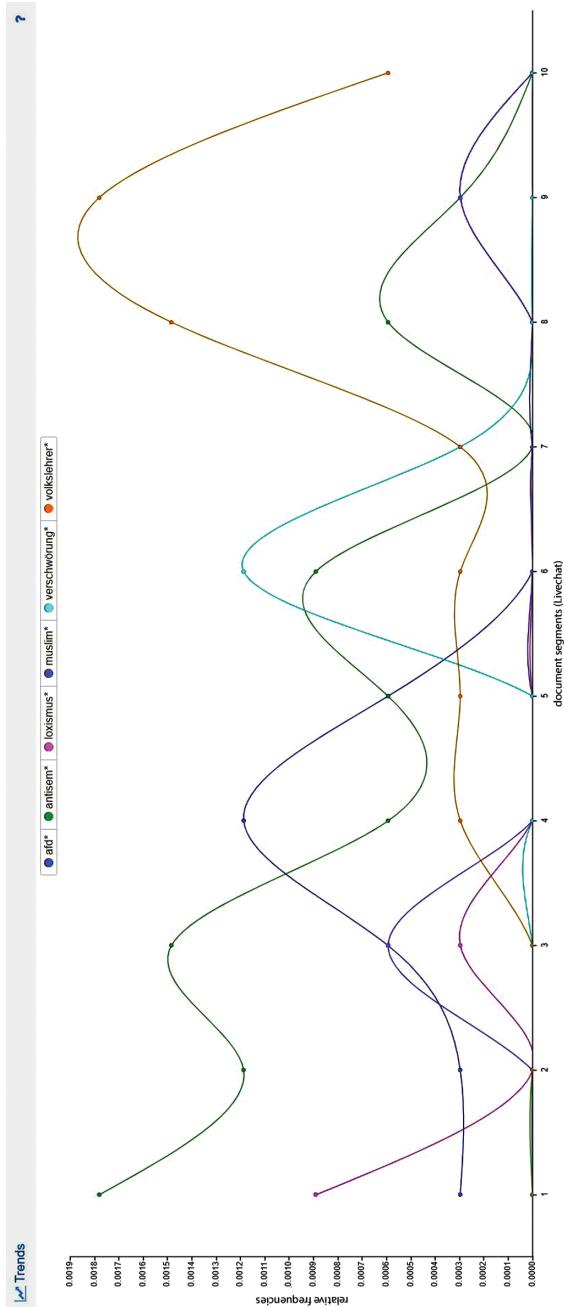


FIGURE 5.2 Discourse shift, search words in English: afd*, antisem*, toxicism*, muslim*, conspiracy*, muslim*, and volkslehrer*. Source: Voyant Tools, Trends, CC BY 4.0.

of the chat. Overall, the relative frequency of antisemitism decreases over the course of the live chat.³²

In addition to striving to shift the discourse, trolls try to delegitimize events about societal issues through their attacks, and to intimidate speakers and listeners in order to prevent such future events. These tactics become clear based on the comments from the live YouTube chat in this example. The strategy of discourse shift goes back to the “Breitbart doctrine” of the American alt-right, which through online networking has found its way into right-wing players on German social media: one must first change the debate culture before one can change the politics (Ebner, 2021, pp. 43–44). These discourse shifts not only normalize an extremely right-wing worldview, but also antisemitism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In *Lingua Tertii Imperii – Language of the Third Reich*, Victor Klemperer (1947) shows that we express positions formed in our consciousness through language. Language can be propaganda that manipulates and instigates. The Nazis said “The Jews are our misfortune,” Commentator 26 wrote in the YouTube Live Chat in the continuity of National Socialist antisemitism “Israel is our downfall②.”³³ For Klemperer, his diary entries were a form of resistance and a form of counter-speech against the Nazis and antisemites. But can counter-speech and moderation be an effective tool against neo-Nazi and antisemitic trolls on social media? Is it right to provide a forum for antisemitic trolls and argue that one should not be bothered by them? Is it right to let trolls post antisemitic remarks that shock, hurt, and silence listeners, including Jewish listeners?

No, it is dangerous, because counter-speech during a troll attack does not lead to a debate. It fades into nothing, like the BAF’s announcement that antisemitic statements would be reported. On the contrary: the deletion of the content is instrumentalized by the trolls to prove that they are victims of censorship and that there is no longer any freedom of expression. Trolls want to be destructive and a troll attack is a targeted attack. As in the present case, it is intended to delegitimize and prevent an event on the subject of antisemitism from running smoothly. In this troll attack, the moderators had no ability to act. During the whole chat they were behind with their reactions to the antisemitic posts, because a troll attack cannot be fended off by (educational) intervention such as counter-speech. So far, there is no satisfactory solution to such situations, other than not to let trolls take over and do everything to protect participants from antisemitism.

In this example, the trolls have won. They could not just express symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2005) in the form of antisemitic comments, but also had the final say in the chat (Figure 5.3).

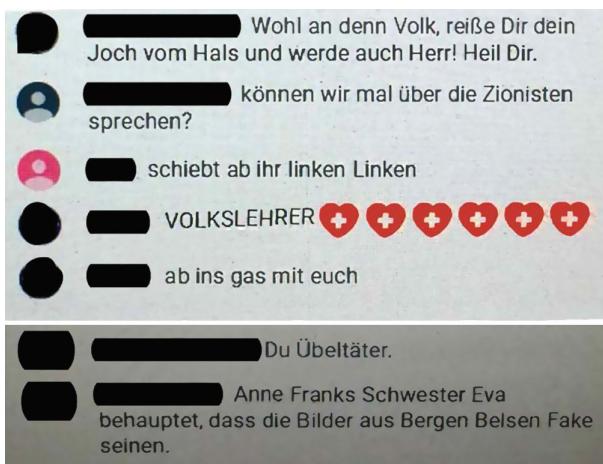


FIGURE 5.3 Screenshots in the sequence of the chat.

The analysis of the goals and strategies of trolling has practical consequences. The only way to prevent a troll attack is not to open (virtual) rooms for it. Some institutions in Germany set a good example when they published statements on how to deal with trolls in the announcement of their (online) events, such as IDA-NRW (Information and Documentation Center for Antiracism Work eV in North Rhine-Westphalia) in IDA Infomail No. 4, from August 2020:

We set great store by respectful cooperation. In this sense, we reserve the right to make use of our house rules, and to deny access to people who belong to right-wing extremist parties or organizations in the right-wing extremist scene or who are known to have made racist, nationalist, antisemitic or other inhumane statements in the past.

(IDA-NRW, 2020, p. 6)

The exclusion not only prevents the trolls from taking control of events but also protects participants from attacks as long as there are no better digital strategies.

YouTube itself also offers recommendations to reduce the likelihood of a troll attack, and, in the event of one, to at least minimize the damage. On the one hand, it is possible to block messages with certain words using a list that you have created yourself. However, antisemitism is often expressed in coded form or only becomes apparent in context and cannot be ruled out using word lists. Furthermore, YouTube offers the option to “delay comments,” which delays potentially inappropriate messages through the YouTube system and only makes them visible in LiveChat after approval by the moderator (YouTube, 2021). However, the YouTube algorithm would have to be able to recognize antisemitic messages.

To better understand troll attacks, it is necessary to analyze the phenomenon in an interdisciplinary manner, especially in terms of its effects on bystanders.

Strategies for dealing with troll attacks in terms of damage limitation must also be developed on the basis of such analyses. This requires that quantitative and qualitative research are more closely linked.

In our analysis we have shown that the trolls used symbolic violence in the form of antisemitism (aggression) and communicated antisemitic content in the form of questions by pretending to be interested (deception). With blatant antisemitic remarks, the trolls disrupted the chat and distracted from the event (disruption). This ultimately led to the fact that the discourse was shifted in the interests of the trolls, the chat moderators left the space to them, and it became practically impossible for others to participate in the chat (success). Since antisemitism in the form of conspiracy myths is one of the drivers of the loss of trust in media and science, it contributes to the erosion of democracy. Antisemitism prevents participation, leads to exclusion, and undermines the legitimacy of the pluralistic society and its institutions. That is why one can speak of an attack on democracy in an antisemitic troll attack. Academic scholarship must contribute to the defense of democracy, and one way to do so is to engage in further research of contemporary phenomena such as troll attacks.

Notes

- 1 Translation: Sabine von Mering.
- 2 The authors thank Ingo Pätzold, Prof. Ullrich Bauer, and Prof. Nicolle Pfaff for their constructive feedback, and Tim Eipert for his help with the figures. Thanks also to Prof. Sabine von Mering for translating the text into English.
- 3 Variations of the words (e.g., anti-Semitic) are not counted here.
- 4 Since the moderators tried to delete antisemitic content as quickly as possible, the comments quoted here are not always given in the exact order of the chat. In the quoted comments, the typographical errors have not been changed. Some of the trolls' comments are related to what the speakers said in the YouTube Talk, some others are incoherent interjections aimed at pure provocation. The numbering of the commentators is for the sake of clarity and does not represent one commentator in each case.
- 5 “Darf man ‘die Juden’ kritisieren so wie man ‘die Deutschen’ kritisieren darf oder ist das dann schon Antisemitismus?”
- 6 “Wie soll das auserwählte Volk mit den Gojim verfahren?”
- 7 The users could have participated in the chat with their real names or a pseudonym.
- 8 “Wann hört die deutsche Schuld und die Zahlungen nach Israel auf?”
- 9 “ich verstehe halt nicht warum 100.000 Juden in Deutschland so eine Lobby brauchen obwohl ihnen hier von den einheimischen gar keine Gewalt angetan wird.”
- 10 “Warum wurde das tagebuchbuch [sic] von Anne Frank mit Kugelschreiber geschrieben? Der wurde dich [sic] erst nach ihrem Tod erfunden.”
- 11 “War Anne Frank nicht die Erfinderin des Kugelschreibers?”
- 12 “Anne Frank im Kleider.”
- 13 “Anne Franks Schwester Eva behauptet das die Bilder aus Bergen Belsen Fake seinen [sic]” h [sic] von Anne Frank mit Kugelschreiber geschrieben? Der wurde dich [sic] erst nach ihrem Tod erfunden.”
- 14 “Ich finde diese Pauschalisierungen falsch. Verschwörungstheorien sind NICHT antisemitisch. Wer kommt zu diesem Schluss? Es ist eine normale Theorie, die wissenschaftlich geprüft wird.”

- 15 "Was ist daran antisemitisch, wenn man wissenschaftliche Ausführungen von Prof. Dr. Bhakdi ua. anhört."
- 16 "Genauso wenig sind Verschwörungstheorien 'rechts' oder 'links.' Sie sind hauptsächlich eine eigenständige "Bewegung". Sie nennen sich Wahrheitsbewegung. Man muss immer individuell beurteilen."
- 17 In the following, the truncated terms in the text are used in a uniform form and without the*. References are always relevant for all the words with the abbreviated stem, (e.g., antisem* for antisemitism or antisemitic) which were included in the analysis.
- 18 "Kollektiver Antisemitismus aus dem Koran/Islam wird verschwiegen !"
- 19 "Wird das Thema Antisemitismus durch muslimische Zuwanderer auch thematisiert?"
- 20 "In der islamischen Welt ist der Antisemitismus oder Antijudaismus (denn viele Araber sind selbst Semiten) sehr verbreitet. Aber es werden immer mehr Menschen aus diesen Ländern ins Land geholt."
- 21 "Was ist mit dem Antisemitismus, den die Araber bereits in der Grundschule beigebracht bekommen?"
- 22 "Es gibt nun mal mehr linke und Muslimische Gewalt letztere werden auch häufiger übergriffig gegen Juden und das wird als Rechte Gewalt eingeordnet"
- 23 "Es gibt nun mal mehr linke und Muslimische Gewalt letztere werden auch häufiger übergriffig gegen Juden und das wird als Rechte Gewalt eingeordnet"
- 24 "Wie steht ihr eigentlich zu den größten Anti-Juden der Bundesrepublik. den Muslimen?"
- 25 "Der Volkslehrer ist klasse! Aber die Angst, mit ihm zu reden, ist soooo groß.... all ihre Argumente würden in Luft auf gehen"
- 26 "Volkslehrer is Top...."
- 27 "warum wird rechts so oft mit rechtsextrem bzw sogar Nationalsozialismus gleichgesetzt in den Medien? z.B. andauernde Bezeichnung der AfD als Nazis getarnt als Satire"
- 28 "wow wie man jetzt suggestiv sagen will die npd geht und geht automatisch zur afd... so ein blödsinn"
- 29 "gibt es rassimus auch gegen weiße?"
- 30 "Was ist Loxismus?"
- 31 "Zählen sie zu den rassistischen Gewalttaten auch Gewalttaten gegenüber Deutsche?"
- 32 Due to the small data corpus and the corresponding overall lower word frequencies, the significance of the analysis with trends is inhibited, but tendencies are evident. The use of a larger data corpus offers a more detailed interpretation and consideration.
- 33 "Israel ist unser Verderben ☺."

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6

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SYSTEM COLLAPSE

How Extremists Built an International Neo-Nazi Network

Cassie Miller

In a room on the encrypted messaging app Wire in May 2019, members of the white power accelerationist group The Base debated the best way to take out “the system,” a term for Western liberal democracies that, the neo-Nazis in the chat believed, were fundamentally corrupted and controlled by Jews. “Political violence is the only thing that will bring down the system, not futile ‘infiltration’ or ‘triggering liberals,’” a user argued. “Voting is fake and gay,” another offered in agreement, “grab a gun, join the fun.” Though they disagreed about certain logistical aspects of bringing down “the system,” members of The Base agreed that it could not be done working within its institutions and political channels. But, some in the chat asked: Could infiltrating elected bodies serve their needs in some capacity? “Militants shouldn’t infiltrate generally speaking because we need them pulling triggers,” the group’s founder and leader Rinaldo Nazzaro, operating under the pseudonym Norman Spear, argued. Others suggested they could do both. “One COULD use infiltration to get into a senate hearing and then boom. A bunch of kikes are gone,” a member responded, using a slur referring to a Jewish person. When other members of the group agreed, they moved on to the next order of business: distributing files of the latest recruitment fliers with the group’s logo, “Save Your Race, Join The Base” (The Base Chat Log, 2019).

From its start in 2018, The Base began recruiting and organizing on social media and encrypted chats, as well as physically gathering on occasion to train in firearms and operational tactics to prepare for an anticipated – and welcomed – civil collapse. Some members of the group organized to vandalize synagogues in the Midwest in 2019 and, in 2020, police arrested six other members on gun-related charges, conspiracy to murder an antifascist couple, and other crimes after an agent with the Federal Bureau for Investigations infiltrated the group (Chappell et al., 2020). The attention from law enforcement helped to hasten

the group's eventual end, but not before it attracted roughly 100 members and potential recruits mostly in the United States, but also Europe and Australia (Wilson, 2020).

The Base was able to quickly establish itself as a major group within the radical right because it drew on an already robust white power milieu. Little about the group was novel when placed before the larger backdrop of the movement to which it belonged: They adopted a readymade aesthetic, lexicon, texts, and historic and cultural references that had been circulating in online forums and social media for years, packaged them under a new name, and set about recruiting across a variety of social media channels. Its members embraced National Socialism, apocalypticism, targeted political violence, and aimed to foment the collapse of what they alleged was a Jewish-controlled "system." They belong to a segment of the white power movement that refers to themselves as "accelerationists" because they call for adherents to accelerate – through violence targeted at the state, Jews, people of color, antifascists, and antiracists – "system collapse" (Miller, 2020).

The Base makes up one node in what the historian Roger Griffin called the "groupuscular right," which "has the characteristics of a political and ideological counter-culture rather than a conventional political party movement" (2003). Griffin and other scholars (Jackson, 2014; Virchow, 2004; Burstow, 2003) have used the term to describe the formation that white power revolutionary movements have taken in the postwar political landscape and, in particular, our contemporary political world that is indelibly shaped by the internet. While the organizational structure during the "fascist epoch" of Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes was centralized, hierarchical, and dominated by political parties, the post-1945 revolutionary right is more akin, as Griffin argues, to a rhizome: a messy, non-hierarchical, polycentric, overlapping network of groupuscules ("groupuscule" refers to an individual group or node, while "groupuscular" refers to the wider network that they collectively create). In today's white power movement, one activist might join a group like The Base or Atomwaffen Division (AWD), a violent neo-Nazi group formed in 2015, as a way of participating in the movement, while another may elect to join a series of antisemitic channels and chats on Telegram, an encrypted messaging platform with minimal content moderation. Both will feel committed to the movement, share the same antisemitic beliefs, and investment in purging Western nations of what they call the Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG). Though group affiliations might differ, or they may not belong to a formalized group at all, each participates in the white power movement.

In this chapter, I trace the genealogy of the accelerationist network beginning in 2011, when the neo-Nazi forum Iron March formed and helped gestate a particularly militant and violent community within the broader white power movement. How were members of the accelerationist network able to utilize social media to spread their propaganda and make new recruits? How did their strategies change over time, and why? In large part due to political developments

during the Trump era, scholars have recently taken an increased interest in the radical right. The vast majority, however, are social scientists who utilize content analysis (Hendry and Lemieux, 2021; Chandrasekharan et al., 2017), ethnography (Windisch et al., 2018), and other methods that allow them to highlight behavioral patterns among far-right extremists (Scrivens et al., 2020; Lee and Knott, 2020). While their work gestures toward the larger historical context, few trace the genealogy of white power groups using a historian's method of in-depth archival research to analyze how they develop, network, and shift their strategies and the spaces from which they recruit over time. Most historical works on the radical right remain firmly focused on the twentieth century (Belew, 2018). This chapter brings these two bodies of literature together, drawing on a recent archive: the social media content and internal discussions of groups and communities associated with the accelerationist network. Specifically, I draw on an online archive of the Iron March forum, Atomwaffen Division Discord chat logs, and the recorded vetting interviews with 65 potential members of The Base. I pay particular attention to the content they produce and distribute that is antisemitic – a hatred that underpins their entire ideology but is often underplayed in scholarly analysis. I also look beyond Atomwaffen, which has garnered a great deal of attention because of their violent history (Ware, 2020; Hendry and Lemieux, 2021), and toward the wider accelerationist network that preceded the group and continues to thrive online even after AWD's collapse in 2020.

Far-right extremist groups pose unique dangers, but I argue that the vast network through which they arise – sustained by social media – deserves greater attention because it is the mechanism through which the racist and antisemitic movement perpetuates, even as its constituent groups fade from existence. Resilience is the key strength of the groupuscular right, even while impermanence is a defining feature of groupuscules. Except for a long-standing, mutable group like the Ku Klux Klan, most white power groups fade quickly from existence. The movement they belong to, however, remains intact. Though both The Base and Atomwaffen collapsed in 2020, groups like Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division, National Socialist Order, and others filled the void, networked with the broader white power movement, especially on Telegram (Guhl and Davey, 2020). Today, social media acts as a connective tissue for the groupuscular right, binding together groups and individuals through networks forged by human action and algorithms both within and across platforms. This tangled web allows new groups to develop and flourish while others inevitably die off, and – thanks to an “alt-tech” infrastructure designed specifically to cater to far-right actors who have been banned from mainstream social media platforms (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg, 2018), as well as insufficient action from mainstream platforms themselves – it is arguably larger and significantly more stable now than even a few years in the past.

I begin this chapter by looking at the Iron March forum, hosted on IronMarch.org, which served as the online base of militant fascism from 2011 to 2017. On Iron March, a group of roughly 1,600 users collectively built a militant fascist

community where violence became the only solution to the perceived persecution of whites by the Jewish “system.” The instruction to “read Siege” – a reference to a violently antisemitic text written by neo-Nazi James Mason in the 1980s – became the primary meme this community used to spread its message and recruit new followers into its fold. Before it went offline, Iron March spawned multiple violent neo-Nazi groups, including Atomwaffen Division, who used social media like Twitter and Gab, as well as the instant messenger and distribution platform Discord, to propagandize.

Their efforts, combined with the changing political tides following the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, convinced an ever-growing segment of the white power movement that “there is no political solution,” leaving “system collapse” as the only viable political goal. It was from this pool that The Base made recruits. The Base itself relied heavily on Twitter, where it was able to maintain a presence by drawing on the memes started by its predecessors. Directives to “read siege,” anger hurled at “the system,” and calls to “accelerate” its collapse were not, on their face, openly racist or antisemitic, but people who spent even a brief time in these corners of Twitter could easily figure out their underlying message. In other words, The Base and the accelerationist movement more broadly developed a lexicon that helped them evade social media bans. These were standard neo-Nazi ideas packaged in a way that made them less detectable, especially to social media companies that invested few resources in doing so. Even when the group was finally banned from Twitter and other mainstream platforms, it simply shifted to alt-tech social media platforms like Gab and the hybrid messenger-social media platform Telegram. Thanks to its minimal content moderation, the latter became a haven for The Base and other groups and individuals that were part of the accelerationist movement (Hayden, 2019a). When The Base and then Atomwaffen collapsed in 2020, their absence on Telegram and in the wider groupuscular right was hardly noticeable. A robust, networked movement remained. Social media platforms, unwittingly or not, have facilitated the antisemitic accelerationist movement and are, therefore, implicated in the violence that emanates from it.

Iron March: Origins of the Global Fascist Fraternity

The origins of the contemporary revolutionary white power community lie in the Iron March forum, started in 2011 by its pseudonymous founder “Alexander Slavros.” “GAS THE KIKES! RACE WAR NOW! 1488! BOOTS ON THE GROUND!” its masthead declared. Iron March had multiple layers: content that any visitor could view, public threads that members could post to, and a private messaging feature. People hoping to become members of the forum had to make an introductory post outlining their political trajectory and ideology. “Hello everyone! I am a National Socialist from the pacific northwest of the United States of America,” reads a typical post, “I am 19 years old, and my interests are Esoteric Hitlerism, Wotanism, Racial anthropology/Eugenics, reading, writing, [and]

shooting” (lord bueron, 2016). Iron March’s purpose was for members to *collectively* generate a fascist ideal (Lee and Knot, 2020). For these white power activists, fascism was not simply a political ideology, but Truth – always with a capital “T” – itself. Users understood the forum was not a place to “shitpost” or engage in unproductive banter, but to generate knowledge. The forum had two understood rules, as an experienced user once told a new member in a private message: that you should not make a thread on a topic that already existed (to keep them neatly organized and archived) and that “violence and Hitler-worship is the order of the day here.” “Ironmarch is very much a fan of the ‘no compromise’ approach to things,” they explained (Vinokura, 2016). The forum and its users were meant to act as a cadre, educating the revolutionary vanguard of the white power movement. They captured their views in texts they communally produced, many of which would go on to become mainstays of the white power canon. An early article included in the 2015 anthology *Next Leap* succinctly explained the Iron March worldview: “A fascist simply looks at the evidence and decides that reality is racist, human nature is that we are social animals, and jews have historically been a harmful influence on every society that hosted them” (Iron March, 2015).

Iron March spawned several white power groups, making up the component parts of what they deemed the “global fascist struggle.” Those affiliated with the forum included National Action in the United Kingdom, Antipodean Resistance in Australia, Skydas in Lithuania, and Atomwaffen Division in the United States. Brandon Russell, an Iron March user in Florida, announced Atomwaffen’s formation to the forum on October 15, 2015. The group, he claimed, had roughly 40 members spread across more than ten states in separate cells. Members met up for “hate camps” where they practiced weapons training and filmed propaganda videos to disseminate online (“Atomwaffen Division,” Southern Poverty Law Center). Like the past white power groups they idolized, members of Atomwaffen committed multiple acts of violence and intimidation. In 2017 through early 2018, men associated with Atomwaffen were charged with killing five people in three different incidents (Boghani, Robiou, and Trautwein, 2019). Atomwaffen member Devon Arthurs allegedly killed two other members of the group in May 2017 in the Tampa apartment they shared. Prosecutors charged Brandon Russell, a founder of the group who lived with the others, with possession of hexamethylene triperoxide diamine (Thompson, 2018), a highly explosive compound that can be made from homemade materials. Just days before Christmas that same year, Nicholas Giampa allegedly shot his girlfriend’s parents in their Virginia home. Another murder came in January 2018 when Samuel Woodward allegedly stabbed to death Blaze Bernstein, a gay Jewish college student who knew Woodward from high school. In the aftermath of the murder, other members of the group praised Woodward, calling him a “one man gay Jew wrecking crew” (Thompson, Winston, and Hanrahan, 2018). Other members of the group have been charged or convicted of other crimes, including coordinating swatting attacks and threatening journalists (Wilson, 2020).

Atomwaffen and Iron March highly revered the work of James Mason, who began his career in the neo-Nazi movement in the youth wing of George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party (ANP). After a former member of the ANP murdered Rockwell in 1967, the party splintered along strategic lines. Rockwell's successor, Matt Koehl, transformed the group into the National Socialist White People's Party, tightening its focus on building a mass movement and even running political candidates in local elections (Schmaltz, 1999). Mason and his compatriots disagreed with this strategy, believing the masses could not be convinced to take up a National Socialist platform and, instead, needed to foment a violent revolution to bring down the Jewish "system." He fully embraced political terror in the pages of *Siege*, the NSLP newsletter he penned from 1980 to 1986. Jews, he wrote, were the primary enemy of white people, and their ultimate goal was the orchestrated destruction of the white race in order to achieve global political control. His book reflected beliefs long held by neo-Nazis that Jews hoped to dilute the white race by promoting – through control of the media and political systems – intermarriage, immigration, and other policies aimed at decreased white birth rates (a conspiracy that contemporary white power activists call "the great replacement"). The end result would be a population more easily controlled because, he believed, non-whites were less intelligent and more easily manipulated.

The only reason we still have a fighting chance is because the Enemy has not yet had the time to fully realize the keystone tenet of his program and philosophy: the complete bastardization of all races of man into a single, brown mass, devoid of all identity

he wrote in a 1980 newsletter.

Except for a mere time factor the Jewish Enemy has won totally and outright. It's no longer a contest in the United States; it's a matter of REVOLUTION, a struggle to overthrow the Enemy and for survival as a race.

(Mason, 2003)

While *Siege* had garnered a small cult following in white power circles since it was first published as a single volume in 1993 (Hatewatch Staff, 2018), Iron March would eventually help to turn it into the most influential text of the contemporary accelerationist movement by deliberately promoting the text in white power circles. In a 2015 podcast, Slavros told listeners they were going "to be promoting as much as possible James Mason's *Siege*." The book, he said, "is something that remained in the background for too long ... this whole time we had this master work which could have told us exactly what to avoid and how to proceed further" (Hayden, 2019b). *Siege* quickly became a constant reference on Iron March. Data compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center shows that

mentions of the book more than tripled on the forum between 2015 and 2017 (Hayden, 2019c). Iron March members boiled the violently antisemitic ruminations of the text down to a two-word meme: “read siege.”

The Siege Pill

During the latter years of the Obama administration and the early years of the Trump presidency, the “alt-right” posted its way into the American consciousness. A rebranding of the white nationalist movement, the alt-right was led by suit-and-tie activists that rejected establishment conservatism yet wanted to pursue political change through mainstream institutions (Miller, 2018). The movement’s goal was to “red pill” the masses – a term they co-opted from the 1999 film *The Matrix* to describe the process of opening one’s eyes to supposedly inherent racial differences. When he declared his candidacy for president in 2015, alt-righters placed their faith in Republican Donald Trump. On the campaign trail in 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton repeatedly denounced the alt-right, a development that delighted members of the movement. “It’s hugely significant,” alt-right leader Richard Spencer told a journalist in August 2016. “When a presidential candidate … talks about your movement directly, I think you can safely say that you’ve made it” (Goldberg, 2016).

As the alt-right celebrated their media coup, accelerationists hovered at the margins of the radical right while expressing scorn for those who pushed mass movement strategies. “The White Race (Americans) has no time to ‘vote itself into power’ or ‘subvert the parties’ because guess what – ever since 1945 the Jews have been in complete control of EVERYTHING,” an Iron March user wrote after another member defended the alt-right. “Want a solution to saving the white race as an alt righter? Blow your fucking brains out and stay out of the way of actual fascists” (Tyler, 2017). The 2017 Iron March publication *Zero Tolerance* argued for just that: fascists could make no room for compromise, even with others in the radical right. As the alt-right pushed the red pill, accelerationists adopted one of their own: the “siege pill.” To swallow it meant accepting the core tenets of Mason’s book: that “the system” was run by Jews, Jews were attempting to use their control to “replace” the white race, the “system” needed to be overthrown to ensure white survival, and that could only be achieved through revolutionary violence.

Then came the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which tipped the balance of power within the radical right. On August 12, hundreds of alt-right activists marched on the college town, and one murdered anti-racist activist Heather Hyer by driving his car through a crowd. Though not originally supported by accelerationists, the rally underscored the hazards of right-wing mass movement politics – a welcome development in siege-pilled circles. Alt-right leaders became swiftly entangled in lawsuits related to the rally, dramatically hampering their ability to organize because, suddenly, associating with them meant possibly getting caught in the dragnet of the law. With public

backlash, managing the movement's image became a much more formidable task. Other developments soured the radical right on the mass movement strategy (Miller and Graves, 2020). President Trump, who the alt-right once believed to be an ally, over time came to disappoint the movement by failing to live up to their expectations and, in their minds, acting more like a traditional conservative than a rightwing populist (Hatewatch Staff, 2019). His perceived moderation showed, many came to believe, that mainstream politics and political institutions held no promise for their movement. That sense of disillusionment helped spark a revolutionary ethos within the husk of the alt-right. Atomwaffen saw the moment as an opportunity (Miller, 2020). Only hours after Hyer was killed, one member of the group's Discord server suggested it was the "perfect time to push SIEGE." Ten days later, they bragged that they were getting "loads of applications" (Atomwaffen Division Discord, 2017).

Siege spread remarkably quickly in the post-Unite the Right white power landscape. An archive of the 4chan "politically incorrect" /pol/ board, a hugely popular space for white power activists where users anonymously post comments and share images, shows that the words "read siege" only appeared there a total of 4 times in 2014 and 2015 and 18 times in 2016. Since the beginning of 2017, "read siege" has been posted more than 5,500 times, often with a link to a PDF of Mason's work (4plebs). Its spread was particularly extraordinary because *Siege* was never meant to be an accessible text. It is, extremism scholar J.M. Berger wrote in an analysis of the book, "best understood as targeting readers who are already deeply radicalized, with the aim of moving them toward violent action" (2021). In creating the "read siege" meme, accelerationists boiled down an unwieldy tome, which rambled through decades-long debates within the white power movement, into something simple and easily communicable. Its widespread use was a testament to the changing tides of the white power movement toward violent revolutionary action, and to how effectively accelerationists spread their message through online channels.

Social media was the primary tool National Socialists used to make recruits among the ranks of disillusioned alt-righters. They spread the "read siege" refrain endlessly across social media and injected it into the chats of groups across the spectrum of the radical right. On Discord, accelerationists infiltrated the server associated with the Daily Stormer – a neo-Nazi site run by Andrew Anglin, a favorite Atomwaffen punching bag – specifically to "shill zero tolerance and siege" (Atomwaffen Division Discord, 2017). Matthew Heimbach's alt-right Traditionalist Workers Party was also targeted with the "read siege" meme to the point that Heimbach eventually upbraided members on Discord. "Considering we don't use SIEGE as [inspirational] material, we can stop bringing it up in here, because the Farmers Almanac is literally more relevant," he told them in April 2017 (Hayden, 2019c).

No mainstream social media platform was free of *Siege*-wielding neo-Nazis. Motherboard reported in late 2018 that neo-Nazi propaganda was rampant

on TikTok, an algorithm-driven video-sharing social media app. They found accounts signaling support for Atomwaffen, videos of people giving Nazi salutes, users posting the hashtags #readSIEGE and #SIEGE, and offensive depictions of Jews (Cox, 2018). Giampa, the Atomwaffen member who allegedly murdered his girlfriend's parents, simply listed "Read Siege" as the bio on his Twitter account, where he also posted tweets about using Jews as target practice (Schulberg and O'Brien, 2018). The meme was so widespread that a Twitter user with the handle @ReidSeej (who listed their location as "Auschwitz, Poland") used Cameo, a service that allows people to pay celebrities to make custom videos, to have gossip columnist Perez Hilton read the words in a Christmas-themed video (Hayden, 2019c). They posted it to Twitter, where it earned praise from other users. "Rub your hands together to keep warm for ZOG!!!!!" one person posted in the thread, referring to a common antisemitic depiction of Jews rubbing their hands together in a show of greed (ReidSeej, Twitter, 2018). On the GoodReads page for *Siege*, where readers can post book reviews, one person left an irritated message. "I only tried to read this book because of all the 'read siege' memes I encounter on the daily from white nationalist idiots." They concluded they were "not impressed" with the book, was "basically just a long winded [sic] promotion of terrorism" (2018).

In 2017, both Iron March and Atomwaffen had Twitter accounts, as did innumerable individuals associated with the accelerationist milieu, that they used to recruit and propagandize. "I try to SIEGEpost on Twitter as much as seems reasonable," a member said in the Atomwaffen Discord chat. Members of the group agreed that it was the "best platform," because of its large reach, and several noted that Twitter is what brought them to revolutionary National Socialism. "We've been recruiting a lot off of Twitter," a prominent Atomwaffen member said on Discord in September 2017, "A lot." The Atomwaffen Twitter account was a more reliable online presence than even the group's website. When the site went down unexpectedly, one member posted in the Discord chat that their "primary avenues are going to bo [sic] Ironmarch and Twitter for now." The members expressed little concern. "It was really easy to reach AWD through Twitter," one responded. Some came to Twitter via other platforms, like one user who explained, "I was a wandering natsoc [National Socialist] and was directed from the [Atomwaffen] youtube to the twitter then to here." "The aesthetics and propaganda reeled me in," they continued (Atomwaffen Division Discord, 2017). Atomwaffen carefully cultivated their propaganda style, which they called the "sinister aesthetic": heavily stylized, high-contrast, black, white, and red images glorifying both fascist figures and acts of violence (Hatewatch Staff, 2018). The group's Twitter account was replete with images rendered in this style.

Atomwaffen posted their carefully constructed propaganda videos to their account on YouTube, the algorithmically driven social video platform. Atomwaffen's videos often featured members decked in camo and skull

balaclavas, traversing wooded areas, practicing firearms training, and performing Nazi salutes. Their videos clearly violated YouTube's terms of service, which banned "content that promotes violence against or has the primary purpose of inciting hatred against individuals or groups based on certain attributes," including race, ethnic origin, or religion (Weill, 2018). The videos called for killing Jews: one was titled "Gas the k*kes, race war now" (Al Jazeera, 2018) and another featured members yelling the same phrase before firing guns (Maiberg and Gault, 2018). Remarkably, the company refused to take down their account. Instead, they elected to put a warning label on the videos that prompted viewers to click a button that said, "I understand and wish to proceed," and appeared to block the videos from appearing in algorithmic recommendations. YouTube argued that this struck "a good balance between allowing free expression and limiting affected videos' ability to be widely promoted on YouTube" (Weill, 2018). Only after *Motherboard* and the Anti-Defamation League also expressed outrage about the decision did YouTube finally remove Atomwaffen's account. But, as *ProPublica* pointed out, a second Atomwaffen channel called SIEGEtv remained on the platform (Thompson and Winston, 2018). Atomwaffen's ban was only semi-permanent; users continued to upload propaganda videos to the site more than a year after their original ban, remaining for days after they were reported and, in the meantime, racking up hundreds of views (CEP Staff, 2019).

Atomwaffen's @siegeculture_Twitter account seemed not to alarm moderators. Discord, YouTube, and the gaming platform Steam banned the group in the spring of 2018 (Thompson and Winston, 2018), but their Twitter account remained online for another year (Siegeculture_, 2019). This and those belonging to others associated with the neo-Nazi group remained on the platform despite Twitter's December 2017 promise, made in response to the Unite the Right rally, to ban groups or users associated with violence both on and off the platform (Romano, 2017). Twitter ignored user reports that Atomwaffen and its members were violating the company's terms of service. After Nicholas Giampa posted a tweet suggested that the Holocaust was a hoax, other Twitter users tagged Twitter Safety, but his posts remained (Doctorpepper35, 2017). About a month later, he allegedly murdered his girlfriend's parents.

Though it was not always successful, the movement to deplatform extremists – spearheaded by the activists, watchdog groups, and journalists – made sufficient headway that "alt-tech" sites stepped in to offer their services to those who could not maintain a steady foothold on mainstream ones. Gab, a social media site founded in August 2016 that closely resembled Twitter, found some early success. It courted users banned from other platforms and practiced little to no content moderation, making it a haven for the far-right (Hess, 2016). As one journalist put it, "No one moves to Gab because they want to, they move because they have to" (Bennett, 2018). Both Atomwaffen and Iron March used the platform, and the latter linked to their Gab account in the bio of their Twitter account. What they posted on Gab was largely indistinguishable from

the content they posted on Twitter, but the community was far more oriented toward the radical right.

Gab gained public notoriety when one of its users carried out the largest antisemitic attack in US history at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in October 2018. One study found that although the attacker's posts were "among the most consistently anti-Semitic on Gab ... hundreds of others were even more extreme" (McIlroy-Young and Anderson, 2019). PayPal banned Gab from using its services and GoDaddy stopped hosting the site in response to the antisemitic attack. But within a matter of days, Gab migrated to Epik, a domain registrar and web-hosting company that also hosts the neo-Nazi site Daily Stormer, where it is still registered (Robertson, 2018). It continues to be a gathering place for the far-right. Indeed, Gab users coordinated and documented their activities as they stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Frenkel, 2021). The site's founder, Andrew Torba, continues to expand services available on the site; in addition to a video streaming service called Gab TV, he says they plan to build an "infrastructure for a new digital economy" to provide an alternative to "Big Tech censorship and the anti-White, anti-Christian, and anti-American woke economy" (Torba, 2021). Gab exemplifies the growing resilience of alternative platforms and the possibility that far-right extremists could build a parallel social media structure that is impervious to public pressure campaigns and difficult for governments to regulate.

Building The Base

The attempts by mainstream social media platforms like Twitter to clean up their sites in the aftermath of Unite the Right were half-hearted, and enough extremist content remained to bring new recruits into the fold of the revolutionary white power milieu. Rinaldo Nazzaro, an American expat who moved to Russia in 2017 after making a career in defense contracting (Makuch, 2021), credited Twitter with pushing him deep into the world of white power activism ("The Base," Southern Poverty Law Center).

I ended up hopping on Twitter because I got a lot of my information originally just from blogs and websites and it just became kind of hard to keep up with everything so I just thought Twitter just might be an easier way to do it,

he said on a podcast in December 2017, "and at that point I just got increasingly sucked into it" (Paper Beats Rock). When one user insisted that "The Jews are in control," Nazzaro agreed. "How can we take it back now when we're weaker than ever and become more so by the day?" (METATPOH1, Dec. 2017). The answer, he suggested, was violence. "Terrorism is a two-way street for the only answer to terrorism is stronger terrorism. We're left no choice whatsoever – It's fight or die," he tweeted in October 2017, linking to an Atomwaffen account.

He told his followers that “direct action against anti-White perpetrators” would eventually become necessary (METATPOH1, Oct. 2017). Twitter brought Nazzaro to the attention of other white power activists, like the host of the neo-Nazi Paper Beats Rock podcast, who welcomed him as “a good social media comrade” (2017).

In the summer of 2018, Nazzaro turned his social media following into a formalized white power network that he called The Base. He conceived of the group as a network of small underground cells. Nazzaro sat at the helm, organizing real-life meetups, paramilitary training, the dissemination of propaganda, and recruitment alongside a small group of trusted confidants. The Base tried to make itself more accessible than groups like Atomwaffen, openly courting new recruits on social media and instructing interested users to send Nazzaro a direct message or email. Members of The Base were also allowed to maintain an affiliation with multiple organizations (some, for example, were also members of Atomwaffen) (“The Base,” Southern Poverty Law Center). The group’s media profiles included a link to the group’s application form hosted on a WordPress site (The Base, 2020). After sending in an application, Nazzaro reached out to promising recruits and, following an email exchange, would invite them to interview with a small group of Base members. Members were required to adhere to either white nationalism or National Socialism. They considered *Siege* their core text, instructed all potential recruits to read the book if they had not already, and even organized a reading group to dissect the neo-Nazi leader’s work.

On Twitter and Gab, the two social media platforms that The Base relied most heavily upon to do their recruiting, Mason’s focus on the Jewish “system” factored heavily into their rhetoric. Nazzaro, argued in social media posts that white people would be increasingly repressed by the “system” as they become a smaller proportion of the population, reflecting a driving fear among white power activists that white people will be eliminated or “replaced” by nonwhites due to intermarriage, immigration, and other factors all orchestrated by Jews (Anti-Defamation League). While Nazzaro avoided nakedly antisemitic imagery on his personal social media accounts, other members posted swastikas, images of Hitler, and the sonnenrad – a sun symbol appropriated by Nazis – on their own. A Gab account with the username TMB, which the FBI identified as the pseudonym of Base member Luke Austin Lane (Redmond and Joyner, 2020), was filled with calls to join The Base and images of Hitler and other figures rendered in the “sinister aesthetic” popularized by Atomwaffen. Lane was later arrested for allegedly plotting to murder an antifascist couple in Georgia.

From February 2019 through January 2020, at least 65 people made it to the final vetting stage for Base membership. Taken collectively, The Base’s recruitment interviews highlight just how pervasive the *Siege* mentality originally cultivated on Iron March became across the white power movement in the years after Unite the Right. “The ‘read siege’ spamming got enough to that I actually read a PDF copy and later on was able to find a physical copy,” one recruit told Nazzaro in June 2019. Though nearly all The Base recruits were familiar with

Siege, many had not actually read the book. Still, they expressed familiarity with its ideas and even considered it central to their ideology. “I’ve been submerged,” one 22-year-old recruit told Nazzaro, “I’m very familiar with the attitude and ideology but, actual reading of *Siege*, I have not read [it] yet.” Many who joined The Base explained they were drawn to the group because they believed that it best embodied the tenets of accelerationism.

I’ve come to the conclusion that the only way that the masses at large are ever going to be, I guess, red pilled is through this abyss. You know, this complete destruction of society and what’s left afterwards through natural selection is really what’s going to be the remaining Aryan population. (The Base Vetting Interviews, 2019)

One 23-year-old interviewee explained. Accelerationism had become the dominant strategy within the movement; it was no longer confined to highly vetted forums like Iron March. This provided a huge pool of potential recruits.

Spreading their propaganda across a variety of social media spaces allowed The Base to cast a wide net for recruits and lessen the impact of deplatforming. The group retained their Twitter account until November 2018, and it was only removed after two *VICE* journalists reporting on the white power group reached out to the company (Makuch and Lamoureux, 2018). The Base and Twitter got locked into an ongoing contest: after getting banned, Nazzaro created new accounts under different handles, only for Twitter to eventually ban those, as well. Accounts could stay up for months before the company took action. According to reporting from the Southern Poverty Law Center, extremists regularly evade bans using this practice (Hayden, 2021). The Base also appeared on Gab in November 2018 after they faced their first Twitter takedown. They tried to temper their rhetoric, avoiding “fed posting” – a term used in far-right circles to describe incendiary rhetoric that a federal agent might post to entrap someone in an online chat or on social media, or the kinds of posts that would attract the attention of law enforcement (The Base Chat Log, 2019). Nevertheless, Nazzaro claimed in July 2019 that the group had been banned from Gab five times (The Base Vetting Interviews, 2019) – seemingly a result of the platform’s fleeting attempt to clean up its image in the wake of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue (Koh and Wells, 2018).

While bans certainly hampered The Base’s ability to propagandize, the group still managed to pull in almost 50 members only four months after forming and would go on to almost double in size (Makuch and Lamoureux, 2018). That number represents only a small portion of their online influence – many more people applied but were either ignored or rejected, while thousands more saw their propaganda. The messaging they used on Twitter and Gab was designed specifically to appeal to young men who were already deeply antisemitic. “I saw one of the flyers on Twitter at some point, and then one of the guys I was talking to on Twitter, he recommended that I look into The Base,” one recruit explained

during his interview. Gab appeared to draw in members despite a lack of enthusiasm about the platform, which stemmed from the fact that its far-right base meant there were few users to troll or harass. “I haven’t used Gab very much, but I saw one of some of your propaganda on there and I kept that in mind for a while,” one recruit told his interviewers. Another noted that he made a Gab account after hearing that the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter had used the platform. “So I made the Gab account, found you guys,” he said. Altogether, seven recruits credited Twitter with helping to lead them to the group, while six cited Gab (The Base Vetting Interviews, 2019).

While both Twitter and Gab have faced immense scrutiny for their insufficient content moderation, a little-reported social platform called iFunny – a meme-sharing website and app with a chat feature, which recommends memes based on your activity – attracted a number of applicants to The Base. Eleven recruits mentioned it in their interviews. The content on iFunny ranged from mainstream memes to racist and antisemitic content, some praising groups like Atomwaffen and white supremacist mass murderers. Atomwaffen member Samuel Woodward, who is accused of murdering his Jewish former classmate, was active on the site under the name Saboteur (Broderick, 2019). Some Base prospects credited iFunny with guiding them toward National Socialism. “Well, first, I was just, you know, just memes and bullshit on iFunny and then, you know, led me into reading a little bit more and so I read into Mein Kampf a little bit,” one explained. That led him to do “research into the Jews,” and eventually conclude that he would “rather have a government that maintains a high level of authority so it can keep out of the hands of Jews and corporations and all that kind of stuff.” Another, who started his political journey as a libertarian, explained that he started looking into racist material so he could debate fascists on the platform. “I didn’t know what I was talking about. So I went to go read Mein Kampf to argue with them functionally,” he said, “and it ended up just turning me into a Nazi” (The Base Vetting Interviews, 2019). Other Base recruits first learned about the group from members openly recruiting on iFunny and posting propaganda videos on the site. “Pretty cool,” one poster commented on a video showing 11 members conducting firearms drills. “I’m completing my vetting right now” (Lamoureux and Kamel, 2019). The success The Base found on iFunny shows that lesser trafficked, more niche communities could be fruitful recruiting grounds.

Terrorgram

By mid-2019, The Base was no longer able to maintain their accounts on Twitter – a problem facing the accelerationist movement broadly. While Gab still offered a place to post propaganda images, the group shifted their videos over to the alt-tech video platform Bitchute. Patterned after YouTube, the site quickly became a haven for white supremacists. But by that time, no platform rivaled Telegram in its popularity among white power activists and groups. Founded in 2013 and

long favored by ISIS, Telegram is a platform that allows administrators to create public channels where they can post messages, videos, and pictures, as well as repost content from other channels. Files can be up to two gigabytes. The app also has an encrypted chat feature that allows public and private groups, as well as “secret chats” between two users. All these features make it a particularly effective platform for spreading propaganda and building a following (Gais and Squire, 2021). The Base created their own channel on the platform, where they posted their contact information and propaganda images.

The first recruit to mention seeing The Base on Telegram was interviewed on June 10, 2019, explaining that he had seen The Base’s contact information posted on a channel called TERRORWAVE REFINED. The channel had, at the time, about 725 subscribers who would find themselves flooded with propaganda images of men in camo and skull masks, others holding Atomwaffen and Iron March flags, propaganda praising white supremacist murderer Dylann Roof and synagogue shooter John Earnest, and images with directives to “Pipe bomb your Jewish neighbor” and “KILL ALL KIKES.” “It was like siege posting,” the recruit said of the Telegram channel. From there, he checked out The Base’s Gab account, “And now I find myself here.” At least ten recruits became connected to The Base through Telegram, either through someone they met on the platform or via propaganda, between June 2019 and January 2020 (*The Base Vetting Interviews*).

The Base’s Telegram channel was part of a sprawling network on the platform that its members dubbed “Terrorgram.” Terrorgram glorifies political violence, contains innumerable posts about an impending race war, and frequently features the sinister aesthetic originally associated with Iron March and Atomwaffen. The network took to calling white supremacist killers “saints” and depicting them as such (Miller, 2020). While early research from Richard Rogers shows that “extreme Internet celebrities” mellowed their hateful language as they spent more time on the platform (2020), the same may not be true for the accelerationist community. Indeed, the white power content on Telegram was and remains markedly more extreme and prodigious than anything found on mainstream platforms.

Terrorgram administrators actively encouraged people to migrate to the platform specifically because there was little fear Telegram would moderate content (Miller, 2020). They were not entirely wrong: though companies like Apple have banned Terrorgram channels from being viewed on their devices, Telegram rarely quarantines or bans accelerationists’ channels. Even device-based restrictions have had little effect. Analysis conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that “of 36 far-right channels that had been restricted for violence ... 21 of them continued to attract followers at a median growth rate of 43.63% between 2019 and the end of 2020.” Additionally, many “Terrorgram channels experienced triple-digit growth throughout 2020 despite previously being banned from the platform or being restricted on some devices” (Gais and Squire, 2021). Even when channels were banned, administrators found simple

workarounds, including moving to a new channel with a slightly altered name. Telegram continues to be the main hub for accelerationists, with hundreds of channels lending themselves to the creation of a vast, decentralized movement.

Conclusion

The Base folded in early 2020 following a series of arrests. In late 2019, two Base members were arrested on charges related to the vandalism of a synagogue in Wisconsin. In January 2020, police made six more arrests. First came the arrests of three members in Delaware, one of them Canadian, on firearms-related charged. The next day, three members of the Georgia cell were arrested for conspiracy to murder an antifascist couple after an FBI agent infiltrated the group and uncovered the plot. Just about a week later, journalists revealed Nazzaro's name to the public (Wilson, 2020; DeSimone and Winston, 2020). The Base founder continues to post videos on Bitchute defending accelerationist strategies, but he has lost most of his credibility within the far-right. Atomwaffen, too, disbanded in early 2020 following the arrests of several members for threatening journalists (Fisher-Birch, 2020).

While Atomwaffen and The Base are no more, and Iron March is offline, the white power accelerationist milieu continues to persist. New groups have arisen over the past year and Terrorgram remains teeming with violently antisemitic content. The vast array of online spaces that cater to the accelerationist movement is a major cause for concern, and researchers need to consider this new reality. How has white power recruitment changed now that groups and individuals have access to platforms like Telegram and Gab, which are extremely resistant to any kind of content moderation? Are their networks wider or more resilient, and how successfully are they able to cross-pollinate with other far-right movements using these social media platforms? Perhaps most importantly, how can we most effectively counter antisemitic and other far-right movements given the growing alternative social media ecosystem?

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ANTISEMITIC RHETORIC IN URDU ON YOUTUBE

An Analysis

Navras J. Aafreedi

Introduction

Religious antisemitic rhetoric abounds in Urdu on YouTube in multiple formats, such as interviews but also discourses, speeches, and lectures by Islamic televangelists and clerics. Many of these videos attract viewers in millions and are widely shared on social media, such as Facebook, which has 330 million users in India, more than any other country in the world (Statista Research Department, 2021), and 37.38 million in Pakistan (Degenhard, 2021a); Twitter, which has 18.8 million users in India (Statista Research Department, 2021) and 2.68 million users in Pakistan (Degenhard, 2021b); and WhatsApp, which has 390.1 million users in India (Dean, 2021) and 9.30 million users in Pakistan (Degenhard, 2021c). In spite of the large numbers of social media users and particularly YouTube consumers, their proportion is small compared to the total population of the region. However, it must be assumed that these YouTube videos play an important role in shaping the South Asian Muslim perception of Jews, Israel, and Zionism, because what is consumed online has a much bigger and longer life offline. The significance of the Urdu language lies in the fact that it is the *lingua franca* of linguistically diverse South Asian Muslims, making up almost a third of the global Muslim population. It has also been the language of South Asian Islamic discourse. It is spoken as a first language by nearly 70 million people, and as a second language by more than 100 million people, primarily in Pakistan and India. It is the official state language of Pakistan and is also officially recognized in India. South Asia¹ is home to 21% of the global population (IMF), irrespective of religion, and one-third of the world's Muslim population, with Pakistan, the world's fifth most populous country and the second most populous Muslim country with a total population of 212 million, and India with a total population of 1.3 billion, home to the third largest Muslim

population. Some of the major ideological roots of Islamist jihadist ideology, of which antisemitism is an integral part, lie in South Asia. The region is also home to some of the largest Islamist movements, such as Tablighi Jama'at, the largest Sunni Muslim revivalist (*daw'a*) movement in the world; Jama'at-i-Islami, a prototype of political Islam in South Asia; Darul Uloom Deoband,² alleged source of ideological inspiration to the Taliban; and Nadwatul Ulama³ of Lucknow. Islamic revival (*ihya'*) is a response to Western and secular trends supporting an increased influence of Islamic values on the modern world. The solution to all the ills of Islamic societies and modern society as a whole is seen in a return to Islam in its purest form. The South Asian Muslim diaspora is also numerically stronger and far more widespread than that of Muslims from any other region, giving them immense clout to influence Muslim opinion internationally. YouTube has over 265 million monthly active users in India. About 1,200 channels from Indian creators have more than one million subscribers (Laghate, 2019). About 73% of Pakistanis watch YouTube every month (Rizwan, 2019). YouTube is one of the top two most visited websites and the fourth most googled search term in Pakistan (Mueed, 2020). Against this backdrop, the dissemination of antisemitic content by clerics on YouTube among the Muslim community must be taken seriously: In 2016, in a study commissioned by the World Jewish Congress, approximately 4,000 antisemitic posts were found on social media sites (such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Blogs) in India. Expressions of hatred accounted for 61% of them, use of antisemitic symbols 20%, calls for violence 8%, dehumanization 8%, and Holocaust denial 3%. But only 1% of them were on YouTube, whereas 60% were on Twitter, 21% on blogs, 12% on Facebook, 4% on Instagram, and 2% on other platforms. These figures were obtained by monitoring data in "dozens of languages, including English – the leading language in online discourse – as well as in 186 other languages, the most relevant being German, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Swedish, Arabic, and Chinese." It seems most of the antisemitic Urdu content on YouTube emanates from Pakistan, but the study makes no mention of Urdu or Pakistan (WJC, 2016). When accessing YouTube in India, one finds community guidelines in 41 languages (if American English and British English are considered different languages), but the only South Asian language among them is Hindi. The guidelines clearly warn against hate speech, without specifically mentioning antisemitism (Google – Privacy Policy – YouTube Terms of Service, 2021). However, a couple of YouTube channels, Majid Goraya (Goraya, 2020), with 58,100 subscribers, and Learning Centre, with 8,900 subscribers, have posted a video, each explaining the YouTube community guidelines in Urdu. Goraya's 16 minutes and 3 seconds video, posted on September 29, 2020, had attracted only 281 views and 12 likes (no dislikes) by July 29, 2021, 05:32 hrs (Indian Standard Time) and Learning Centre's 17 minutes and 54 seconds video, posted on February 21, 2019, had attracted just 26 views without any likes or dislikes by July 29, 2021, 05:59 hrs (Indian Standard Time). This shows YouTube's disregard for the large Urdu-speaking community, and leaves the responsibility to

inform about the guidelines on the platform to the users. Furthermore, YouTube ignores the hate speech problem caused by clerics. Considering that hate speech on Facebook has led to genocidal violence against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar (UN Human Rights Council, 2018), this omission is irresponsible. In addition to introducing government regulations about hate speech on social media, an obvious solution would be for YouTube to be required to provide guidelines in all languages where it is commercially active, and to consistently delete antisemitic hate speech on its platform.

This chapter introduces antisemitic content on YouTube in Urdu for the first time to non-Urdu speakers, thus providing access to antisemitic discourses that are not yet part of contemporary antisemitism research.

In order to assess the amount of antisemitic material on YouTube in Urdu, I looked for antisemitic content using certain keywords and phrases. Aware as I was of the fact that more often than not Urdu videos on YouTube have their titles in the Roman alphabet, I looked for relevant content using the two variants of the spelling of the Urdu term for Jew or/and Jewish, namely, *Yahudi* and *Yahooodi*. I also searched by typing the term *Yahudi* in the Devanagari script (used by Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi), as it is not rare for Indian Muslim YouTube channels to use Devanagari for Urdu titles of their videos. I looked for videos by typing *Yahudi* in the Urdu alphabet as well. Additionally, I also looked for videos by typing “Jew, Jewish, Urdu” in the search box. I repeated the same set of keywords by replacing “Jew” with “Zionist” and then with “Zionism.” I also used “*sahyūniyat*” (Urdu for “Zionism”) and “*sahyūni*” (Urdu for “Zionist”) in Nasta’liq (Perso-Arabic script), Devanagari, and Roman scripts. As a result of my search, I shortlisted 120 videos from 108 YouTube channels, spread over a period of 11 years, with the oldest video posted on March 31, 2010, and the latest video posted on April 24, 2021.

I recorded the number of times each video had been liked and commented upon and also paid attention to the comments it had attracted. Besides that, I also looked at the number of subscribers to the most notorious of the YouTube channels posting antisemitic rhetoric, the ideological and organizational affiliations of the clerics who are featured in those videos, their personal followings, and their educational backgrounds. I did the same with secular commentators as well. I investigated the sources of the contents and how Quranic polemics against Jews are interpreted in an overly literal manner and out of context while alternative interpretations are available.

Of the 108 YouTube channels whose videos were shortlisted for this study, 11 have their number of followers in millions, which in descending order are detailed in Table 7.1.

As is evident from Table 7.1, all except one are based in Pakistan. There are 26 clerics and commentators who figure prominently in the 120 videos. Fifteen of them are from Pakistan,⁴ seven from India,⁵ and one from the United Kingdom. The geographical location of the remaining three was impossible to determine.⁶ Israr Ahmed⁷ has by far the largest number of videos in Urdu with antisemitic

TABLE 7.1 A Selection of YouTube Channels in Urdu with Antisemitic Content

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Channel</i>	<i>Followers in Millions</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Location</i>
1	ARY Digital	20.6	13,729,039,184	Pakistan
2	HAQAIQ TV OFFICIAL	6.82	540,539	Pakistan
3	IRC TV	3.06	605,890,163	India
4	Message TV	2.82	318,968,682	Pakistan
5	Spread The Islam	2.6	148,246,950	Pakistan
6	Limelight Studio	2.1	215,461,742	Pakistan
7	Dr. Israr Ahmad Official	2.02	214,416,100	Pakistan
8	GNN	1.69	356,974,825	Pakistan
9	Engineer Muhammad Ali Mirza – Official Channel	1.56	301,585,668	Pakistan
10	Zaitoon TV	1.05	138,475,932	Pakistan
11	Studio One	1.4	121,020,508	Pakistan

content, posted by several channels. Therefore, I chose to focus on him for this case study to see what he based his arguments on, what motivated him, and what he purported to aim to achieve with his diatribe against Jews.

The Role of YouTube

The ease of “distributing ideas and messages rapidly to a large audience” makes social media popular, also among those who propagate their hate in Urdu. Social media enables malicious actors to reach out to younger audiences and influence them and shape their perceptions (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). One reason behind the popularity of YouTube is that it is not only a social networking site, but also a content provider, allowing every user, both identified and anonymous, to not just view but also upload videos.

The importance of discourses by Islamic clerics on YouTube becomes clear when we take into account how “person-to-person transmission has always been at the heart of the transmission of Islamic knowledge,” as pointed out by Francis Robinson. The belief that listening to the author himself was the best way of getting to the truth led Muslim scholars to travel long distances across the Muslim world in order to receive in person the reliable transmission of knowledge. “When a scholar could not get knowledge from an author in person, he strove to get it from a scholar whose *isnad*, or chain of transmission from the original author, was thought to be the most reliable,” informs Robinson (Robinson, 1993, p. 237). It also explains the Muslim skepticism of the written word. Robinson draws our attention to the fact that print could establish itself in the Muslim world only four centuries after it had established itself in the West. He points out that “the Quran was always transmitted orally” (Robinson, 1993, p. 234). Muhammad conveyed to his followers orally the messages he is believed to have received from God,

which within just a few years of his death were written down, but “only as an aid to memory and oral transmission. And this has been the function of the written Quran ever since” (Robinson, 1993, p. 234). With the proliferation of Islamic clerics and Islamist orators on YouTube we are witnessing a kind of revival of the age-old tradition of the oral transmission of Islamic knowledge but unfortunately also the dissemination of antisemitic discourses on a large scale.

Extreme content such as antisemitism on YouTube accessed once generally redirects the user to further extremist videos, “potentially leading to immersion in an extremist ideological bubble” (O’Callaghan et al., 2015, p. 473). The potential of encountering extremist ideas online increased three times between 2013 and 2015 (Kaakinen et al., 2018). The percentage of internet users aged 15–30 who reported exposure to extremist messages increased from 17% in 2013 to 60% in 2015. According to a 2016 representative study, 40% of users aged 14–19 had encountered extremist content via video platforms such as YouTube (Schmitt et al., 2018). A report prepared by the Online Hate Prevention Institute, Melbourne, for the Global Forum for Combatting Antisemitism in 2016 and posted by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its website found YouTube harboring most antisemitism, with 41% of all antisemitic content available on social media as per the study’s sample of 2057 categorized items. Following the Global Forum for Combatting Antisemitism in May 2015, the Online Hate Prevention Institute offered Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter the list of IP addresses with antisemitic content on their platform, which was included in the report. Twitter and YouTube agreed to review the list. However, by January 2016, only 20% of the sample had been removed by the above-mentioned platforms. The report also points out that YouTube was likely to remove on average of only 8% of the antisemitic items from its platform that are brought to its attention, while the removal rate for Facebook is 37%, and for Twitter, 22% (Oboler, 2016, p. 7). Of the three social media studied for this report, Holocaust denial was found to be most prevalent on YouTube. Facebook and Twitter were discovered to be working as vehicles for the circulation of YouTube videos denying the Holocaust (Oboler, 2016, p. 18). *The Jewish Chronicle* recently reported on how “the world’s biggest video sharing platform is hosting extreme antisemitism in the Urdu language.” It drew attention to how “YouTube hosts vile Jew hatred with millions of views” (Simons, 2021) but also shows how the platform continues to fail to address the issue.

Case Study: Israr Ahmed

Israr Ahmed (1932–2010) was a prominent Islamic theologian in Pakistan. He joined Jama’at-i-Islami, a prototype of political Islam in South Asia, in 1950, but left it when its founder and leader Syed Abu A’la Mawdudi decided to participate in electoral politics in 1957, which according to Ahmed was incompatible with the revolutionary ideology of the Jama’at as adopted in the pre-1947 period. However, he continued to subscribe to Mawdudi’s description of modernity and/or Westernization as neo-*jāhiliyyā* (pre-Islamic ignorance) embodied by the

Jews. The concept of neo-*jāhiliyyā* was later embraced by Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and popularized across the Arab world and beyond, leading to the emergence of international militant Islamism. Ahmed was honored with Pakistan's third highest civilian award, *Sitārā-i-Imtiāz* (Star of Excellence) in 1981. He regularly appeared on Peace TV, which was banned in India and Bangladesh in 2016. Israr Ahmed tended to accuse Jews of almost everything bad under the sun. However, some of the recurring themes common to the discourses by other Islamist theologians and commentators are: (1) Jewish antagonism toward Islam since its advent; (2) the depiction of racism, jealousy, stubbornness, arrogance, treason, and deceit as traits of Jewish character; (3) the accusation of the falsification of sacred texts; and (4) Jewish global conspiracy. A video featuring Israr Ahmed attracts on average every day 1,291.04 views, 13.60 likes, 1.66 dislikes, and 1.19 comments. The exact duration for which each video had been available online from the date it was posted on YouTube to the date it was accessed by me was calculated on the free online calculator collection PlanetCalc, which contains 856 online calculators.⁸ Four of the videos mentioned in Table 7.1 were posted by a channel devoted exclusively to him, "Dr. Israr Ahmad Official." Three videos were posted in 2020, two in 2014, and one each in 2011, 2013, and 2017. All of the videos mentioned above were posted after Ahmed's death in 2010. Given the inflammatory nature of his discourses, it is alarming that they continue to be posted by different channels even long after his death, and that they continue to attract views in such huge numbers. With the exception of just a few, all videos contained antisemitic rhetoric and/or tone in varying degrees. The videos can be broadly divided into two categories. One category focuses on the polemics against Jews in the Qur'ān and the *hadīths* and their interpretations. The other category is made up of the videos that are devoted to conspiracies. Overlaps between the two categories are not rare, though. Some of these videos attracted hundreds of thousands of views within just a month or so of being posted on YouTube.

The polemics repeatedly referred to in Israr Ahmed's YouTube videos are the following:

1. Allegation of the distortion/falsification of the scriptures by Jews (*tahrijf*)
2. Prohibition on friendship with Jews and Christians
3. Transformation of Jews into apes as divine punishment for violation of Sabbath
4. Allegation of the murder of prophets by Jews
5. Condemnation of most Jews for both rejecting the prophet Muhammad and failing to live up to their own religious imperatives
6. Prophecy of the annihilation of most of the Jewish people by Jesus at the end of times as God's wrath for their misdeeds
7. The prophecy of the killing of *Dajjāl* (Antichrist) followed by the annihilation of his Jewish followers, according to certain interpretations of a hadith, *Sahih Bukhari*.

To show how antisemitic statements made by Ahmed may have global relevance due to the spread on YouTube to the Urdu-speaking diaspora, I will focus on antisemitic conspiracy myths about Jews and Israel.

Antisemitic Conspiracy Myths in Israr Ahmed's YouTube Discourses

Antisemitic conspiracy myths abound in Israr Ahmed's discourses available on YouTube, encompassing in their huge range a plethora of allegations. Jews are blamed for economic exploitation of the world, the plan to demolish the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa mosques, plans to occupy Israel's neighboring countries to form Greater Israel, and plans to rule the world and control the global economy (Dr. Israr Ahmad Official, [YouTube] 2014). One also comes across an intersectionality of homophobia and antisemitism when Jews are accused of popularizing homosexuality as part of a conspiracy (Al-mashriq Institute, [YouTube] 2020). Ahmed says that according to the Jewish text Talmud, all gentiles or *goyim* are human-like creatures but not human. Just as human beings are entitled to use other creatures, such as horses and oxen, similarly the Jews are entitled to use the non-Jews for their benefit. And the best way to do so is to turn them into beasts by striking at the very roots of family values. Ahmed finds the Jews successful in doing so, as according to him the sense of modesty has vanished in the West. He points out how Bill Clinton once said in his State of the Union address that soon the majority in the American population would be that of "bastards." He then clarifies that the use of the term "bastards" is his; that is how he has translated what Clinton said, "Born out of wedlock." He laments the fact that pastors and senators openly declare their homosexuality without any sense of shame. Ahmed tells his audience that Jews believe that sexual pleasure can be arrived at by any way whatsoever. Jews using the power of the sole supreme power on earth are laying siege on Muslim society so that their social and ethical order also gets ruined, the way they destroyed it in the West. So that in the Muslim society, too, man and woman will start thinking of themselves as equal to each other and homosexual marriages become legalized, prostitution gets recognized as a normal occupation, and prostitutes come to be called sex workers (Al-mashriq Institute, [YouTube] 2020).

Ahmed was absolutely sure that the attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, was the work of Israel, for he believes nobody else was capable of executing it. According to him, Israel's agents are omnipresent in America. Both, print and electronic media are in their control. He uses the terms Israelis and Jews interchangeably, not uncommon in the South Asian Muslim discourse (Zamana Gawah Hai, [YouTube] 2014). According to Ahmed:

When the light of knowledge started spreading from Arab ruled Spain to the rest of Europe, the Jews added three things to it. First, the individual freedom to believe. As a result, the grip of faith weakened over Europe,

from which the Jews directly benefited. The second thing was the freedom of action, to do as one liked. This is what brought about a storm of adultery and sexual corruption in Europe. And the third was a free economy.

(Dr. Israr Ahmad Official, [YouTube] 2017)

Ahmed said that the Zionists wish to ensure that America remains the sole supreme power on Earth. They aim to bring about a clash of civilizations for the implementation of the “Dajjalian (Antichrist’s) System of Life” all over the world, create Greater Israel, demolish the mosques – Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa – on Temple Mount and construct the Third Jewish Temple there, and gain control over all of the world’s natural resources. It was in order to achieve this agenda that the Jews were targeting the Muslims. They are preying upon Muslims as they are weak as an adversary. The Muslims possess great oil reserves. It is necessary to gain control over the Islamic world as it is the only region still untouched by the “Western nonsense of gender equality.”

The Quran has clearly considered man’s status to be higher to that of woman and there is still a clear distinction between the domain of man and that of woman in the Islamic world. Defeating the Muslims is necessary for the redrawing of the map of the Middle East for the realization of the dream of Greater Israel.

(Dr. Israr Ahmad Official, [YouTube] 2014)

Of the 148 comments that the video had attracted when checked on July 27, 2021, only 3 were critical. The rest were all in praise of Israr Ahmed and his discourse. All three comments critical of the video were posted by YouTube users bearing Hindu names. One Ramananda wonders in his Hindi comment posted in the Roman alphabet if Israr Ahmed is mad or he is making others mad. In response to this comment of his, there are replies from several users bearing Muslim names. While all of them unanimously condemn his comment, there is a user bearing the Hindu name “Vikram Chavan,” who confronts those who call Ramananda names in their comments. He asks if making fun of others’ beliefs is all that the Muslims know. He implores them to read the *Bhagwat Gita* (a Hindu sacred text) so that they get rid of the hate that they are full of. In reaction to this, a number of users ask him aggressively to just leave.

Islamists hold the belief that the alliance between the United States and Israel has given rise to a “crusader-Zionist” assault on the very root of the religion of Islam. This perception is also at the core of the concept of “Islam under siege.” Islamists generally do not distinguish between Zionists and Jews. The Islamist notion of “Islam under siege,” waging a Jihad against a Jewish-American conspiracy, has its origins in the work of Sayyid Qutb, who was strongly influenced by Mawdudi. Mawdudi was the first to emphasize that jihad was imperative for contemporary Muslims. There is no doubt that Mawdudi influenced revivalism from Morocco to Malaysia, and events such as the Iranian revolution of

1978–1979. His views and thoughts accelerated the spread of Islamic revivalism in Central Asia, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, and influenced a number of Islamist ideologues, including Iran's Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (c. 1900–1989) and the above-mentioned Sayyid Qutb and Israr Ahmed.

Conspiracism is most prevalent in groups that feel victimized by larger forces and tend to view the world as a struggle between good and evil (Charles, 2020). Belief in conspiracy fantasies is often held by antidemocratic regimes (Allington et al., 2020). A considerable degree of homogeneity and continuity has been noticed in conspiracy fantasies. Experts explain it “in terms of the cognitive function of conspiracist assumptions.” The Jews are at the core of the tradition’s continuities, “especially the famously Jewish Rothschild family” (Allington et al., 2020). “The folklore about Jewish communists and Jewish financiers,” as M. Billig puts it, is entrenched because of the conspiracy fantasists’ reliance on the work of their predecessors (cited in Allington et al., 2020). The centrality of antisemitism to conspiracy fantasy is well established by existing research. It also highlights the particular role of the YouTube platform in the dissemination of such fantasy. It has been noticed that there is a pattern to how implicit antisemitic content attracts explicitly antisemitic comments (Allington et al., 2020). Neugröscher has shown that antisemitic and anti-American narratives have a crucial common denominator in conspiracy fantasies. The United States, Israel, Zionism, and Jews are often framed as “collaborators in – or interchangeable representations of a disruptive world conspiracy that intentionally wreaks havoc on the world” with the objective of gaining control over humanity and exploiting it. As Neugröscher points out:

They thereby associate the USA and Judaism – the latter directly, or indirectly by blaming Israel or Zionism – with a narrative, highly evocative of, if not identical with, the traditional paranoid antisemitic fantasy of a world Jewish conspiracy, conspicuously (but certainly not exclusively) laid out in the notorious forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

(Neugröscher, 2021, p. 176)

A visiting fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Umer Karim, who focuses on Pakistan, says:

The Pakistani Urdu media discourse, whether electronic, print or digital, is heavily influenced by conspiracy theories that remain overarchingly antisemitic and consider Jews responsible for every wrongdoing in the world, particularly when it concerns the Muslim world. These narratives then resultantly fuel extremist attitudes, particularly against Jews who are considered as the centre of all evil, regardless of the fact if they politically support Israel or not.

(Simons, 2021)

Response to the Antisemitic Rhetoric on YouTube

The majority of the comments under Israr Ahmed's videos on YouTube attract praise of its content and for the speaker, but also prayers and wishes for the destruction/annihilation of Jews/Israel. Critique of antisemitic content is generally absent. However, there always are some dislikes, though only a fraction of the number of likes such videos attract. Dislike and comment are the only means of expressing disagreement with the content of any video on YouTube. In fact, a comment critical of the video content can be effectively buried by YouTube's comment system if disliked by enough of the video uploader's followers and fans (Charles, 2020). As a result of this, a cursory look over the comment section of a video gives the impression of consensus among viewers and therefore may function like an echo chamber for antisemitic content. It is difficult to establish a direct causal link between the antisemitism in these YouTube videos and attacks on Jews. There has been little research on the role played by Islamist antisemitic content on YouTube in the process of radicalization. In other words, we know fairly little as to what is the contribution of Islamist antisemitic content on social media in turning a person into a supporter of terrorism or forms of extremism leading to terrorism (Behr et al., 2013). However, Bijola and Manor find that "the spread of anti-Semitic content online affects European societies at large as anti-Semitism drives social tensions, harms social cohesion and often translates into an increase in violence" (Bijola and Manor, 2020). It must be noted that some of the most brutal antisemitic attacks in recent history have taken place in South Asia, such as the attack on the Chabad Lubawich Centre in Mumbai in 2008, a bomb explosion at the German Bakery in Pune (frequented by Israeli tourists and very close to the Lal Deval Synagogue there) in 2010, a failed attempt to assassinate an Israeli diplomat in New Delhi in 2012, among a number of foiled Islamist attacks on Jews and their institutions in South Asia. There were antisemitic attacks in South Asia even before the invention of the internet and the advent of YouTube. Thus, antisemitism was already there, but YouTube has been accelerating its spread like a virus.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this first study of antisemitic rhetoric in Urdu on YouTube I shortlisted 120 videos from 108 YouTube channels, spread over a period of 11 years, with the oldest video posted on March 31, 2010, and the latest video posted on April 24, 2021. I discovered that 11 of the 108 YouTube channels whose videos were shortlisted for this study have their number of followers in millions, and all of them, except one, are based in Pakistan. Yet neither Pakistani nor Urdu, the lingua franca of linguistically diverse South Asian Muslims, finds any mention in studies done on antisemitism on social media. I noticed that of all the clerics, Israr Ahmed's discourses were available on YouTube more than any other

Urdu-speaking cleric's and that his discourses were more hateful than anyone else's. It is precisely this extremely and blatantly antisemitic nature of his discourses that makes him so popular that his videos continue to be posted on YouTube even 12 years after his death. He draws at once from scriptural polemics and the antisemitic global conspiracy myths in circulation, and lends them respectability in his position as a recipient of Pakistan's third highest civilian award. The antisemitic content as found in videos featuring Israr Ahmed and other clerics like him plays an important role in shaping South Asian Muslim perceptions of Jews, Israel, and Zionism in a region where most of the people never come into any direct contact with Jews and know them only through unreliable secondary sources.

The importance of YouTube is underscored by the fact that person-to-person oral transmission through an undisputed chain of reliable narrators has always been at the heart of the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Obtaining knowledge directly from the author in person rather than via printed word has always taken precedence in the Muslim world. In South Asia, where illiteracy is still widespread, YouTube emerges as a new medium of oral transmission of knowledge, giving Urdu-speaking antisemites an unprecedented access to young Urdu speakers both within and beyond South Asia.

In spite of this the antisemitism in South Asia, its spread via YouTube has not attracted the attention it deserves. There are several reasons for this: The numerical insignificance of Jews in India and their practical absence in the rest of South Asia and that the antisemitism there has only seldom translated into violence has deluded people into believing the officially promoted narrative of the absence of antisemitism in the region. Antisemitism without Jews is just as common in the Muslim world today, including among South Asian Muslims, as it is in post-Holocaust societies like Poland, Austria, or Rumania, where there are very few Jews left. Robert Wistrich explained that the negative stereotypes of Jews crystallize to such an extent that they become part of the culture and then "Jew-hatred no longer" requires "any connection with real human relationships, indeed it no longer" needs "the presence of Jews at all" (Wistrich, 1991, p. xx). It is these negative stereotypes that YouTube promotes via its antisemitic content in Urdu in South Asia and also in the rest of the world through the Urdu-speaking South Asian Muslim diaspora, who have a substantial presence in the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. The response of organizations and institutions devoted to combatting antisemitism to the antisemitic content in Urdu on YouTube has been far from satisfactory. There are a couple of websites with sections in Urdu devoted to raising awareness of the Holocaust such as that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum⁹ and the one owned by a British Muslim activist of Indian origin, Syed Shaheen Chishti,¹⁰ but to the best of my knowledge there is absolutely no video content in Urdu on the history of the Holocaust and antisemitism and the global Jewish history in general. However, there are several Urdu videos denying or minimizing the Holocaust. There is much that advocacy groups could do, such as organizing scholarly lectures in

Urdu on themes relevant to combating antisemitism. A more direct involvement of civil society could have an impact. The arts are a great source of potential positive influence. In 2019, Urdu playwright and theatre director Afaq Almas wrote a play in Urdu based on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. He obtained official permission from the Anne Frank Fund in Basel, Switzerland, to publish the play in Urdu based on the English translation by Susan Masotty. But he could neither find a publisher for it nor a sponsor to stage it despite applying to a number of organizations devoted to raising Holocaust awareness across the world for funds (Aafreedi, 2019). Efforts should be made to get those videos removed that spread rumors of antisemitic global conspiracy beliefs and propagate hate. It is, of course, not easy to get the antisemitic content focused on scriptural polemics removed from YouTube, but videos with alternative interpretations by enlightened and erudite scholars such as Javed Ahmad Ghamidi¹¹ can certainly be released in Urdu and promoted.

Like in any other language, YouTube must translate its user guidelines to Urdu. It could also help to provide information about Jews, the Holocaust, and antisemitism in countries where Jews are mostly absent. Most importantly, YouTube must be pressured to remove antisemitic content from its platform, and to ensure that it does not reappear.

Notes

- 1 South Asia in this study refers to the region occupied by the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, popularly known by its acronym SAARC. Its member countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- 2 Important Islamic movements in Pakistan such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are of Deobandi orientation [Source: Byman, Daniel, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)]
- 3 Graduates of Nadwatul Ulama are found heading Islamic centres across the world.
- 4 Those from Pakistan are Dr. Israr Ahmed, Abdul Rahman Arain, Aalim Muhammad Ibrahim Ashraf, Ehsaan Batalvi, Maulana Tariq Jameel, Mufti Tariq Masood, Engineer Muhammad Ali Mirza, Inamullah Mumtaz, Muhammad Raza Saqib Mustafai, Mufti Gulzar Ahmed Naeemi, Allama Syed Shahenshah Hussain Naqvi, Ahmad Raza Rizvi, Abdur Rab Sajid Saifi, Dr Muhammad Arif Siddiqui, and Shaykh Muhammad Mohsin Munawar Yousafi.
- 5 Those from India are Mohammad Kafeel Ashraf, Mufti Salman Azhari, Maulana Sayyed Akbar Hashmi, Irfanullah, Mohammad Bin Ishaq, Sheikh Abdul Ghaffar Salafi, and Advocate Faiz Syed. The only one from the United Kingdom, though of Indian or Pakistani origin, is Mufti Abdul Wahab.
- 6 The three whose geographical location I could not find are Aalim Muhammad Ibrahim Ashraf, S. M. Iqbal, and Hafeez ur-Rahman. The above-mentioned lists include both Shias and Sunnis.
- 7 A spelling variant of “Ahmed” is “Ahmad.”
- 8 <https://planetcalc.com/about/>
- 9 <https://www.ushmm.org/ur> [Accessed 29 May 2021].
- 10 <https://ur.holocaustinurdu.com/> [Accessed 29 May 2021].
- 11 Ghamidi did not receive his entire Islamic education in madrasas.

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8

ANTISEMITIC NARRATIVES ON YOUTUBE AND TELEGRAM AS PART OF CONSPIRACY BELIEFS ABOUT COVID-19

Hendrik Gunz and Isa Schaller

Introduction

With the rise of COVID-19 infections, Germany witnessed an unexpected alliance of political activists. Formerly “alternative” living, often esoteric individuals and communities joined up with right wing and openly neofascist players and a broader spectrum of apparently apolitical persons discontented with the political handling of the pandemic and its direct consequences for their day-to-day life (Virchow & Häusler, 2020). Their demands were as broad as their alliance, ranging from practical claims like the reopening of the gastronomy over blurry spiritual doctrines up to growing amounts of manifest antidemocratic articulations like death threats to journalists and politicians (Kleffner & Meisner, 2021). From the beginning, many of these demands attracted public attention and outsize media coverage for the obscure and conspiracist presumptions that seemed to form the backbone of their narratives. This attention was augmented by an unexpected politicization of various semi-prominent figures who appointed themselves as the mouthpieces of those oppressed by the alleged Corona dictatorship, frequently voicing authoritarian and conspiracist ideologies. A relevant part of this dynamic took place on social media and in messenger networks. The most discussed and by far most quickly and thoroughly escalated of these realignments from celeb to activist is that of former TV-cook and entrepreneur Attila Hildmann. During the summer of 2020, right before the second wave of high infections hit Germany, Hildmann became one of the most prominent faces of the protests. On social media and predominately on his channel on the messaging app Telegram, Hildmann gathered up to 120,000 followers within a short time by providing a meticulous stream of conspiracist agitation, political organizing, advertisement for his product line, and even direct death threats to politicians. Telegram is an important tool for mobilizing this political scene – and Hildmann is one of its influencers (Quent & Richter, 2021).¹

Various forms of antisemitism soon became a focal point of Hildmann's narrative, passing through a communicational escalation from well-established codes and chiffres toward a spectrum of rearticulations of anti-Judaism, postwar, and National Socialist antisemitism, and blatant Jew hatred. While it could be misjudged as merely a mixture of obscene, ridiculous, and obsolete slogans, these conspiracist articulations contain a narrative structure and an exemplary set of tropes and chiffres that are found frequently in articulations around the political crises in Germany accompanying the pandemic. It is therefore fit for a case study to explore the narrative escalation of antisemitic and conspiracist stereotypes on social media.

Methodology and Wording

While most media as well as political analysis tend toward the term "radicalization" for Hildmann and similar cases, we decided to frame the ideological process displayed as "antisemitic escalation" to shift the focus toward an exemplary tendency of the discourse and away from the specific case. The concept "radicalization" is not only hard to define scientifically, but there are also serious dangers of individualization, exoticization, and pathologizing immanent to the term that fail to take into account the often highly collective dynamic within conspiracist ideologies. (Lee, 2020, p. 348) While the escalation of narratives within the ideological development of prominent figures may seem more and more obscure to external witnesses, "going down the rabbit hole" needs to be understood as a collective phenomenon that grotesquely amplifies authoritarian beliefs and emotions that root in society as a whole, not only in its fringes. With "antisemitic escalation" we intend to describe an exemplary development of narratives and articulation within a broader discourse, leaving psychological questions about character and attitude aside.

To get a grip on the huge amount of data as well as the specific narrative structure produced by Hildmann within the first 11 months of his online activism between the end of April 2020 and March 2021, we decided to apply a combined methods set containing both a quantitative approach as well as a qualitative analysis. In the first part, a collection of three contributions to video sharing platforms originating from different crucial stages of the development of Hildmann's antisemitic narratives shall provide an in-depth analysis of the specific meaning and connection of the various forms of antisemitism. During this period, Hildmann's content passed through a series of deplatformings from prominent social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and partially YouTube)² forcing him to traverse through a multitude of alternative video platforms, and a reevaluation of how frank his articulation can be regarding different providers. Deplatforming describes the definite removal of accounts repeatedly violating platform rules. Richard Rogers states that this phenomenon has been "gaining attention as an antidote to the so-called toxicity of online communities and the mainstreaming of extreme speech" (Rogers, 2020, p. 214).

The second part will explore the broader texture of conspiracist and antisemitic narratives with the help of a keyword frequency analysis on Hildmann's most consistently used platform, his Telegram channel @ATTILAHILDMANN. The huge amount of data within the channel can provide insights into the dynamics within the broader ideology of the expanding spectrum of antisemitism and the conspiracist tropes it is embedded in. By algorithmic comparative frequency analysis, the central role of varying antisemitic narratives and their correlation with other conspiracist tropes within a more and more hermetic "superconspiracy" (Barkun, 2013) shall be outlined. Furthermore, the role of Telegram and its user guidelines for current right-wing extremist articulation in German language will be traced.

Qualitative Approach: The Escalation of Antisemitic and Conspiracist Narratives on Video Hosting Services

After monitoring Hildmann's output for over a year, we chose three contributions to various video platforms Hildmann frequents over time: YouTube, Bitchute, and wtube. The chosen content covers crucial landmarks in time and in ideological development. In the following qualitative analysis, we want to identify the meaning and connection of various conspiracist concepts as well as the changing role of antisemitism within this framework with the help of a hermeneutic approach. The focus lies on three speeches as well as nonverbal aspects like gesticulation, intonation, and symbolism of the displayed pictures and background. Social media is a fast-moving phenomenon. Not only are users like Hildmann themselves able to alter or delete content, the platforms may too, by banning or completely deplatforming certain content or accounts. For this reason, regular backups are a crucial part of any research on social media and video-sharing platforms.

"CORONA-FASCHISMUS" – Early Conspiracist Stage: Doubts, Personalization, and Comparisons to Fascism

On April 16, 2020, Hildmann cross-posted a recording of an Instagram live feed to YouTube,³ and named it "CORONA FASCHISMUS." The title puts the German restrictions against the COVID-19 pandemic on a level with fascism. The arrangement of this 32-minute video lasting was hastily improvised. Until the end of May 2020, the video had more than 100,000 views and over 2,000 comments. It represents one of the first statements by Hildmann about COVID-19 and the federal government's restrictions on YouTube. Already in the second sentence – "I am not purged yet"⁴ – Hildmann expresses his fear of losing his platform (Hildmann, 2020a), which came partly true when Instagram banned his main account permanently less than a month later.

This early statement is characterized mainly by three themes: doubts about the official portrayal of the health crisis, strongly personalized suspicions, and the comparison and framing of current political counter measurements as "fascism."

The rhetoric of doubt at this stage is marked by open questions, articulations of uncertainty, and appeals to the audience to question mainstream narratives: “I just appeal to anybody out there: Please use your brain and google these issues”⁵ (Hildmann, 2020a). At this stage Hildmann still locates himself in the tradition of the Enlightenment, which he claims to have read a lot about. He identifies as part of a minuscule truth-searching dissident part of the German population, fiercely and clear-headedly questioning and opposing what he conceives as a monolithic agenda of state institutions and media followed by the homogenous, obedient masses. He mocks the latter as sheep by imitating the animal’s noise. Though this strongly resonates with the wider conspiracist rhetoric and identification, Hildmann at this early point still distances himself from this spectrum. He prompts his audience to “neither believe conspiracy-theory websites nor everything that is told in the public service television, use the Internet and research on your own. Just insert key words and read the results”⁶ (Hildmann, 2020a). This highlights a method of his: The core process of knowledge gathering seems to consist of searching keywords via a search engine and to connect those eclectic findings from different sources in a tight narrative causality. His positioning toward COVID-19 is at this early point of articulation still ambivalent: On the one hand, he gesticulates quotation marks when speaking of the coronavirus at least twice throughout the video, framing it as ironic or dubious. On the other hand, he emphasizes:

I don’t want to play down this virus, but you have to stop … the people have to stop to play down these political measures, the people have to stop to play down the interests behind Corona.⁷

(Hildmann, 2020a)

Hildmann identifies a network of alleged conspiratorial key figures: Institutional cooperation or funding are interpreted as direct but discretionary power of individuals, especially Bill Gates, over research findings and the news. Additionally, according to him, the World Health Organization (WHO) as well plays a crucial role in the conspiracy. Because of its recommendations to national governments, Hildmann believes to have revealed: “the WHO acts currently as a world government”⁸ (Hildmann, 2020a). This “world government” is supposedly under the spell of the United States and the Gates Foundation, a common misconception in the COVID-19-denying scene as the health professional Andreas Wulf has shown (2021). This is consistent with the antisemitic and right-wing narrative of the pandemic-denying scene, as Virchow and Häusler point out (2020, p. 26). Though the video circles around Bill Gates as a key figure, Hildmann is at this point still doubtful about the role attributed to him:

I can imagine that he [Gates] is deliberately steering this. So. We also currently see the money flowing to the media, to several institutes, to the WHO.⁹

(Hildmann, 2020a)

At the core of Hildmann's conspiracy belief is his assumption that "behind" the coronavirus are several interlocking interests that can and must be uncovered. Characteristic of Hildmann's conspirationist views is the personalization of politics: In his monologue he refers 19 times to Bill Gates or the Gates foundation. This kind of imagination of an almighty puppet master is common in conspiracy mentality and can also be described as "structural antisemitism" (Imhoff, 2020). It refers to an antisemitic conspiracist thinking without naming "the Jew" by installing a more or less subtle place holder. This tendency is intensified by frequent adoption of scraps of pre-established conspiracist keywords, names, and argumentative structure.

Because of the exaggerated influence of the "world government" WHO and his claims of being restricted in his right to free speech, Hildmann questions whether Germany is still a democracy. Thereby he conceptualizes democracy in an abbreviated way, in which an imagined dominance of major news broadcast under public law, *Tagesschau*, is linked to fascism, because of a supposed lack of plurality of opinions. His multiple references to the German past, his talk of a "Corona dictatorship," a "Corona fascism," and his vision of "Corona camps" allegedly being built are not only a polemic comparison but also a direct equation of current pandemic restrictions with National Socialism. Contrary to later speeches, he still condemns fascism at this point and uses the equation of the current situation with Nazi Germany as a warning. The function of these references to history is clear: They give Hildmann a nimbus of dissidence and resilience. However, in the argumentative structure of his revisionist relativization of Nazi Germany there are the first traces of what Adorno called "guilt-defensiveness antisemitism" (Schuldabwehrsemitismus; Horkheimer/Adorno), now also called secondary antisemitism (Wodak, 2018).

"Germany Must Perish" – Churchill and Corona Conspiring Against Germany

A few weeks before a pandemic-denying mob tried to storm the German parliament, Hildmann recorded a speech in Dresden for his online audience. This video is about 5 minutes long and was uploaded as "Germany Must Perish"¹⁰ to YouTube on August 9, 2020 (Hildmann, 2020b). Eleven days later, Hildmann claimed in his Telegram channel that YouTube had deleted the video, which he then uploaded to Bitchute (Geiler, 2021). Bitchute has been described as "the main alternative to YouTube as a video-sharing platform with [sic!] the far-right's ecosystem of online platforms" (Guhl, Ebner, & Rau, 2020, p. 28). Until its deletion, the video had more than 50,000 views on YouTube. In the evening of the same day, Hildmann remarked that "While Yew-YouTube [sic!] is deleting my stuff, I will only post videos to Bitchute!"¹¹ Considering he received less than 12,500 clicks for this video in nearly eight months (as of April 12, 2021), with this partial deplatforming of content he has lost a large audience. In the following days, he repeated the phrase "Yew YouTube" on his Telegram channel several

times. This highlights several core aspects: On the one hand, this illustrates the increased and more openly articulated antisemitism in Hildmann's conspiracy belief. On the other hand, it shows that services like YouTube are not neutral platforms but stakeholders following their own policies. Novel for Hildmann's style of video messaging was that he held an actual speech: He addressed an audience and read quotes off his smartphone, which suggests that he somewhat prepared and structured his message.

In this speech "to the German people,"¹² Hildmann affirms the idea of a Jewish conspiracy planning a genocide against all Germans. He derives this conspiracy belief from the victim narrative of the bombing of Dresden during World War II and claims to have found the reasons for this maneuver: "I believe that this was a war crime and that this war crime was long planned to destroy Germany"¹³ (Hildmann, 2020b). To prove this allegation, he offers several statements which he claims are direct quotes from Britain's wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill. These alleged testimonies all suggest a plan to force Nazi Germany into war for financial reasons. While it is not possible to clarify the provenance of these alleged quotes mostly spread online without sources, there is no proof that any of them are historically accurate. But there is proof that some of Hildmann's disputed quotes are quite popular on social media (dpa, 2020) and among German Neo-Nazis (Manthe, 2015, p. 258; Langebach, 2015).¹⁴ The tradition of this narrative is evident: Portraying the bombing of Dresden without the historical context, in which Nazi Germany started a war of annihilation, is a narrative victimizing Germans in World War II that derives from topoi of Nazi propaganda (Winter, 2015).

Hildmann's statement picks up those topoi and updates them to the COVID-19 situation, claiming that the German chancellor has plans similar to Churchill's imagined "anti-German" plans: "And just like Winston Churchill Merkel is a warmonger" (2020b).¹⁵ Hildmann refers to the antisemitic conspiracy theories of the Kaufman, Hooton, and Kalergi Plans (Langebach, 2015). He implies that Merkel could fulfill what Churchill failed to do: the annihilation of Germany and the German people. The title of Hildmann's video is a reference to a pamphlet which Nathan Kaufman published in 1941. Hildmann was likely aware that this otherwise irrelevant pamphlet was exploited by the Nazi regime for its propagandization of a Jewish conspiracy against Germany (Herf, 2008): On August 5, 2020, he posted a screenshot of the first passage of its German Wikipedia article, including a clarification on this question, in his Telegram channel. As the historian Wolfgang Benz pointed out, the "Kaufman Plan" was significant only in its reception by the Nazi regime and its apologists after the war, because it could be used to claim that "the Jews" were the first to demand a genocide (1981). Hildmann integrates the antisemitic idea of a sterilization of the German people proclaimed in the pamphlet into his coronavirus-related conspiracy beliefs, in which the vaccination against the virus is part of a sinister plan to render the population infertile. He claims that "Merkel['s] anti-German, Germany-hostile politics are not only based on the Kaufman-Plan, but also on

the Hooton-, and Kalergi-Plan, with the ultimate aim to destroy the German nation and the German people”¹⁶ (Hildmann, 2020b). He also describes the COVID-19-related restrictions on the economy as part of this all-encompassing plan against Germany.

Hildmann ends his speech comparing the damages that resulted from the bombing of Dresden with this alleged plan to genetically modify all Germans’ DNA, and a call for action:

Germany wake up now. The enemy governs you. Merkel is a Zionist Jew of the B’nai B’rith-secret society and she was given the task by Rothschild to destroy Germany for ever. This we must not allow.¹⁷

(2020b)

He imagines a Jewish conspiracy as the deadly enemy of the German nation and its people. With this conspiracy belief he excuses the crimes of Nazi Germany as self-defense and tries to make sense of the current coronavirus crisis, which he portrays as a weapon directed at Germany. He thus affirms and replicates topoi popular in both national socialist and Neo-Nazi propaganda. This contradicts Hildmann’s former positioning against fascism. His method of cherry-picking research reappears in the disputable Churchill quotes presumably originating from various internet sources.

Holocaust denial “JEW IS JEW !!!”

On March 23, 2021, Hildmann posted an 11-minute voice message in his Telegram channel. The subsequent message linked to wtube.org, where he published the exact same voice recording (Hildmann, 2021). Wtube is a video-sharing service that claims to be an “anti-YouTube” mainly hosting the deplatformed but simultaneously banning those who challenge the worldview of the anonymous operators (Rohwedder, 2021). The extent of the collaboration between Hildmann and wtube remains unclear: Not only does he operate one of the most active channels on the site, but he also provides a bank account for donations for wtube in his name (Rohwedder, 2021).

In this voice message the conspirationist and antisemitic content can no longer be separated. Hildmann openly denies the Holocaust and refers to a variety of far-right and Neo-Nazi framings, connecting them to the current politics of the pandemic. Denying the Holocaust is a crime in Germany and can be punished with up to three years in prison. He construes an evil Jewish unity, claiming that there would be no difference between inner Jewish movements: “It is always told to differentiate between [...] Khazars, Zionists or Illuminati [sic!]. Those are maneuvers of deception by the Jew. Those terms and groupings were fabricated by the Jew”¹⁸ (Hildmann, 2021). He homogenizes heterogeneous groups to “the Jew” – a single entity, which he claims hates Christians, Muslims, and “every other people which he seeks to enslave.” He imagines a Jewish enmity against

Germany, in which “the Jew” – sometimes personalized in an apparent Jewish mastermind, Rothschild – orchestrated both world wars, and managed to profit from those wars, using the Holocaust as a “lever.” Using the term “guilt cult” (“Schuldkult”), Hildmann repels any historical responsibility of Germany and pictures Germans as victims instead – a common term and narrative in German Neo-Nazism (Suermann, 2016, p. 279). Hildmann continues:

The Jews invented this Holocaust-fairytales. There has not been an industrial killing of Jews. The gas chambers are not existent. You couldn't murder someone using Cyclone B. It is a grotesque fairytale and it fabricated a guilt cult. And with this guilt cult the German allowed everything to be done to him.¹⁹

(2021)

He affirms his conspiracist belief that Jewish powers were responsible for World War II, which he already articulated in the video “Germany must perish”: “He [the jew] has been the everlasting warmonger.”²⁰

The Jews control the financial markets since forever. They have always been the poisoner, whether in medieval times poisoning wells or ritual murders of children. The Jew is behind the children-sex-ring. The Jew is sadist and Satanist. Judaism is Satanism. And. The Jew founded the Federal Republic of Germany in the Villa Rothschild. Germany is not Germany. The FRG is not Germany. The FRG is a Jew-Republic, an illegal company construct, a plague spot on Germany, an enemy rule over Germany.²¹

(Hildmann, 2021)

Hildmann connects several antisemitic topoi here: He recurs to famous anti-Jewish stereotypes of well-poisoning and ritual murders, while portraying “the Jew” as almighty conspirator against Germany. Thereby he distinguishes between the “real Germany” and the state of the Federal Republic of Germany, which he says is an enemy rule, robbing taxes from Germans. “Jew Republic” thereby is a right-wing term that became popular after World War I for discrediting the Weimar Republic (Hampe, 2010). Additionally, the Holocaust – which he denies – serves a political purpose in this construction. Hildmann claims that after World War II “the Jew” used the illegitimate construct of the Federal Republic of Germany and the “Holocaust fairytale” to exploit the Germans financially. This money is used for a “real Holocaust against the Palestinians.” This topic is underreported “because the press is a Jew press and TV is Jew TV.” This alleged Jewish evil invented the COVID-19 pandemic too: All vaccine-producing companies are in “Jews’ hand.” And while in Israel vaccine-shots are just placebos, the rest of the world will be killed by the vaccine or enslaved (Hildmann, 2021).²²

The object of Hildmann’s conspiracist interest has changed between the first Instagram video in April and the audio message on wtube 11 months later: He

ultimately claims to have uncovered a global conspiracy that had steered international developments for at least a hundred years. This conspiracy is Jewish, and its goal is world domination – or, as Hildmann often paraphrases the common antisemitic conspiracist term of “New World Order,” a “Jewish World Order.”

Because Hildmann tries to find one narrative to explain every major incident and every aspect of social and political life, he constructs a monolithic and strongly personalized interest controlling everything. He cannot present a coherent narrative, but resorts instead to a sequence of various antisemitic discourses. Hildmann summarizes: “The Jews control nearly every area of our lives.”²³ The alleged Jewish control over finances, COVID-19 vaccines, the media, and both world wars serve him as examples that “the Jew” is one evil entity, the enemy of all people. Furthermore, he imagines Rothschild as some kind of headmaster of a Jewish conspiracy, allegedly worse than Hitler. This can be seen as an antisemitic escalation in his personalized view of politics which was an important factor even in his early articulation, but then mainly focused on Bill Gates.

Qualitative Conclusion

Though Hildmann’s first video employs a rhetoric of questioning and not an explicitly antisemitic concept of hostility, there are already plenty of indications of antisemitic narratives and conspiracist topoi addressing the coronavirus crisis. They can be found in the presentation of alleged key figures like Gates as mighty bogeymen as well as in the recurrence of trivializing Nazi Germany. With his later output in mind, this can be seen as the first step in a development of guilt-defensiveness antisemitism. However, Hildmann’s conspiracy beliefs are at this point not a conspirationist worldview, speaking in terms of Barkun (2013, p. 3). His beliefs seem to be on the threshold between an event and a systemic conspiracy. His conception about COVID-19 and the federal government’s restrictions may be seen as a “conspiracy [which] is held to be responsible for a limited, discrete event or sets of events,” the definition Barkun provides for the structure of “event conspiracies” (2013, p. 6). Within the first video Hildmann already broadens the subject, speculating about several layers of conspiracies with many groups he thinks profit from the virus, which might be interpreted as a preliminary stage of a “systemic conspiracy” (Barkun, 2013, p. 6). At this point he still claims to be searching for what he conceives as “interests behind the virus,” employing a rhetoric of questioning and yet unanswered doubt. However, he also names a broad range of pre-established conspiracist keywords, though they are not defined and connected among each other within a closed causal ideology. The shaky amateur optic and the private setting mirrors this component character. Characteristic is his method of cross posting: uploading a recording of a livestream from Instagram to YouTube, and thus it gets much more widely disseminated.

In the second video, the antisemitic escalation progressed to him claiming a Jewish conspiracy against the “German people.” Hildmann denies the German

war guilt regarding World War II and asserts that Germany was lured into it, namely by the “warmonger” Churchill. In this conspiratorial context he also interprets the governmental restrictions against the coronavirus as part of that sinister historical scheme: to destroy Germany economically, militarily, and physically. He affirms and actualizes the so-called Kaufman Plan, which is de facto Neo-Nazi-propaganda. Hildmann’s subordination of powerful figures like Merkel and Churchill under an alleged “super villain” Rothschild not only illustrates the turn toward open antisemitism, but also introduces a clearly structured hierarchy with an alleged Jewish mastermind at the top into the conspiracist world view. His comments after the banning of this video on YouTube, calling it “Yew YouTube,” shows a more explicit antisemitism. With this he articulated an antisemitic conspiracy belief, insinuating “Jews” could purge his content from this platform – an updated version of the antisemitic belief of Jewish control over the media.

The third contribution to a video-sharing service is characteristic for his changed usage of social media networks: after being deplatformed from mainstream networks and trying out smaller services like Bitchute, Hildmann started collaborating with the hosts of the sharing service wtube and also uploading his Telegram voice messages. In this monologue, he directly denies the Holocaust and pictures an imagined Jewish entity as almighty and evil, while the German and Palestinian people are described as victims. Hildmann fabricates a German “guilt-cult” (“Schuld-Kult”) deriving from the Shoah – which he denies as a “Holocaust-fairytales.” This alleged moral lever is used by “the Jews” – synonymous with Israel – to extort money and weapons, which are used against Palestine. His conspiracy thinking and his revisionism of history are culminating in blatant antisemitism. This “superconspiracy” not only “explains” the current COVID-19 crisis but also the complex situation in the Middle East and the German history of the past 100 years. He constructs “the Jew” as an evil mastermind and a scapegoat.

Quantitative Approach: The Role of Antisemitism within a Hierarchical Conspiracist Ideology

Telegram: The Anticipation of Deplatforming from Social Media and “Social Privacy”

Hildmann’s main channel on Telegram @ATTILAHILDMANN was established on April 28, 2020, at a relatively early stage of his political and digital activism. The addition of yet another public presence was most probably motivated by the fear of posts being partly deleted or a total ban of his accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. A justified fear, as first Facebook and shortly after Instagram, started to restrict and finally ban his main accounts with around 70,000 followers (Facebook: May 09, 2020; Instagram: May 16, 2020). YouTube, however, would not take action, apart from deleting a few

videos such as “Germany must perish” discussed in the qualitative analysis above. Additionally, an official “first warning” was issued by YouTube in August 2020 that led Hildmann to delete all political content from his profile, but he kept the account and its approximately 72,000 followers.

The messenger app Telegram, on the other hand, enjoys a reputation of barely interfering with user content at all. It has therefore become more and more popular within the sphere of political organizing (Urman & Katz, 2020). While often used by democratic uprisings in authoritarian regimes, within the German-speaking context it was favored by recruitment groups of Daesh and neofascist activists. In 2017, Germany established the “Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz” (NetzDG), a law supposed to regulate justiciable content on social media and to hold operators accountable for the deletion of illegal posts within short notice. For a long time the law did not apply to Telegram. Classified as a messenger and not social media, the evaluation of undesirable content was therefore up to the platform itself. In June 2021, the changing function of Telegram was taken into account, and the German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection attempted to subsume Telegram under the NetzDG (Tremmel, 2021). Additionally, Hildmann’s main channel got blocked in June 2021 for versions that were downloaded via Google’s Play Store or the iOS App Store, while it could still be used without restrictions with a desktop (Huesmann, 2021). What led to the partial banning remained unknown. Telegram itself only classifies public channels as “reportable,” explicitly excluding private groups and channels as “private affairs” that will not be dealt with in any way (Telegram FAQ). That represents a very broad definition of private sphere, considering that private groups on Telegram can contain up to 200,000 members, while private channels can contain an unlimited number of followers. However, the operator established an ongoing combined effort against “terrorism and hate crime” with Europol, deleting several dozen profiles of Daesh members in 2015 and has since then by its own account been deleting around 15,000–20,000 channels and bots per month due to abuse. In 2018, Europol stated that the operator “successfully endeavors to ban terrorism and hate speech as well as calls for criminal actions” (Privacy-Handbuch). While mostly classified as “messenger,” Telegram operates more and more like established social media platforms by implementing features that facilitate networking, interactive elements, public communication, and even payment methods. Soon, advertisements will also be implemented into public groups and channels. It is something of a hybrid system of “social privacy” that provides service to the “dual desires of protection and publicity by offering private messaging and broadcasting” (Rogers, 2020, p. 216). Hildmann’s main channel employs nearly all functions available for Telegram channels at this stage: Besides text and image posts, the channel leans heavily on voice messages and video posts, both from Hildmann himself – and often cross-posted on other social media accounts – and those forwarded from other Telegram members, groups, and channels. Furthermore, polls that enable readers to vote on a topic are used frequently. This feature is mostly used as a tool of humor, irony, and

absurdity within the channel. The recently implemented commentary function has also been used by Hildmann since April 5, 2021. Posts can be commented now by every user of the app and comments are available for reading with a click. Voice chats, however, released by Telegram in December 2020 are not used in the channel or related groups so far. The main channel itself is again nested within a changing variety of side channels and groups advertised in the main channel regularly. Besides a barely used international channel promoting Hildmann's ideas in English, most of the open groups are actively used for discussions between his admirers and counter-protestors and trolling, especially whenever Hildmann announces to be present for questions and discussion. For Hildmann's political articulation, his main Telegram channel plays a crucial role, especially for articulations that could result in consequences on other social media platforms. From its creation on April 28, 2020, the channel has been quite active, with up to 411 posts per day (July 16, 2020) and an average of 120 posts per day between May 2020 and March 2021. It can therefore be seen as a representative record of the development of his escalating antisemitic articulation. While it is nearly impossible to read the channel as a whole and apply qualitative research, this huge amount of data provides opportunities for quantitative research outlining the broader stages and the narrative structure of this development.

Method: Comparative Frequency Analysis

The following results are generated by text-mining of the main Telegram channel @ATTILAHILDMANN between April 28, 2020, and March 28, 2021. The download feature is implemented in Telegram's desktop version for all not-protected chats, groups, and channels. Data can be exported as html or JSON and limited to a certain data type (i.e., pictures, GIFs), a maximum size or date range. The frequency analysis was executed by a short python script running on the JSON data whose algorithm gives back the number of posts containing one or several of the keywords per week. Not included in the analysis are pictures, GIFs, videos, and voice messages. The keywords are applied in the form of word stems in German, chosen to cover a preferably wide grammatical range of related content. The part of the word used by the algorithm is printed in bold within the charts. For better understanding, we supplemented the letters to one possible coherent noun. For example, the search for "jud/jüd" would record posts containing the word "Jude" as well as the adjective "jüdisch," as well as inflected words with different suffixes but of the same meaning. In the charts, this search is depicted as "**Jude/Jüdin**." With the help of this frequency analysis, the development of conspiracist, and especially antisemitic content, in the output of the channel will be displayed in exemplary charts. For a first overview, a table of frequently used topoi will compare the number of posts containing them in total within the 11 months as well as the date of first appearance. Following the development of central antisemitic-conspiracist topoi over time will be displayed graphically to examine their quantitative correlation and draft a first hypothesis about the narrative structure

of the escalating antisemitic articulation of the channel. We chose a quantitative approach to handle the large amount of data that is provided by both the Telegram channel and Hildmann's output on social media in general. Within the 11 months of the case study, the channel produced roughly over 49,000 posts of varying length. Within a quantitative analysis, this enormous amount of data can help to provide a framework of central narratives and the inherent dynamic of trends and correlations of antisemitic-conspiracist articulation.

Antisemitism within a Network of Expanding Conspiracist Narratives

Central to the understanding of the narrative structure within the ideology of the channel and therefore to understand the antisemitic escalation is the dynamic of conspiracist expansion. Within the relatively short time of the first weeks of the channel, a huge amount of conspiracist topoi gets integrated into a narration initially directed at the pandemic. As will be illustrated later, this integration comes with a partial re-arrangement within the ideology of threat. Table 8.1 lists some, by far not all, conspiracist keywords that play an important role in Hildmann's discourse, sorted by the date of their first mention in 2020 as well as the number of posts containing them in total within that date and March 2021.

TABLE 8.1 Central Conspiracist Keywords of Hildmann's Telegram Channel and Their Frequency

<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Date of First Appearance</i>	<i>(Text) Posts Containing Keyword</i>
Gates	April 29, 2020	2146
ID2020	April 29	271
Chip	April 29	710
Rockefeller	May 01	342
Soros	May 01	242
NWO	May 02	1781
Freimaurer	May 03	1537
Satanist	May 05	1101
Israel	May 13	960
Rothschild	May 15	736
Antifa	May 16	773
Deep state	May 18	155
Kalergi Plan	May 19	151
Illuminaten	May 21	1120
Kommunisten	June 01	2232
Weltbank/Weltbänker	June 01	298
Zionist	June 03	448
Jude/Jüdin	June 03	3378
Bolschewist	June 05	793
B'nai B'rith	June 13	199

Note: Sorted by first appearance

As can be seen, there is an abundance of alleged threats, groups, and villains established gradually within these first seven weeks of the channel. While the conspiracist keywords of the very first days (Gates, ID2020, Chip) seem to arise from an ideological pool of anti-modern, technology-adverse narration, rather soon classic conspiracist tropes and antisemitic codes are integrated. The first antisemitic codes found in our collection of conspiracist keywords are personalized “names” (“Rockefeller”, “Soros,” followed by “Rothschild” in the middle of May 2020), succeeded by well-established conspiracist tropes like “secret societies” and antisemitic codes (like “New World Order”) (Pfahl-Traughber, 2003) as well as the Neo-Nazi narrative of the “Kalergi Plan.” Roughly a month after the establishment of the channel, Hildmann begins to directly address “the Jews” – though it will take several more months until the codes are completely substituted by open antisemitism, as will be illustrated. Regarding the numbers of posts mentioning them, the most important tropes of threat in the channel circle around “Jews,” “communists,” “Bill Gates,” alleged secret societies (“Freemasons” and “Illuminati”), and a “New World Order.”

This structure of narrative abundance and vast expansion is best described by what Michael Barkun described as “superconspiracy” (Barkun, 2013). Barkun established the concept, on the one hand, in differentiation to conspiracist ideologies focusing mainly on the explanation of one more or less well-defined phenomenon (“event conspiracy”). On the other hand, he defines theories that deploy a more or less confined concept of enemy (“systemic conspiracy”) within a framework of broader conspiracist apprehensions like “world domination.” Superconspiracies, which according to Barkun have become more and more popular since the 1980s, differ from these two established conspiracist schemes by a dynamic of ongoing expansion and integration of narratives into a hierarchical structure that Barkun compares to a “Russian Doll.” They are marked by a diffuse and ever-shifting border between who and what is already part of the conspiracy and who is still to be seen outside and “trustable.”

Following a frequency analysis on central keywords over the range of the first 11 months of the Telegram channel shall investigate the role of coded as well as open antisemitism within the dynamic of this conspiracist expansion. The following charts illustrate the number of posts containing these keywords per week, with an average of roughly 1,000 posts per week.

As can be seen in Figure 8.1, while Bill Gates is a predominant villain between the end of April and the end of August 2020 with up to a hundred posts mentioning him or his foundation, the significance of this trope is narrowed by half in the following month and seems to be nearly fading after February 2021. This turning away from Gates as the “supervillain” must be seen in a broader context of Hildmann’s ideology focusing less and less on concretely pandemic-related topics in favor of an all-encompassing superconspiracy. The mentioning of “Jews,” on the other hand, has been on a lower but constant level since the end of May 2020 and reaches a plateau of around 40 mentions per week between November 2020 and January 2021. From February 2021 onward “Jews” or

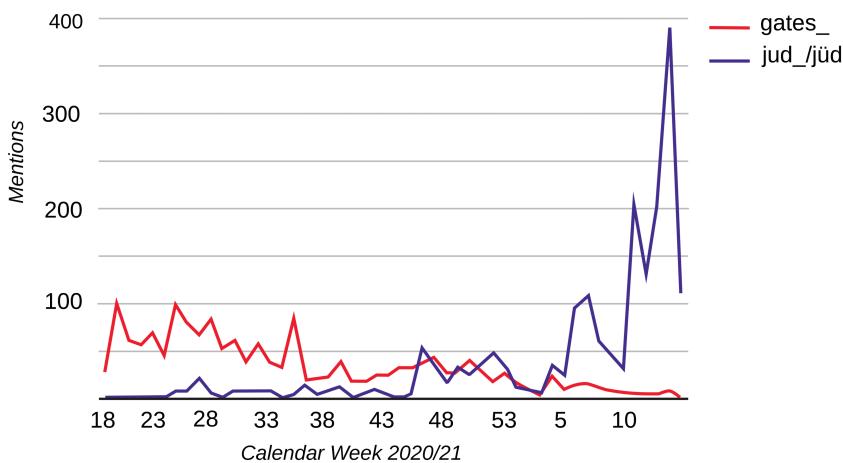


FIGURE 8.1 Posts per week containing “Gates” and “jud_” or “jüd_.”

“Jewish” is the dominating term in his Telegram channel. In place of the personalized concept of enemy focusing on Bill Gates in the beginning of the channel, the antisemitic narrative of “the Jew” as almighty villain is articulated in violent vehemence ten months later. The disconcerting peak of nearly 400 mentions of “Jew” or “Jewish” in late March 2021 marks Hildmann’s eventual declaration of open antisemitism after he fled criminal persecution in Germany and took up residence presumably in Turkey. As the following frequency analysis of further conspiracist concepts shows, between those two concepts of enemy a conspiracist development took place. More and more tropes are integrated and various conspiracist “trends” replace each other every few weeks.

In Figure 8.2, the dynamic of the other predominant concepts of enemy “freemasonry” and “communism” can be seen compared to the initial supervillain Gates: The relative drop of significance of Bill Gates in late July is compensated by the rise of other conspiracist narrations of threat. These three topoi also show different variations of narrative trends: While Gates remains relatively significant even after the drop under 50 mentions in July and only seems to slowly fade out of the narration after February 2021, freemasons enter the narration in the first week but remain relatively irrelevant until October 2020. A short peak of three months until January 2021 is followed by a rapid decline afterward, within the time span of Hildmann’s most frequent and open antisemitic articulation starting in February 2021 (see Figure 8.2). The topos “communism” on the other hand is undergoing several peaks of roughly one to three months. However, this narrative also drastically declines after February 2021. While neither the repeated story about an allegedly almighty puppet master Bill Gates nor about a threat from “Freemasons” or “Communists” is openly antisemitic, within the far-right they are a well-established part of an “inseparable

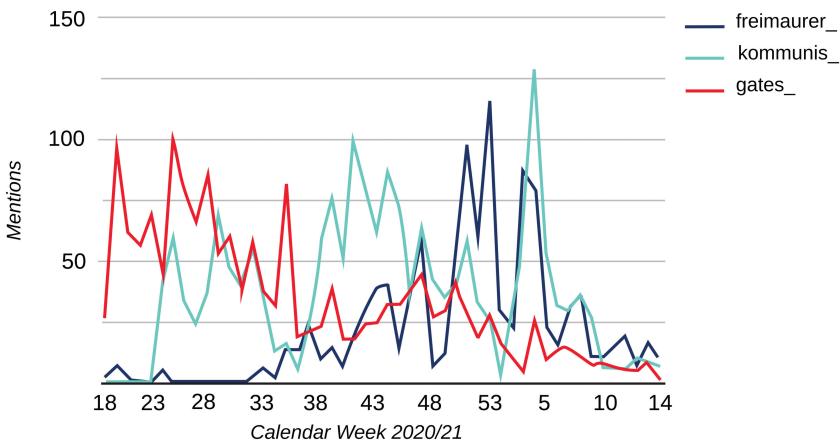


FIGURE 8.2 Conspiracist trends and continuities in Hildmann's Telegram channel between April 2020 and March 2021: posts mentioning freemasonry, communism, and Gates.

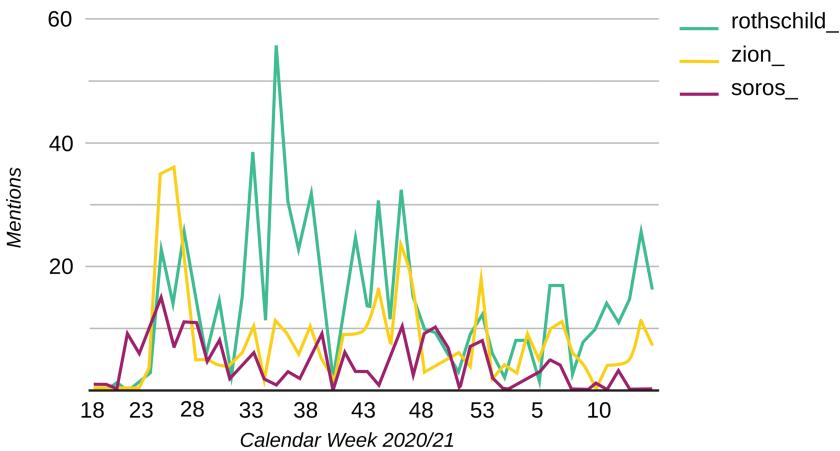


FIGURE 8.3 Frequency of posts containing established antisemitic codes per week.

reference system" with antisemitic attribution (Schulze & Treß, 2017) and often used to encode or avoid open antisemitism (Pfahl-Traughber, 2003). The antisemitic escalation is in regard to conspiracist narratives at an early stage established both by a personalized concept of enemy (Bill Gates) and later on by prevalent conspiracist themes with antisemitic implications. While these topoi undergo several developments of intensified interest interlocking with each other, all of these rather implicitly antisemitic keywords drastically sink in usage with the rise of open antisemitism.

Regarding posts mentioning more obvious antisemitic codes and chiffres, the scale is slightly diminished, ranging up to 60 mentions of the keywords per week – which can, with an average of 1,000 posts, still be regarded as meaningful narrations within the channel. As can be seen in Figure 8.3, all three examples in the chart depict a continuity of coded antisemitism as well as a contingency of integrated narratives within the “superconspiracy” with none of them ever completely leaving the pool of conspiracist keywords and concepts of enemy. It is also discernible that while none of these three topoi have been relevant within the first four weeks of the channel, all of them evolve within a short time frame around June 2020. While “Soros” is the first narrative that can be considered established with at least ten mentions per week for over a month after week 22, both “Zionism” and “Rothschild” undergo several peaks with more than 20 mentions in certain weeks.

While a quantitative approach can be useful to handle large amounts of data, it is limited, on the one hand, by the type of file that can be meaningfully analyzed: The frequency analysis is by default narrowed down to text files and cannot include audio, videos, GIFs, and pictures containing the keywords. On the other hand, it necessarily fails in the analysis of the more subtle functions of natural language: Rhetorical means such as irony or belittlement are as hard to grasp as changes in usage and meaning of keywords over time or context. For phenomena with fast-mutating linguistic manifestations like antisemitism, quantitative methods of text mining etc. therefore come with distinct difficulties that seem to have no other solution than frequent feedback throughout qualitative investigation. This poses a challenge for both social studies and platform providers, and the attempt to get an algorithmic grip on the detection and deletion of antisemitic content.

Conclusions

As could be shown by the frequency analysis on Attila Hildmann’s Telegram channel text data, conspiracist keywords and antisemitic codes form a system of interlocking narratives that escalate in open antisemitic articulation over time. The role of antisemitism is from the beginning crucial within the conspiracist construct, while being articulated in various forms of codes, chiffres, secondary antisemitism, and references over time. As the hermeneutic investigation of three of Hildmann’s videos from YouTube, Bitchute, and wtube shows in depth, the starting point of this escalating antisemitic articulation is the attempt to conceptualize COVID-19 and its political context. This happens within an already strongly personalized concept of political power and responsibility that leans heavily on Bill Gates as an “almighty puppet master.” This personalization can be seen as an early structurally antisemitic component within the expanding ideology of threat. Through the fast integration of more and more interlocking conspiracist tropes, Hildmann’s articulation soon contains a rapidly increasing number of antisemitic codes. Remarkable is the pure amount and speed of tropes

that emerge within the first weeks and months and get integrated in the continuous output of the Telegram channel and the changing video platforms, forming what can structurally be described as a superconspiracy (Barkun, 2013). Although none of the narratives analyzed quantitatively is ever completely dropped from Hildmann's discourse, there seems to be a rhythm of trends and replacement within the conspiracist antisemitic themes. While antisemitic codes and structural antisemitism have been an early focal point of Hildmann's narration, after three months it is openly articulated through the affirmation of national socialist propaganda. Besides referring to the "Kaufman Plan" and "Kalergi Plan," that includes the attribution of being "Jewish Zionist" toward high-ranking politicians and revisionist articulations on German history. While the topic of COVID-19 is taking a back seat over time for the benefit of these established Neo-Nazi topoi, it is still interlinked with them. The political crisis surrounding the pandemic is framed as the newest chapter within a long-term, historical and global threat that imposes dangers, especially for Germany. After ten months, the antisemitic articulation at last reaches the point of open Holocaust denial, death threats, and a quantitatively exceptional fixation on the term "Jew(ish)." Huge parts of this was and is punishable by law in Germany. Neither the messaging app Telegram nor local authorities seemed to bother.

Within this context, Hildmann's use of social media is connected to the antisemitic escalation that marks the development of his conspiracist discourse. The fear of being deplatformed from big social media platforms and actual deplatforming of his accounts had severe consequences for his articulation online. While leaning heavily on videos for mobilization, he migrated through at least three different hosting services within 11 months. The loss of a large portion of his audience went hand in hand with increasingly neofascist content. Also, his fear of deplatforming from Facebook and Instagram led to the creation of a Telegram channel in spring 2020 that would become his most frequented platform for openly articulated antisemitism. For both its hybrid functions that can be classified as "social privacy" (Rogers, 2020) between social media and messenger and its very remote enforcement of user guidelines and national law, Telegram is of growing importance for the radical right scene in Germany and its monitoring. All in all, our findings regarding both the choice of social media platforms and of conspiracist tropes integrated in Hildmann's expanding ideology sketch a pattern that seems to be found frequently within the context of authoritarian articulation and mobilization and tapering antisemitism on social media. Adjacent comparative case studies could shed light on the possibilities of intervention and prevention of these strategic and narrative patterns.

Notes

1 The editorial deadline for this chapter was in July 2021. Months later the press released inquiries, that Hildmann may not have controlled the Telegram channel @ATTILAHIIDMANN all by himself, but that he had some support especially

regarding the IT-infrastructure of his Telegram channels (e.g., Wienand, 2021). This does not undetermine our findings of the antisemitic escalation in the Telegram channel @ATTILAHILDMANN, but reminds to deal with caution regarding authorship.

- 2 Videos with political content disappeared from Hildmanns YouTube profile while his cooking and lifestyle content remains online.
- 3 The picture-sharing network Instagram also provides the function of live streams that can be up to 1 hour long.

They can both be accessed in real time by viewers and get posted for long-term access afterward. YouTube is the most famous online video-sharing platform since it was founded in 2005. On this website, one can upload videos or watch and comment the broadcast of others. By posting an Instagram life feed also on YouTube, it gets both conserved and transferred to a slightly different audience.

- 4 "Ich bin noch nicht gelöscht."
- 5 "Ich appelliere einfach wirklich nach wie vor an alle da draußen: bitte schaltet euer Gehirn ein und googelt doch einfach mal selber diese Themen."
- 6 "Bitte schalte den Verstand ein. Glaubt weder Verschwörungstheorie-Seiten, glaubt weder alles was in den öffentlich-rechtlichen Medien erzählt wird, sondern benutzt das Internet und recherchiert eigenständig. Gebt einfach Stichworte ein und lest."
- 7 "Ich will überhaupt nicht diesen Virus verharmlosen, aber hört auf Ihr hört... die Leute sollen aufhören, diese politischen Maßnahmen zu verharmlosen. Die Leute sollen aufhören, die Interessen hinter Corona zu verharmlosen."
- 8 "Die WHO fungiert aktuell als Weltregierung."
- 9 "Ich kann mir gut vorstellen, dass das auch, dass er [Gates] das auch bewusst steuert. So. Wir sehen auch aktuell die Finanz-, die Finanzflüsse zu Medien, zu diversen Instituten, zur WHO."
- 10 "Deutschland muss vernichtet werden."
- 11 "Während mich Yuden-YouTube löscht poste ich nur noch Videos auf Bitchute! Abonniert mich da ich denke ich bin morgen fertig mit dem Gates Video! Dieser Wichser!" Telegram Channel @ATTILAHILDMANN, August 20, 2020, 20:01 EST.
- 12 "An das deutsche Volk."
- 13 "Ich glaube, dass es ein Kriegsverbrechen war, und dass dieses Kriegsverbrechen, Deutschland zu vernichten, lange geplant war."
- 14 As Maica Vierkant shows, in German Neo-Nazism Churchill is imagined as an aggressive counterpart to Deputy Führer to Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Heß, whose flight to the United Kingdom is interpreted as a failed attempt to negotiate peace (2015, p. 278). German historian Barbara Manthe found out that a German Neo-Nazi group used an alleged Churchill quote, which was also used by Hildmann, as early as 2011 at a demonstration. But she also attests that the provenance of the alleged quote would remain the secret of this Neo-Nazis (2015, p. 258).
- 15 "Und genau wie Winston Churchill ist Merkel eine Kriegstreiberin."
- 16 "Merkels antideutsche, Deutschland feindliche Politik basiert nicht nur den Kaufman-Plan, sondern auch auf dem Hooton- und Kalergi-Plan. Mit dem Endziel, die deutsche Nation und das deutsche Volk zu vernichten."
- 17 "Deutschland, wach endlich auf. Der Feind regiert Dich. Merkel ist eine zionistische Jüdin von der B'nai B'rith -Geheimgesellschaft und sie hat den Auftrag von Rothschild bekommen, Deutschland für immer zu vernichten. Das dürfen wir nicht zulassen."
- 18 "Es gibt keine guten und keine bösen Juden. Es gibt nur Juden. Es heißt immer wieder, man muss unterscheiden: zwischen khasarischen Juden, also Khasaren, Zionisten oder Illuminaten. Das sind Täuschungsmanöver vom Juden. Diese Begriffe und Gruppierungen wurden erschaffen vom Juden."
- 19 "Die Juden erfanden dieses Holocaust-Märchen. Es gab keine industrielle Tötung von Juden. Die Gaskammern sind nicht existent. Mit Zyklon B konnte man keine Menschen umbringen. Es ist ein groteskes Märchen und erschuf einen Schuldskult. Und mit diesem Schuldskult ließ der Deutsche alles mit sich machen."

- 20 "Er ist der ewige Kriegstreiber gewesen."
- 21 "Die Juden kontrollieren schon immer die Finanzmärkte. Sie sind schon immer der Giftmischer gewesen, ob im Mittelalter bei den Brunnenvergiftungen oder den Ritualmorden an Kindern. Der Jude steckt hinter dem hinter dem Kindersex-Ring. Der Jude ist der Sadist und Satanist. Judentum ist Satanismus. Und. Der Jude gründete die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949 in der Villa Rothschild. Deutschland ist nicht Deutschland. Die BRD ist nicht Deutschland. Die BRD ist eine Judenrepublik, ein illegales Firmenkonstrukt, eine Pestbeule an Deutschland, eine Feindesherrschaft über Deutschland."
- 22 "Und es ist der Jude hinter dieser Lügenpandemie. Ihm gehören diese ganzen Impfstoffhersteller: Pfizer, Johnson&Johnson, Moderna. Alles in Judenhand. Er spritzt sich in Israel selber Placebo und alle anderen Völker sollen seine Giftspritze bekommen. Entweder zur Ermordung oder mit (unv.)-Technologie zur Sterilisation. Und diejenigen die über, übrigbleiben, sollen versklavt werden in seiner Jewish World Order."
- 23 "Die Juden kontrollieren fast jeden Lebensbereich von unserem Leben."

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9

RECONSTRUCTING AN ANTISEMITIC MEME ON SOCIAL MEDIA THROUGH OBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS

Hendrik-Zoltán Andermann and Boris Zizek

Introduction

“Times of crisis have always been heydays of hatred against Jews,” the former chairwoman of the Central Council of Jews Charlotte Knobloch said in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Röhmel and Wolf, 2020). Indeed, the pandemic has seen a significantly increased volume of posts and memes on social media transporting antisemitic content. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reports that with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus and the pandemic, antisemitic conspiracy myths experienced a new upswing, and antisemitic memes became more widespread (Cassen, 2020). Visual content is clearly trending in social media like Instagram, TikTok and Co. (Laestadius, 2017; Pennington, 2017), so it can be assumed that antisemitic content would be no exception. Much of this content is coded, which means it requires careful interpretation, but the awareness of understanding coded antisemitic content is sorely missing (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz, 2013, p. 58).

To what extent do these contemporary antisemitic illustrations and stereotypes have structural similarities with historical antisemitic illustrations and stereotypes? Are these antisemitic memes a completely new creation or are they simply a reapplication of existing patterns? What has changed in terms of antisemitism with the advent of social media? To answer these questions, a qualitative analysis of a contemporary antisemitic meme posted on social media will be carried out using the method of objective hermeneutics to check its evident and latent content. With this approach, we hope to make tangible and understandable the mechanisms and contents with which antisemitic visual illustrations operate. We assume that antisemitism is not only structurally and historically deeply rooted in societies, but also appears evident and latent in social media, even though the dissemination path, transmission range, and the associated effort that goes into these illustrations have taken on a new dimension.

Antisemitic Illustrations Past and Present

For many centuries, antisemitic stereotypes have been reproduced in society on the linguistic level (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinhartz, 2013, pp. 58–59), but also on a three-dimensional level, for example, in form of facades on churches (Krah, 2018, p. 298), which means that these patterns are ubiquitous and therefore anchored in the collective consciousness. These images are “firmly inscribed in the cultural memory of society and anchored to this day” (Krah, 2018, p. 293), whereby anti-Jewish stereotypes such as “usurers, moneyers, vengeful schemers, power-hungry conspirators, bloodthirsty child murderers and decomposers of societies” (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 33) continue to hold. These stereotypes have also found their way into the world of images, caricatures, and now memes, which continue to reproduce antisemitism in coded form.

Contemporary Antisemitic Illustrations

Antisemitism underwent a transformation after 1945, as it was forced to the margins in many societies and also became punishable (Krah, 2018, p. 305). Antisemitism was no longer socially acceptable in the broader circles in the same way that it was in previous centuries, since after the Holocaust there was a “public rejection of openly shown antisemitism” (Troschke and Becker, 2019, p. 152), especially in Europe. Antisemitic motifs can still be found regularly in newspapers and magazines, though not in every case directly and overtly related to Jews. An example of this is a caricature published in the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2014, which was supposed to represent Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook is depicted as an octopus with warts on its face as well as a long, crooked nose. This is clearly related to Mark Zuckerberg, who is of Jewish descent. As Franziska Krah has shown, the antisemitic content, such as that of the big nose, is thus still present in people’s minds (Krah, 2018, pp. 305–308). This looks no different with regard to cartoons about the financial market. Here antisemitic topoi such as fangs and big noses continue to be used (Krah, 2018, pp. 309–310). Again, there is no direct reference to Jews, but due to the use of antisemitic motifs and the reference to the financial market, we are dealing more directly with antisemitic content, though not explicit either. Another way in which such images are legitimized is through reference to the state of Israel. Thus, in references to the Israel–Palestine conflict or the Iranian nuclear deal, the Israeli side is shown in the guise of poisoners and monstrous figures, thus clearly making use of antisemitic motifs from history (Krah, 2018, pp. 314–316). This form of Israel-related antisemitism can also be found in German print media (Beyer, 2013) or in Arab media, for example. Jews are still often portrayed in the role of world rulers, child murderers, or bloodsuckers (Schwarz, 2005), and these antisemitic topoi are sometimes even openly expressed by heads of state such as by Turkey’s President Erdogan (Zeit Online, 2021).

Although the antisemitic depictions of the twenty-first century resemble their historical predecessors, there are also visual differences, and the conditions of communication have clearly changed, especially with the emergence of the internet and social media (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 48). Antisemitism is now present in many areas due to social media platforms, and has even spread on thematically distant websites, forums, and discussion groups (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 47; pp. 98–100). Against this background, it is worth taking a closer look at the significance of social media and the antisemitism present there. “Web 2.0 in particular has helped normalize antisemitism online” (Dietz and Rathje, 2020).

Antisemitic Memes on Social Media

The internet and social media have developed into an interactive space that has a complex impact on the daily lives of humans (Common Sense Media, 2015; Leven and Schneekloth, 2015; Turkle, 2016), in the private and public spheres (Zeller, 2017). The users are confronted above all with a large and ever-increasing number of visual images, be they pictures or videos (Pennington, 2017). Some of the social media platforms are exclusively visual, for example Instagram (Laestadius, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that it is widely reported that antisemitic memes are also increasingly spread on social media (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 9). Indeed, social media are by far the most important space for the spread of antisemitism today (Troschke and Becker, 2019, p. 151).

Visual forms of antisemitism appear in images, memes, gifs, and videos that are posted on social media (Troschke and Becker, 2019, p. 155). According to Krah and Schwarz, the dissemination of visual data is also related to the fact that images are easily remembered by the consumer and generally generate a strong and emotional effect (Krah, 2018, p. 293; Schwarz, 2005), because significantly more information can be obtained with an image than with a text message: A picture is worth a thousand words. Thus, emotional motives in antisemitism also play a major role for the creators of antisemitic posts (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz, 2013, pp. 297–298). The emotion of hatred, in particular, is often found in antisemitic content in social networks (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, pp. 112–113). The fast, unfiltered and multisensory communication on social media in particular enables users to move around in this space in a manner controlled by affect (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 48). A further complicating factor is that the creators and distributors of such antisemitic depictions “play” with motifs and sometimes hide them. They resort to packaging antisemitism in such a clever way that it is not noticeable to recipients at first glance (Troschke and Becker, 2019, pp. 153–154; p. 171). Indirect hints are made in the form of memes and pictures (Dietz and Rathje, 2020). Due to a flood of visual stimuli and the encryption used, there is no time for users to critically classify and process these images.

One such well-known antisemitic meme is that of the “Happy Merchant,” which appeared online for the first time in 2001. It combines many antisemitic

motifs and is used in the context of many antisemitic visual illustrations (<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/the-happy-merchant>).

Antisemitic Visiotypes

As already stated in the previous section, the creators of contemporary antisemitic illustrations often make use of a large spectrum of visual antisemitic stereotypes, so-called visiotypes. A particularly frequently used visiotype in antisemitic illustrations is the large, often hook-shaped or crooked nose, which is often used (Frankl, 2021, p. 115; Janáčová, 2021, p. 62). But also bulging lips (Janáčová, 2021, pp. 62–63) or large hands (Frankl, 2021, p. 99) that are rubbed with a malicious smile (Tarant, 2021, p. 254) are frequently used visiotypes. Frizzy or curly black hair is also often associated with Jews in antisemitic visuals (Janáčová, 2021, p. 73) as is a black beard (Tarant, 2021, p. 254). Many visiotypes also associate Jews with money lending or other capitalist business (Tarant, 2021, pp. 253–254; p. 268) and create a connection between Jews and greed.

Objective Hermeneutics as a Methodological Approach

The method of objective hermeneutics was developed by the sociologist Ulrich Oevermann in collaboration with his colleagues, who saw limitations in merely quantitative survey methods, especially for interpreting complexity (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008, p. 240).¹

The method of objective hermeneutics allows us to analyze a social action independent of the self-interpretation of the actors (Zizek and Andermann, 2020). Actions can thus be examined in their dynamic process structure and implicit meaning structure.

In objective hermeneutics it is assumed that the traces and protocols left by the practice of life have an expressive character (Zizek, 2012; Wernet, 2014). This means that the expressions and actions of the life practice reflect the attitudes of the respective individuals. On the basis of protocols, these statements and attitudes can then be reconstructed in a mode of action-relied, methodological understanding. With regard to antisemitic posts on social media, existing protocols can be used to determine which antisemitic stereotypes were used, even if they were used unintentionally or subconsciously.

Humans possess an intuitive knowledge of universal and culture-specific rules that create the scope for their actions. Actions are therefore the result of intuitive and rational selection processes. If one follows decisions made by the actor (be it an interviewee or an artist) over a certain period of time, one can sooner or later determine a characteristic of a selection from the scopes for actions, which is case-specific and called “case structure” (“Fallstruktur”). The reconstruction of case structures is the main task of objective hermeneutics. The notion of structure emphasizes that the choice is characteristic, not random, but based on case-specific dispositions. Objective hermeneutics follows five principles:

- I. Principle of freedom from context: At the beginning, the analysis must be interpreted in a context-free manner, so that neutrality and objectivity are preserved (Wernet, 2000, p. 21). To achieve this, it can be very helpful to interpret in small groups.
- II. Principle of literality: The sequences must be read in the manner in which they were written (Wernet, 2000, pp. 23–27). In the case of illustrations, only the existing image segment and its individual components are analyzed at the beginning.
- III. Principle of sequentiality: The text must be broken into meaningful sequences. Before the next sequence can be included in the analysis, the previous sequence must be fully considered and analyzed (Wernet, 2000, pp. 27–32). In the case of visual illustrations, this means dividing them into different image segments. Instead of chronological sequentiality, a hierarchical sequentiality applies to visual data (Oevermann, 2014; Zizek, 2017, p. 213; Zizek and Andermann, 2020).
- IV. Principle of extensiveness: Sequences have to be analyzed until all readings have been exhausted. This means that the sequence must be read in all imaginable, well-founded directions, and that every text or image element must be adequately viewed and analyzed. This must be done within a sequence until all potential readings are exhausted. Only then can the next sequence be added (Wernet, 2000, pp. 32–34). This rule is limited by the fifth principle.
- V. Principle of frugality: Only those readings may be taken into account that are not out entirely of the ordinary. This means that the reading must not be about case-specific, extraordinary occurrences. That means, it must be possible to obtain the reading from the raw data (Wernet, 2000, pp. 35–38).

Analysis of Antisemitic Illustration in Social Media

In the following, the functional principle of objective hermeneutics will be explained based on the analysis of an antisemitic meme (Figure 9.1) on social media.

Translation: “COVID-19 provides”; “Moshiach now”; “Never let a crisis go to waste!”; “antisemitic canard”; “Loot the treasury; “Martial Law!”¹²

The present illustration was sent to us by a colleague who discovered the picture on Facebook. The post is no longer present on Facebook, but this picture was saved for scientific analysis. An almost identical picture was published in an article in *Haaretz* from May 3, 2020 (Cassen, 2020). In the following, however, the image that was seen on Facebook is used. Facebook is a social network that was founded in 2004 and has enjoyed great popularity ever since. In 2020, Facebook had around 1.7 billion users. Users – be it private individuals, celebrities, companies, or institutions – can create a profile, share content with other people, and comment on other people’s posts. The content that is presented to the user is determined by an algorithm. How exactly the algorithm works is not clear. It is certain that it is not only based on the popularity and topicality of



FIGURE 9.1 Antisemitic illustration on a social media platform.

content, but also tries to determine which content could potentially be of interest based on the usage behavior of the user (Cooper, 2021).

Basic Idea, Format and Frame of the Picture

Before we can start analyzing the antisemitic meme, it is necessary to discuss the framework and the format. This is important to start analyzing in a controlled process. Especially when interpreting images, it is necessary to proceed a little differently than with text sources, since there is not an unequivocal chronology. We have to think about the hierarchization of the image. To do this, it helps to visualize which options are objectively available. By excluding the options that have not been selected, we can successively determine the significance of the design choices made.

With regard to the general design, there are two options. On the one hand, it is possible to display any image sources in the form of a portrait or landscape format. In the case of a portrait format, a single person or a single object is usually the central focus. The landscape format, on the other hand, is used to depict groups of people, for example, but also landscapes. The present illustration is in landscape format. At first glance, strong accentuation and the use of simple motifs can be seen. The picture is not overloaded with countless visual elements. What is striking is the depiction of a coronavirus-like object on the right side, a caricature-like exaggerated person on the left, and various lettering, whereas the background of the picture is red and blurry.

The picture presented here does not fit easily into a known type of image sources. It represents neither a familiar painting nor an advertising poster or photo nor a drawing. The illustration comes closest to a caricature, but due to

the equally photorealistic representation, this is only partially true. One can best speak of a kind of collage. The picture is not actually framed. Neither a logo nor a title that could be used for hierarchical classification can be found. There is also no signature of the artist. Since the caricature of the man does not fit into the rest of the photo-realistic image due to the drawing style, we begin our analysis with him.

Analysis of the Image Segments

The Left Half of the Picture ("the Jew")

Before the interpretation can begin, a description of the image segment must be carried out. This is followed by an interpretative characterization. However, this harbors the risk of duplication, which means that the description and the interpretative characterization cannot always be clearly distinguished (Zizek and Andermann, 2020). The figure of a man can be seen in the left half of the picture.² This stands out visually from the rest of the image, as it does not seem to fit in with the rest of the illustration, neither in terms of drawing style nor color. The first thing that is very noticeable about the picture is the person's large head, which takes up more than half of the figure, as well as the associated and very prominent sense organs, which are actually clearly overdrawn. This includes the seeing (eyes), smelling (nose), tasting (tongue/mouth), and feeling or grasping (hands) sense organs. This overdrawing is reminiscent of a caricature in which salient features are exaggerated in order to underline them. This is done often in the context of political caricatures, but also, for example, by street artists. The nose stands out especially, which is not only represented as very large, but also as very crooked. This is reminiscent of familiar antisemitic images.

The eyes of the person appear telescopic and literally "jump" out at an as yet unidentified object. It is a staring, surging cartoon-like gaze. The illustration of the eyes is reminiscent of the technical equipment used by jewelers, goldsmiths, watchmakers, and pawnbrokers to better identify small details on the objects under examination. Furthermore, many fine veins are clearly visible in the eye. That he looks very concentrated can also be seen in the wrinkles around his temple, as well as the veins on his forehead. It seems as if the person is looking with full concentration at an object, which seems to cast a spell over him. This could illustrate an exaggerated greediness or lewdness. However, what exactly this refers to in the present illustration cannot be determined by looking at the left image segment alone.

The figure's mouth is torn open. It reveals a few teeth that have gaps. Some of the teeth appear deformed and are pointed, so that these teeth can be described as unhealthy. This suggests that the person is unhygienic. The pointy teeth also have something grotesque about them. Predators, for example, have sharp teeth, illustrations of monsters are often shown with sharp teeth, which underline their danger. They show something animalistic. The lips appear somewhat bulged.

The figure's tongue is wavy, suggesting that it is probably moving in a lusty and ecstatic way, but it also resembles a snake's tongue.

The person pictured seems to be a bit older, which is indicated by his receding hairline, among other things. He also has a beard and frizzy hair, which in racist contexts is associated with people from the Middle East. Neither of these looks well-groomed, further emphasizing a certain lack of cleanliness. His figure is rather gaunt. His head is quite large, but his arms are relatively small. His shoulders are hunched and he is rubbing his hands. This is a gesture that indicates malicious pleasure or greed, similar to the saying: Rubbing your hands with glee. In this context one thinks, for example, of Mr Burns from "the Simpsons," with his exclamation "Excellent" when something went his way. The figure does not look strong and its proportions suggest that he does not have to work hard physically. The head can indicate that it is being used excessively, for example for thinking tasks and could indicate a certain cunning. On his head he wears a cap, but it is slightly removed. Similar to a character in cartoons, for example, when there is a surge. The cap is in the shape of a kippah. Since it is depicted together with the person, this allows the assumption that the depicted and strongly exaggerated figure is a Jew. The creator of the illustration establishes a connection between "being Jewish" and "being greedy." Further, the big nose and the frizzy hair are supposed to point to Jewishness. Between the cap and the person there is a little white background. It seems as if the construct of a stereotype Jew was copied hastily and uncleanly into the picture, as if the author had not taken special care with details.

At first glance it seems as though the person does not seem to have a body. However, a closer look reveals that the upper body is mounted on a round object, which is colored red-yellow and has suction cups or nubs. This illustration is similar to a virus. The person, which apparently illustrates an antisemitic image of a Jew, seems to form a unit with the virus due to the composition. It almost seems as if the Jewish person would arise from the object. His body would thus be a virus. The virus covers the area where his genitals would have to be, so that a connection is made between the sexuality of the person and the virus. Overall, the Jewish person is presented in a drastically negative way. It is not only associated with vermin, but even with a virus. Furthermore, an uncleanliness can again be seen in the composition of the collage: Parts of the back have not been completely retouched away, which also indicates that it was compiled with little care. All in all, the Jewish person, overloaded with antisemitic motifs, clearly turns to the right half of the picture with his posture and all his sensory organs. His object of desire is therefore located there.

The Right Half of the Picture ("the Virus")

Just like the person in the left half of the image, the object in the right half of the image is in the foreground and is not blurred. On the right half of the image, a round object with nubs or suckers in all directions can be seen, which appears

very strange, and which is visually very reminiscent of the virus segment of the torso. The object is red in color, though it has a yellowish glow to it, which could indicate that the image is being illuminated by something from all directions. Both colors are strong signal colors. For example, the color “yellow” is used in many danger signs (for radioactivity, for example) and “red” is also used as a signal color (prohibition signs, stop signs, traffic lights in road traffic).

Viruses are associated with disease and poor hygiene. It has no face, it lacks sensory organs in a certain way, which would make it undoubtedly recognizable as a living being. But it differs, due to its missing metabolism also from other living beings, so that viruses are generally not regarded as living beings. From an everyday perspective, the virus would not be considered “beautiful.”

When combining both objects of the image halves, it becomes clear that the “Jewish” person on the left half of the image is staring at the virus. Now it is also clear what his narrow eyes are jumping out of their sockets over: The virus. All sense organs, his greedy and lustful facial expression, the rubbing hands, point toward the virus. Colloquially, one could speak of lust for the virus. This seems surprising insofar as viruses, as already mentioned, are not objects of desire. They are associated with negative aspects (poor hygiene, epidemics, pandemics, illness, death). But the figure on the left clearly seems to see something positive about the virus. Based on the image segments and interpretations considered so far, the virus could presumably be viewed as a way of making money or as an instrument of power.

The Analysis of the Text Sequences

The illustration shows several text sequences. Since these are distributed over the entire image and no chronology can be recognized, it is necessary to look for another way of hierarchizing, as with the image segments. The sequence “COVID-19 gives” is particularly noticeable here, as it was created in a different font size and without quotation marks, whereas all other lettering is shown in quotation marks and is the same size. The lettering is also placed at the bottom left and thus also distinguishes itself from the others. It therefore acts like a signature. The other words appear to be separated from it.

COVID-19 Gives

COVID-19 is the factual name of the coronavirus, which led to a pandemic in 2020. The word “gives” indicates that something is being provided. For example, to give someone a letter. The question now arises what COVID-19 can provide. One expects things like “death,” “illness,” “restrictions,” “unemployment,” or “existential difficulties,” as these are associated with the coronavirus. However, if this sequence is brought into line with the illustrations already analyzed, this raises doubts due to the greedy representation of the person. The person’s facial expression and posture do not match this portrayal. Based on the previous presentation, COVID-19 should provide something positive. A first guess would be

a profit, for example. The COVID-19 pandemic caused huge losses for many people and companies, but there are also companies that have made a profit, for example online retailers like Amazon. How this gain looks exactly in relation to the antisemitic illustrated Jewish person cannot yet be clearly established at this point.

"Moshiach Now!"

The second text sequence is arranged at the top left. The word “Moshiach” comes from Hebrew and means “Messiah.” Hebrew usage also makes it clear that the person on the left is supposed to be a Jew. The waiting and arrival of a future Messiah is a very central element of Judaism. When adding the sequence “now,” it becomes clear that the coming of the Messiah is related to “now.” The Messiah has now appeared. Based on the quotation marks, this can be assigned as a verbatim speech. It could be the exclamation of the Jewish figure within the illustration. Based on the look at the virus and the previously analyzed sequence “COVID-19 gives,” the reading suggests that the COVID-19 virus is viewed here as a messiah. A connection is made between the greed of the person (his visual appearance) and Judaism (“Moshiach now!”). Therefore, a religious utopia is equated with a virus. This results in a devaluation of Judaism.

It is noticeable that Hebrew (“Moshiach”) and English (“now”) are mixed. The “now” is supposed to make it understandable to a broad target group, whereas the “Moshiach” should appear authentic, as if it were actually an exclamation made by a Jew. In a way, it is a stylistic device that the creator of the illustration uses to create false authenticity.

"Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste!"

The third text sequence is at the top right. “Never let a crisis go to waste!” means something like one should never let a crisis go without somehow benefiting from it. From an educational and socialization perspective, crises offer the opportunity to grow with them. But this understanding of crises contrasts with the understanding of crises within the present image: To use the crisis, but for one’s own profit and at the expense of others. The point here is not to solve a crisis or to face it, but to exploit it in order to make a profit from it. Not to waste it, but to use it to the maximum, which also indicates greed. The Jewish person in the picture is demanding that the COVID-19 crisis should not be left unused, but should be taken advantage of. For example, people can consolidate existing power structures, expand new ones, or draw a financial advantage from the crisis.

"...Antisemitic Canard"

“Canard” is a newspaper hoax. “Antisemitic canard” refers to rumors about Jews and Judaism that are antisemitic. The three dots before (...) could represent a

placeholder: "... is an antisemitic rumor." A defensive attitude is described here by the creator of the illustration in order to defend the image against allegations of bias. The three points make this seem arbitrary. In principle, anything can be used in place of it. It is therefore a general attempt at defense, an anticipation. With that exclamation, all accusations could be denied by saying "This is an antisemitic canard." The saying would therefore amount to a blanket defense against criticism, a general formula to protect oneself. Relating this to the illustration COVID-19 would give Jewish people a new argument to protect themselves using the defense mechanism of the "...antisemitic canard."

"Loot the Treasury!"

The expression "loot the treasury" refers to plundering a treasure, to enriching oneself with something, for example a state treasury. The word "loot" indicates a certain greed, an unjustified, violent, and uninhibited appropriation of a treasure. Linguistically, it corresponds with a robbery that is taking place. "Treasury" can refer to a treasury in general, but it can also refer to a treasury of a state. The quotation mark makes it an invitation or saying, "Plunder the treasury!" In conjunction with the COVID-19 reference, the illustration suggests that COVID-19 gives one the opportunity to tamper with treasures, that is, to enrich oneself from the state, for example, by selling or distributing products that are needed in a crisis. Usury would also be a possible reading here, in that these urgently needed products are sold at a higher price.

"Martial Law!"

Martial law is a state of affairs that is proclaimed in times of war or crisis on a particular scale. Its purpose is to enable a state to make decisions quickly in order to remain able to act in times of crisis. However, this goes hand in hand with drastic restrictions of civil rights and freedoms. As martial law has to be proclaimed by governments, a reference to a state is made here. Due to the strong constructed Jewish reference and the corona context in the illustration, the reading suggests that the Israeli state is being addressed here at the time of the pandemic, but other states are also conceivable at this point. Thus, COVID-19 makes it possible to restrict civil rights, which includes things like tracking and secret service methods. The proclamation of martial law in this context could indicate a financial and power calculation and thus strengthen an imaginary Jewish influence.

Conclusions of the Analysis

The antisemitic illustration is supposed to illustrate a Jewish person, which is particularly clear from the Hebrew word "Moshiach" and the kippah. But even without these two characteristics, an antisemitic context would have been very likely, which is related to the fact that it is overloaded with antisemitic topoi:

On the one hand, we have characteristics from national socialist racial theory, such as the big and crooked nose, bulging lips (Janáčová, 2021, pp. 62–63 or the frizzy/curly and black hair (Janáčová, 2021, p. 73). The stalk eyes, the rubbing hands (Tarant, 2021, p. 254), on the other hand, are supposed to emphasize his greed. There is a clear devaluation of his religion (virus and the pursuit of profit with him as the messiah), but also a devaluation of the Jew himself, who in this illustration is fused with the COVID-19 virus and thus the used zoomorphisms (the Jew as a pig, rat, or worm) (Schwarz, 2005; John, 2013, p. 332) even exceeds it significantly, at the same time also associates it with the spread of diseases.

Furthermore, the illustration conveys the message that Jews allegedly even use the COVID-19 virus to gain profit and influence, but also gives them an argument to defend themselves. This is also indicated by the incorporated text sequences. The Jew is clearly portrayed as the evil of the world in this image. In this antisemitic illustration, the Jew seems to form a unity with his drives. He makes profitable use of his instincts.

However, it is also noticeable that the image source is unclean. For example, it has not been carefully put together from an artistic perspective. One can clearly see that some picture elements have been copied in. For the illustration of the Jew, the antisemitic meme of the “Happy Merchant” was used. On the one hand, this was done to generate a high recognition value, but on the other hand also because it combines a multitude of antisemitic stereotypes and can thus be seen as a kind of universal code in antisemitic circles. Overall, it can be said that this illustration takes already existing antisemitic patterns and, with the help of applying new technical possibilities and referring to current crises (COVID-19 pandemic), creates new applications of old patterns in an “innovative” and “creative” way.

Contemporary Antisemitic Illustrations and Social Media

The analyzed antisemitic illustration is posted on Facebook in a time of crisis. This confirms what Charlotte Knobloch spoke of above. Jews are portrayed as beneficiaries of the crisis, who would exploit the situation for their own purposes and ruthlessly enrich themselves and thus harm the world. Many antisemitic stereotypes can also be found in the analyzed contemporary social media illustration: Be it physical characteristics such as that Jews have big crooked noses, bulging lips (Janáčová, 2021, pp. 62–63), black hair or character characteristics that Jews are seen as greedy capitalists and profiteers, or as vermin are illustrated. It also has in common that the Jew is portrayed as a kind of world ruler and evil of the world (Schwarz, 2005). But not all motifs are shown on the surface. Because antisemitism is socially ostracized in many societies. So other ways had to be found to create and disseminate such images, be it under the protection of anonymity on social media, the low penalties associated with it, or the hiding of such content behind codes.

The analyzed illustration above portrays the Jew as a greedy being, who made his greed his own and integrated these instincts into his character in a selfish,

but not self-destructive way. In the contemporary portrayal, the Jew seems to be at peace with himself. The author of the image is unknown. The social media image source does not have a signature and cannot be associated with the creator (at most with the user who shares this illustration on social media), which is the norm, not the exception, for images shared on social media. In addition, the technical possibilities that are available to the creators of such content have changed. Creators of social media illustrations use already existing visual images – like in this case the “Happy Merchant-Meme,” as well as a photo-realistic illustration of a virus), merge them, add individually adapted text sequences, and upload them within seconds to forums or social networks such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook or distribute them via instant-messenger services such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Telegram. Any social media user can create and share antisemitic illustrations with minimal effort, without having greater know-how or investing a lot of time in creating them, and spread them around the globe in seconds.

The analysis shows that familiar antisemitic motifs continue to be promoted in the twenty-first century and on social media. These images are rooted in people's thoughts. The antisemitic motifs work like memes (the contents of consciousness or thoughts). The programmer Richard Brodie wrote: “Once our brains evolved to the point where we could receive, store, modify, and communicate ideas, there suddenly appeared a new environment that had the two characteristics needed for evolution: copying and innovating” (Brodie, 2009, p. 65). This is exactly the way antisemitism works: Already existing information stored in the cultural memory of society is copied and, based on this, something new is created, but remains true to the old patterns. This is where social media come in, making it easier for users to “receive, store, modify and communicate” antisemitism. What is also new here is that some antisemitic motifs now remain hidden from the recipients and cannot be understood at first glance.

Conclusion

Antisemitic depictions have a continuity that has persisted over centuries. The antisemitic illustration analyzed in this chapter confirms a continuity with regard to already existing visual antisemitic stereotypes. The antisemitic associations of history continue to function in images found on social media today. It appears that this antisemitic content will also increasingly be created and disseminated in times of social upheaval. The antisemitic illustrations on social media platforms are often new usages of existing structural old patterns. On a cognitive level, these contents act like memes (Greek μίμησις). As our analysis of the coronavirus in the image shows, existing antisemitic templates and enemy images are used and applied to current society-changing phenomena and world-changing developments. A continuity can also be seen in the use of technical progress in order to create or further spread antisemitic illustrations. A significant difference that has been shown is the type of illustration and distribution. Despite the fact

that the contemporary antisemitic images can be created with little technical and time effort, they are nevertheless rich in obvious but – and this is an outstanding difference – also latent antisemitic associations and implemented skillfully and creatively. Visual content on social media has the effect that the artist can remain vague in his statements on the outside, although a very clear message is to be conveyed on the inside. There is “under-the-table-communication.” This can be a danger precisely because this impression can be burned into the recipient unnoticed. There is a risk that the impression of Jews as, for example, “child murderers” or “profiteers from crises” could gradually gain acceptance among people who actually do not consider themselves antisemitic.

It could be shown that in the visual medium the following contents can be disseminated in a similar ad-hoc perception and that the antisemitic illustrations fall back on existing stereotypes. On the one hand, traditional patterns of interpretation are obviously revealed, but, as we have shown, antisemitic images like this also play with latent patterns of interpretation. Similar to a Trojan horse, these creep into perception. Not all of this kind of social media content is immediately recognizable for the viewer, as it is sometimes coded and the users are also in a quick reception mode when they are on social media and do not have the time to notice or decipher these. This represents a great challenge in dealing with antisemitism on social media, because if the antisemitic content is not recognized straight away, it can cause damage. There is no real solution to this challenge. However, scholars can develop concepts on how to better recognize antisemitism. Filters for inappropriate content on social media apps, which already exist, could definitely be improved. But above all, people must be educated, especially children and adolescents, with the help of this knowledge and these approaches. The qualitative interpretation technique of objective hermeneutics represents a possibility to carefully decipher such content and its creation process by reconstructing it in a methodically controlled manner, making it tangible and thus revealing the functionality and mechanisms of antisemitic illustrations on social media.

The antisemitic social media image source analyzed here depicts the Jew as a virus and thus directly associates him with COVID-19. The notion of Jews as virus has remained and spread in people’s minds for millennia. It mutates over the course of time, adapts to new environmental conditions, and challenges the antibodies and the immune system of society by making use of new developments to accelerate its spread, but it keeps at its core the same structure, mechanisms, and danger. Social media provides the perfect breeding ground for this virus and helps to camouflage it.

Notes

1 The theory arose because the sociology of education was confronted with the problem of adequately representing the correlation between class specificity of parents and the school success of children. (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008, pp. 240–241).

- 2 Figure 9.1 was posted on Facebook. This figure is known from the field of internet memes and represents the so-called Happy Merchant. The image and user profile are not accessible anymore, because they were deleted. See a nearly identical figure: Cassen, F. (2020). ‘Jews Control Chinese Labs That Created Coronavirus’: White Supremacists’ Dangerous New Conspiracy Theory. *Haaretz*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-the-jews-control-the-chinese-labs-that-created-coronavirus-1.8809635> [Accessed 25 May 2021].

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10

NEW ANTISEMITISM ON TIKTOK

Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri

Introduction

In late 2020, a video using an antisemitic song about Jewish people being killed in Auschwitz emerged on TikTok. The song featured the lyrics: “We’re going on a trip to a place called Auschwitz, it’s shower time.” One video featuring the song showed a giant robot scorpion with a swastika attacking and gassing people. According to a study by the BBC, the video has already been accessed more than six million times worldwide, and the user posting it gained 12,000 new followers after posting the video (Tidy, 2020). Nearly 100 TikTok users also made use of the song with related graphics, gaining another half a million views.

TikTok was created in 2016 by ByteDance, a Chinese company, to let its users upload 15-second videos which are often lip-synched, combined with an assortment of creative features and interactive formats. Within just two years, TikTok has challenged leading companies like YouTube, Facebook, Netflix, and Snapchat with more than 1.2 billion downloads in 150 markets worldwide, and 75 languages.

TikTok has become the fastest-growing app, and today it is one of the most popular applications in the world. It is most widespread among children and teenagers who use it daily and spend numerous hours on this platform every day. But TikTok has its dark sides: TikTok users are exposed to a variety of extremist content, racist postings, calls for attacking minorities, ethnic groups, people of color, Muslims, and Jews, as well as postings sharing neo-Nazi propaganda. TikTok’s Terms of Service officially do not permit people under 13 years to use it, but many of the users shown in the videos are clearly younger. The combination of popularity, exposure, and openness of the TikTok platform clearly made it attractive to many extremist, racist, and radical groups, including neo-Nazi and antisemitic individuals and groups (Weimann and Masri, 2020). This study

examines the antisemitic postings on TikTok, using a systematic content analysis of the videos, the comments, the texts, and the usernames.

TikTok's Audiences and Contents

Within three years, TikTok acquired over 1.2 billion active users (The 20 Biggest TikTok Statistics: Key Facts, Figures & Data [2021], 2021). In the first quarter of 2020 alone TikTok had more than 315 million downloads in the App Store and Google Play, more than any other app ever in a quarter (Chapple, 2020). The latest TikTok statistics show that as of January 2021 the app has 689 million monthly active users worldwide and an additional 600 million monthly active users in China alone. TikTok has attracted mostly the younger generation: 41% of users are between the ages of 16 and 24 (Beer, 2019). Among these young TikTok users, 90% are using the app daily.

TikTok's mission, as declared by the company, is "to capture and present the world's creativity, knowledge, and precious life moments, directly from the mobile phone. TikTok enables everyone to be a creator, and encourages users to share their passion and creative expression through their videos." Indeed, what makes TikTok's success is that practically anyone, even young children, can become a content creator and provider due to the simplicity of using this app. That is one of the main reasons for its impressive appeal to so many young users around the world. However, TikTok's success among the younger generation could also be explained by the fact that the app designers decided to choose youngsters as their preferred target audience from the very beginning. By using a short video clip format, TikTok is aimed at children and teenagers with a short attention span. The app also promotes creativity with its wide range of special effects and editing options. In addition, because of TikTok's algorithm, it is easier to go viral on this platform compared with other social media platforms (Leander and Burriß, 2020). With children and teenagers as their preferred target audiences, TikTok creators matched the preferences and habits of this age group, thus creating a platform that gives their young audiences exactly what they want, letting them express themselves by singing, dancing, and using their favorite music.

The New Antisemitism

The basic foundations of antisemitism were classically recognized in Theodor Adorno's definition:

This ideology [of antisemitism] consists ... of stereotyped negative opinions describing the Jews as threatening, immoral, and categorically different from non-Jews, and of hostile attitudes urging various forms of restriction, exclusion, and suppression as a means of solving 'the Jewish problem.'

(Adorno et al., 1950, p. 71)

In the past, antisemitism has taken many forms but key themes have persisted throughout history and are being “repackaged” as “new” antisemitism on new media platforms. The commonality among antisemitic themes is a manufactured fear of perceived Jewish power and the need to defend against it. However, historians, sociologists, and political scientists have warned about the emergence of a “new antisemitism” in the twenty-first century. It is a repackaging of historic antisemitic tropes presented by extremists from the far-right and the far-left, from neofascists, racists, anarchists, xenophobic groups, anti-immigrants, and more.

This new antisemitism is also a fusion of antisemitism and anti-Zionism to facilitate the dehumanization and demonization of Jews, individually and collectively. Thus, “old” antisemitic stereotypes, terms, and defamations are recast in contemporary political terms, presenting Israel and Zionism in terms historically used to demonize and vilify Jews. Thus, the “new antisemitism” is defined as antisemitism that is directed toward Israel as a Jewish collective.” In the important modern redefinition of antisemitism, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) formulated a working definition (Porat, 2011; Wieshaider, 2019). This definition was also adopted by the International Holocaust remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In particular, the EUMC-IHRA definition provides several attributes of the fusion of old and new antisemitism:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion
- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective, such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews
- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust)
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor
- Applying double standards by requiring of Israel a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis

- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

With the rise of the internet and, in particular, social media, these theories have taken on new life as antisemites now have new ways to spread their propaganda and connect with others who share their views. While the internet has made it easier to find information that dispels myths and conspiracy theories, it has also made it easier for those who traffic in conspiracies to find followers and create echo chambers that affirm and reinforce those conspiracies. One of the recent and maybe most alarming trends is the use of TikTok.

The Rise of Antisemitism on TikTok

TikTok has become a magnet and a hotbed for violent and extremist content, with its predators exploiting the platform's young user base and lax security to prey on the vulnerable. The hate speech material on TikTok is varied, including mostly neo-Nazi, antisemitic, and racist contents. The hate speech postings on TikTok largely went unnoticed until December 2019, when *Motherboard* reported that it had found examples of "blatant, violent white supremacy and Nazism," including direct calls to kill Jews and black people (Cox, 2018). Some postings verbatim read "kill all n*****," "all Jews must die," and "killn*****" (the words are uncensored on the app). One video, for example, contained a succession of young users making the Nazi salutes. Another TikTok video included the note, "I have a solution; a final solution," referring to the Holocaust. Some postings include 1488, a reference to two 14-word slogan "we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children," originated with American white supremacist David Eden Lane, and the 88 standing for HH or Heil Hitler.

More and more videos containing antisemitic agitation or Holocaust denial are being disseminated on TikTok. According to Wheatstone and O'Connor (2020), some posts "feature sickening antisemitic taunts – with cartoons depicting Jewish men with large noses and joking about the Holocaust receiving hundreds of likes and comments." In one video, racist sketches of characters labelled "A Sneaky Jew" and "Mega Jew" are followed by antisemitic statements that Jewish people control the media, the financial sector, and the government.

In one disturbing clip, a TikTok user "duets" – a term describing posting a video reply shared with an original, innocent post – presenting a young man opening an oven door and pointing inside. It relates to the death camps like Auschwitz, in which millions of Jews were gassed to death and cremated in large ovens by the Nazi executioners. One TikTok user commented: "You have to put a trail of coins for them to follow." Another, appearing to cast doubt on the six million Holocaust death toll, said: "I myself have been gassed over 6,000,000 times!!!" In another video, a young man drinks a milk-like liquid. As he complains about the strange taste, a friend explains to him that he had just poured Anne Frank's ashes from a container into his drink. The TikTok

user with the profile name “bigmacdaddywac” received 1.3 million likes with it. Another TikTok user shows a suntanned young man exiting a shower, set to happy music. One person labelled as “Auschwitz guard” looks at him surprised. This is designed to suggest that concentration camp prisoners were treated well – a clear trivialization of the Shoah and its victims. In late April 2020, two Minnesota high school students were criticized for sharing a video titled “Me and the boys on the way to camp,” which photoshops them dancing in a Nazi boxcar and happily skipping into Auschwitz. These anecdotal findings suggest the need for an empirical, systematic, and objective study of TikTok’s use for antisemitic propaganda, incitement, and hate.

Method

The research question guiding our project was: According to the Antisemitism definition of the IHRA, what kind of antisemitism can be found on TikTok? Our first study on hate speech, violent extremism, and antisemitism was conducted in 2020 (Weimann and Masri, 2020, 2021). The method developed, tested, and applied in our 2020 study was employed again for the present study, allowing for comparison of changes and trends over time. The present study was conducted for four months (February–May 2021) and its findings allowed us to monitor changes, especially after TikTok’s declarations in 2020 that it will remove all antisemitic postings (Levine, 2020).

To scan TikTok for antisemitism, we applied a systematic content analysis. The first stage involved searching for posts (video clips posted), comments (texts written by viewers, following the video clip), hashtags, and usernames relating to Judaism and antisemitic beliefs. Some of the leading keywords used for data collection include Jew, Jewish, Jews, antisemitic, antisemitism, holocaust, dancing Israeli, six million, and 109 countries (the number 109 is white supremacist numeric shorthand for the antisemitic claim that Jews have been expelled from 109 different countries). These keywords are a combination of generic terms, some of which are associated with antisemitic conspiracy theories. According to TikTok (Discover and search, 2021), when searching for a specific term, “the first few videos on hashtag pages are the videos that started the trend and other popular videos that are relevant to the trending hashtag.” This required scrolling to the bottom of the search results to find antisemitic postings. These terms enabled us to find users who posted antisemitic hate content which would not have been captured by searching for these keywords as they were image-based, such as memes and videos which did not contain captions making them unsearchable. The antisemitic postings on TikTok yielded numerous comments: We scanned 56,916 comments responding to the antisemitic postings. In addition to searching for posts and comments, we also searched for usernames with the same keywords. TikTok users identify themselves in two ways, either through a user handle (@johnsmith) or a display name that appears on their profile such as “John Smith.”

Findings

Our scan of TikTok postings revealed a total of 61 antisemitic postings (a rise of 41% when compared to our 2020 scan, see Table 10.1). More alarming was the growing frequency of antisemitic comments on TikTok, rising from 41 in 2020 to 415 in 2021 (an increase of 912%). We also found a sharp increase in usernames with antisemitic titles (e.g., “@holocaustwasgood” or “@eviljews”), rising from only 4 in 2020 to 59 in 2021 (an increase of 1,375%).

Analysis of Antisemitic Posts

In our study, we found 61 TikTok postings with attributes relating to the IHRA working definition of antisemitism. An additional 28 postings were not antisemitic in nature. However, they were either posts highlighting antisemitism in the world, such as videos of antisemitic attacks, or videos of Holocaust survivors which received numerous antisemitic comments. Looking at the various attributes of antisemitic contents according to the categories of the IHRA definition, we found 34 posts relating to

Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.

These posts contained several antisemitic memes, including the “Happy Merchant,” a meme illustrating a drawing of a Jewish man with a greatly stereotyped face who is greedily rubbing his hands together. Other posts included videos of religious Jews dancing captioned “Jews getting lit, knowing they basically own the media.” Another meme that depicted someone celebrating was captioned “me waking up every day knowing that antisemitism is on the rise.” In another post, a user was asked “did a Jewish girl reject you?,” the user responds in the video saying “never, ever make goblin babies with those big hooked nose” before cutting out.

Additionally, we found 11 posts relating to “Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices

TABLE 10.1 Change of Antisemitic Postings on TikTok 2020–2021

	2020	2021	Change
Antisemitic postings	43	61	+41%
Number of antisemitic comments	41	415	+912%
Antisemitic usernames	4	59	+1375%

during World War II (the Holocaust).” One post included a video where a man being interviewed refers to the Holocaust as being “imaginary.” Another meme posted states: “it is possible it happened. But, not 6 million,” this post was captioned “happy holocaust day.” Another post is a video of Nick Fuentes, a far-right podcaster who has been described by the FBI as a “white supremacist” who states, “I think my math is wrong” with the user captioning the post as “6 billion? 6 trillion?”

A further ten posts were found relating to “[a]ccusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.” These posts are related to the conspiracy theory that Jews have been expelled from 109 different countries. One post featured a clip of Nathaneal Kapner, who the ADL describes as an “anti-Semitic provocateur” (Despite YouTube Policy Update, Anti-Semitic, White Supremacist Channels Remain, 2021), who states that “I mean Jews have been kicked out of 109 countries, 110 is a good round number.” Three more posts were found relating to “[c]alling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.” In one post, a user responds to a comment he received which states that “[t]he only thing I liked about Hitler he was doing a great job with Jewish people.” three posts were found relating to “[a]ccusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.” One post, entitled “Homemade pizza recipe” is a cartoon about making six million pizzas in four ovens, where one of the characters states: “we could say we made the pizzas, but we’ll need to make organizations to enforce the fact that we made the pizzas … and we should also make it a crime to even question if we made the pizzas and we’ll also need some TV channels and constant Hollywood films to remind everyone that we made the pizzas,” suggesting that the Holocaust was invented.

Analysis of Antisemitic Comments

Within four months in 2021, we found 415 comments containing one or more of the antisemitic attributes of the IHRA working definition. Of these, 136 comments were “[c]alling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.” In particular, the notion that Jews are conspiring to establish control over the world, the media, industry, and government was expressed repeatedly. Comments included “Jews own all media,” “the Jews are running the world and destroying other countries,” “they control the media and all worldwide governments. They are no good parasites,” and “Jewish people are the most over-represented group in all circles of power. But keep pretending you’re horribly prosecuted [sic] lmfao.” Several other comments referred to the conspiracy theory that the Rothschild family have used their money to control global financial institutions. One comment stated that “Rothschild are Jewish they run the world,” and “the UK got

tricked by the Rothschild [wink face emoji] we don't trust Juda [nose emoji and laughing face emoji]."

In addition, we found 125 comments relating to "calling for, aiding or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a racial ideology or an extremist view of religion." Most comments related to calls for another Holocaust such as "I'll put all of em back in the shower give em flash backs," "I love to see Zionist Jews g[e]t slaughtered," "bring back the Holocaust," "we need another Holocaust," "Jews are kind of people who should not exist," "the world would be better place without Jews," and "death to the ones with a hooked nose." Several comments also referred to Hitler, including "Fu** Jews fly high Hitler I will always respect you for slaughtering the Jews." One user posted a video of an antisemitic attack in which an orthodox Jew from London was chased with a stick. Comments left on this post included "I don't see a problem in this video," "so what they deserve it," "I'm Italian from New York ... beat them in the hine," "smack him," "slaughter them like sheep dirty f*** Jews," "Christian here, and I say shoot him," "good – these Jewish are f****ing trouble makers," and "finish them all off."

We found 54 comments relating to "Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel." For example, "aw poor wittle Jew is such a victim, it's not like you literally have a ethnostaate," "I remember the Palestinians in Gaza who were sniped cold blooded by Jews for being Palestinian teens," and "brother until you stop Jewish atrocities people will never accept and sympathise with the holocaust. It is hypocritical." One video posted on TikTok was a clip from a UN speech on Jewish Refugee Day in 2019 where Hillel Neuer asked Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and other countries "Where are your Jews?" This post received comments such as "the Jews went to go steal Palestinian land and murder innocent women and children," "all the yids have gone to Israel because Zionist make wars by deception and tell Jews to go to Israel as if it aint safe for them. Lying yids," and "Where are the Jews? They moved to Israhell to practise apartheid and cry with crocodile tears."

A further 42 comments were found "[d]enying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g., gas chambers), or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust)." Most of these comments claim that the Holocaust was invented and claim that legitimate accounts of the Holocaust are works of propaganda.

On Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27, 2021, TikTok populated the app with "educational videos about the Holocaust, the Jewish community and anti-semitism today" (Kanter, 2021). TikTok boasted that

when a UK TikTok user first opens the app, they will find at the top of their For You feed an educational video featuring Robert Rinder, as well as our top creators, to encourage our community to access the new educational resources and learn more about Holocaust Memorial Day.

The new resources include Lily Ebert BEM sharing her story of surviving Auschwitz-Birkenau. (*Ibid*)

The video by Robert Rinder received comments such as “it never happened,” “Holocaust never happened,” “What does Jews in the Holocaust and Pikachu have in common? They r both ashes” (Pikachu is one of the characters from the video game Pokémon). The video of Lily Ebert, a Holocaust and COVID-19 survivor received similar comments “yo I think we were in the same camp bro” and “burn.” Other videos of Holocaust survivors received the following comments, “cannot see 6 million,” “holocaust is like 9/11 it was made to happen,” “if the gas chambers at Auschwitz were real, how come the holes used to inject the gas were installed after the war,” “most holocaust survivors are hoaxers,” and “holocaust is the biggest lie in century.” However, these videos also showed that many people did not know that six million Jewish people were killed in the Holocaust, such as “is this true” and “I only know 6 mill died cuz of TikTok.”

An additional 42 comments were found “[a]ccusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.” The majority of these comments referred to the term “dancing Israeli’s,” a myth that Jews were responsible for the 9/11 attacks arguing that multiple people reported religious Jews dancing and throwing parties throughout New York City following the attacks. One user commented on a video about a Holocaust survivor stating:

I am educated a lot and the only terrorists I mentioned are Jews the biggest terrorists in the world as well as the biggest war criminals in the world ... they also blew up the world trade centers, there the biggest terrorists in the world they kill and rape women and little girls in Palestine.

Other comments included “I’d like to see some evidence pointing to Jews being guilty for the Holodomor,” suggesting that Jews were responsible for the 1932–1933 famine in Soviet Ukraine. Another user commented on a post arguing that “Jews spread the virus” referring to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further six comments were found “accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.” These comments tend to refer to the popular myth that Jews control the media and Hollywood, enabling them to invent/exaggerate the Holocaust. For example, “Holocaust is like 9/11 it was made to happen” and “fun fact Holocaust never happened, they rebuilt the buildings, its fake with crisis actors.”

We found six comments “[d]enying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.” For example, “yea I support Israel...if the Jews disappeared,” “there was never a Jewish state and will never be one,” and “Jews don’t deserve a homeland.” Moreover, six comments found were about “[d]rawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.” Examples of these comments

include “Israhell is a criminal illegitimate enterprise composed to Nazi-like criminal Zionist that have inflicted horrific crimes against the Palestinians,” “Zionist Nazi apartheid society,” and “Israel is a racist genocidal mass murdering holocaust nation.”

Antisemitic TikTok Usernames

In our study, we also found 59 user handles and names associated with antisemitism. Of these, 21 names were categorized under the IHRA working definition of

Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective – such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.

These names included “@antisemeticandproud,” “@violentantisemite,” “@eviljews,” “@thejewsrundmedia,” and “@jewdestroyer88.” Several of these names included the far-right numerical code of “88,” which is the white supremacist numerical code for “Heil Hitler.” We found 18 names that were categorized under “Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g., gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).” These names included “@holocaust.was.a.pr.stunt,” “@holocaustfake,” and “@holocaust.is.fake.” Additionally, we found 18 names that we categorized under “accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.” These names included “@jews_did_9_11,” “@jewscursed911,” and “@jewscursedvietnam.” A further six names were characterized as “[c]alling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.” These included “@jewgasser88,” “@jewdestroyer1939,” and “@holocaustwasgood.” One account named “@holocaust_hype_house” a reference to houses where Gen-Z TikTok influencers live together and create TikTok videos had a bio entitled “let’s gas the jews.”

Although this study is not based on a representative sample, the findings are alarming: Within one year there is sharp increase in all measures used to analyze antisemitism on TikTok. There were more postings, more comments, and more usernames with antisemitic contents. The trend is clear and alarming, especially when considering the young audiences of TikTok. The antisemitic contents combine both “old” and “new” attributes of antisemitism. Thus, in addition to the “classical” attribute of Holocaust denial or stereotypical allegations about the power of Jews as collective, we also find the newer attributes of blaming

Israel for atrocities and comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis. These messages may be more powerful to young, gullible, naïve, and less-informed recipients, as most TikTok audiences are.

Conclusions

In recent years the TikTok app has spread like a digital wildfire, getting over 1.2 billion new users, mostly very young children and teenagers. The 2021 TikTok statistics show that the platform has 689 million monthly active users worldwide. This success is extraordinary, bearing in mind that the platform was introduced only in 2016. However, TikTok has also become a powerful magnet for various malicious predators, including racists, paedophiles, neo-Nazis, white supremacy groups, terrorists, and violent extremists (Cox, 2018a; 2018b; Feuer, 2019; Weimann & Masri, 2021). These predators are exploiting the app's young and gullible audiences and the sloppy regulation to prey on the vulnerable. Our scans of TikTok's postings and comments in 2020 and 2021 revealed the alarming number of postings of antisemitic content in various forms, including texts, symbols, songs, gestures, videos, jokes, caricatures, and more. Moreover, we found evidence of the use of all the attributes of old and new antisemitism: While numerous postings are related to the classical stereotypes of Jews, the new antisemitism is revealed in attacks on the Israeli state, its existence, and its conduct.

These findings come during growing calls for tighter and stiffer regulation of social media. TikTok claims on its homepage that it is “raw, real, and without boundaries.” But the lack of boundaries combined with the growing success of this platform make it an ideal virtual home for hate speech and extremist content. While similar issues were raised regarding other social media, TikTok's distinctive attributes make it more worrying. First, unlike on other online social media platforms, TikTok's users are almost all young, mostly children and teenagers who are more naïve and susceptible when it comes to malevolent content (Statista, 2021). Second, TikTok is owned by a Chinese company and therefore less open to regulation, public pressure, and measures to defend their users from hateful, violent, and dangerous content. However, TikTok's own Terms of Service state that users may not

- intimidate or harass another, or promote sexually explicit material, violence or discrimination based on race, sex, religion, nationality, disability, sexual orientation or age; or
- post any material which is defamatory of any person, obscene, offensive, pornographic, hateful or inflammatory;
- any material that would constitute, encourage or provide instructions for a criminal offence, dangerous activities or self-harm;
- any material that is deliberately designed to provoke or antagonize people, especially trolling and bullying, or is intended to harass, harm, hurt, scare, distress, embarrass or upset people;

- any material that contains a threat of any kind, including threats of physical violence;
- any material that is racist or discriminatory, including discrimination on the basis of someone's race, religion, age, gender, disability or sexuality.¹

Our two studies have consistently found TikTok unable or unwilling to impose its own terms of service. Moreover, the special attributes of TikTok open this app to alarming venues for spreading hate and abuse while evading detection. TikTok's unique algorithm poses additional problems: This algorithm offers "more of the same content" to users, based on their viewing. Thus, it can drive users who unintentionally see distressing content to get and see more. So once a user has been exposed to one extremist video, the likelihood that he/she will be presented with much more similar content is very high, due to the way the algorithm works. During our research, we were flooded with directions to antisemitic postings on TikTok: The application's algorithm certainly identified us as interested audiences for such material.

Our findings, based on a very limited database of two studies, revealed a sharp increase in all types of antisemitic attributes, both old and new ones. Within four months in 2021, we found 415 antisemitic comments, an increase of almost 1,000% when compared to the same four months in 2020. These alarming trends call for future research that will continue the monitoring of TikTok and expand the database. Moreover, while our studies focused on the contents only, future research should look at the impact, that is, conduct reception studies among TikTok's viewers. Are these young and more naïve users accepting the repetitive anti-Jewish stereotypes? Do they see them as legitimate?

Finally, TikTok was informed about our 2020 study and similar studies by other scholars. In response to growing criticism, TikTok announced in October 2020 that the company "will be revising its policy in regard to hateful content, including Holocaust denial and antisemitism." TikTok also announced that it is "expanding the range of hate content that it will ban from the network." Yet, as our 2021 findings indicate, despite these declarations and published cases of several items' removal, antisemitic postings are still displayed and shared on TikTok, and there are now even more than a year ago. This may be the result of a combination of factors, including the general growth of online antisemitism on social media, the growing sophistication of the users posting hateful content online (Weimann and Ben Am, 2020), and the impotence of TikTok's search and removal efforts.

Note

¹ TikTok Terms of Service, last modified February 2019. Available at: <https://www.tiktok.com/legal/terms-of-use?lang=en>. Accessed May 12, 2021.

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11

THE IMPACT OF ANTISEMITIC CONTENT AND HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUNG JEWISH SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Quint Czymbmek

Introduction

In recent years, the spread of antisemitism on social media is becoming more and more virulent. A linguistic study of antisemitism on the internet in which antisemitic comments in Web 2.0 (social media) were analyzed over a period from 2007 to 2018 revealed that antisemitism on social media is increasing and becoming more radical. “Web 2.0 is currently the primary transmission site and multiplier for the spread of antisemitic content” (Schwarz-Friesel, 2020, p. 16, see also Becker, 2020, p. 49; Dietz and Rathje, 2020).¹ This finding is supported by a survey among young Jews about their experience with antisemitism. The study “Young Jewish Europeans: perceptions and experiences of antisemitism,” in which young Jews in 12 EU -member states were asked about their experience of antisemitism points out that most respondents experience antisemitism on the internet. “Young Jewish Europeans are likely to point to the internet and social media as the context in which antisemitism is most problematic today, and where an increase can most be seen in recent years” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019, p. 21).²

Jews and Jewish institutions are being harassed, insulted, and threatened on social media platforms.³ Antisemitic harassment on social media itself can severely impact Jewish social media users. Apart from trying to influence like-minded people, antisemitic speech “aims at the cognitive and emotional vulnerability of humans (as victims of insulting and stigmatizing use of language)” (Schwarz-Friesel, 2013, p. 145). It can also have a negative impact on one’s identity and self-esteem, which could lead a person to decide to hide their Jewish identity (cf. Melo, 2020, p. 11) or withdraw from social media platforms. Against this backdrop, this chapter sheds light on the impact of antisemitism on three Jewish social media users, with the aim to provide a broader understanding of the factors

that matter in the individual perception of and reaction to antisemitism on social media platforms. The following research questions structure the analysis: (I) How is antisemitism on social media platforms perceived by Jewish social media users? (II) How does antisemitism on social media affect them and their security on social media platforms? (III) What are their coping and counter-strategies, and how are they using social media to combat antisemitism?

Three interviews with Jewish social media users were conducted in German and translated by the author. The respondents were contacted through emails to Jewish organizations. Two respondents are active in Jewish student organizations (I1 and I3), and one works for a Jewish organization that combats antisemitism (I2). The analysis differentiates between the experience of antisemitism in the private life of the respondents and the antisemitism that they are facing as members of Jewish organizations. In addition to information about their personal experience, I2 also provided information about the spread of antisemitism on social media in general from a professional perspective. The interviews were conducted online via video telephony. They were semi-standardized and open-ended in order to be open to the topics of the respondents. Mainly four topic areas were discussed in the interviews: (1) personal use of social media, (2) perception of antisemitism on social media, (3) reactions and counter-strategies against antisemitism on social media, and (4) opinions about political and societal reactions to antisemitism on social media. The topics were initiated with an open question to evoke an open narrative by the respondents. Then several follow-up questions were asked to gather further information on the topics. Using Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2014) and the Software QCAmap, the interviews were analyzed to determine key categories that play an important role in how the respondents are affected by antisemitism on social media. In the following sections, the results of the analysis of the interviews are presented and hereafter the categories which derived from the interviews will be put together to identify key factors in the perception of antisemitism.

Use of Social Media by the Respondents

To understand how the respondents perceive antisemitism on social media, it is important to outline how they make use of social media, how they present themselves on the platforms, and how much private information they share with other users (see Table 11.1).

I1 started using social media as a child for the purpose of socializing with friends and self-expression. Because of a physical antisemitic attack in her childhood, she feared to be exposed as a Jew, so she did not reveal her Jewish identity on social media and also maintained distance from Jewish organizations and institutions. “I did not want to be marked as a Jew and I did not want to receive antisemitic insults” (I1). During her university studies she became active in Jewish activism, especially in a Jewish student organization, and she started using her social media accounts to inform her followers about antisemitism and Judaism. The activity in the Jewish student organization empowered her to go

TABLE 11.1 Information on the Respondents and Use of Social Media

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>I1</i>	<i>I2</i>	<i>I3</i>
Gender	Female	Male	Female
Age group^a	20–29	30–39	20–29
Private use of social media	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter	Twitter, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Use of social media in context of Jewish organizations	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook	Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram	–
Extent of social media usage	Very active on social media privately and in the context of her Jewish student organization	Not much private activity but much activity in the context of his work	Sporadic use of social media depending on the amount of free time

^aAge group estimated.

public as a representative of her organization. She mainly uses Instagram, but also Twitter and Facebook. She would consider herself a “Jewish representative” (I1-80) for her non-Jewish followers and states that she is often asked by them specific questions about Judaism. On her private accounts she is using her real name. In her activity for a Jewish student organization, she is very active in the social media team and is managing the social media channels of the organization. On her private accounts she writes many posts on antisemitism and on Judaism. For example, she states that she posted on Instagram about an attack against a rabbi because she had the feeling that many of her non-Jewish friends did not notice the attack at all. Her aim is to raise awareness about antisemitism especially for her non-Jewish followers and educate them about Judaism.

I2 started using social media like ICQ and an “alternative community platform” (I2) in his youth to socialize with friends. Later he started using Twitter mainly for journalistic reporting and Instagram to show photos. He does not use his real name on social media. In general, he is suspicious about the security on social media and does not even use the private messengers on the platforms. I2 works at an organization that monitors and combats antisemitism online. He is responsible for managing the social media accounts at his work. On his private accounts he makes sure that he cannot be identified as Jewish. He posts regularly on memorial days for the victims of National Socialism but states that this does not give away his Jewish identity.

I3 began using social media for socializing with friends and for self-expression. She states that from the beginning of her usage of social media accounts she posted content on Judaism. With the beginning of her university study, she

became active in a Jewish student organization. She states that she started using Twitter to gather information on antisemitism and to be able to intervene against antisemitic incidents. She says she recognized that the continuing preoccupation with antisemitism is stressful for her, and she decided to create other social media accounts for different interests. On her main accounts she is using her real name. Since the beginning of her usage of social media she has posted about Judaism. As a teenager she made posts on Jewish holidays and participated in photo campaigns about Judaism and Zionism. She uses her social media accounts to educate people about antisemitism and raise awareness about this topic.

Experience of Antisemitism on Social Media

The respondents are encountering antisemitism on social media on different occasions. They talk about direct antisemitic harassment against themselves, harassment against other Jewish users in the form of antisemitic comments under their social media posts, antisemitic comments against Jewish organizations, and undirected antisemitic comments on social media accounts of Jewish users and organizations. It is apparent that from the impact antisemitic speech has on the respondents, direct antisemitic insults and threats against them or other Jewish users are seen as more shocking than unspecific antisemitic posts.

Direct Antisemitic Attacks

Being harassed directly on social media can have severe consequences for the attacked. Especially when the harassment goes on over a long period of time, and when there are many attackers, the people who are targeted by these attacks are likely to retreat from the platforms. Those attacks can “have real consequences on the life of these persons that are similar to those of victims of violence” (Rasul, 2021, p. 304). But also isolated insults and threats that are directed at one person can be very distressful for that person.

I1 never experienced direct antisemitism directed against her on her social media accounts but was subjected two times to antisemitic insults and threats on the dating apps Lovoo and Tinder by her chat partners after she rejected them. On Lovoo the chat partner wrote very explicit antisemitic comments, for example, that he is proud to be an antisemite and expressed that he regrets that not all Jews were murdered in the Shoah. I1 states that the antisemitic insults shocked her very much and she did not know how to cope with the aggression against her. She says that at that time she did not dare to report the incident to the police and apparently did not have a broad network that could support her dealing with the incident. The experience left her helpless because she was not able to defend herself: “These were very severe statements, countless antisemitic statements, well not very enlightened, but I did not dare do something. At this time, I did not dare” (I1). I1 is recognizably dissatisfied with her reaction from that time. In this case, the antisemitism I1 witnessed is clearly interconnected with

misogyny. The rejection was taken as occasion for insulting I1 in an antisemitic and misogynous manner.

I1 says that her security feeling on social media is high due to her large supportive environment. Her roots in Jewish activism, her involvement in a Jewish student organization, and the knowledge that many people would support her in case of antisemitic threats make her feel safe. “Now I dare say openly that I am a Jew because I have all these people in my back, because I have all this solidarity and this love, and this is so wonderful” (I1). On her social media accounts, she created a positive and encouraging online environment where she can move safely. Nevertheless, she fears that she could be targeted by antisemites who recognize her on the street because of her appearance on social media and attack her.

One has to stay in the real world. [...] People are getting attacked. This is what we have seen a few days ago. When people are following the student organization, I am active in, they know my face, they know ‘ah ok, Jew’, I have to be able to defend myself. (I1)

I1 is very aware of the dangers of being a “public Jew” (I1) and that antisemitic violence could also affect her. Here it becomes apparent that antisemitic hate crimes also function as an intimidation and a signal to other Jews that they are also in danger of getting attacked (cf. Köbberling, 2018, p. 53). The case of I1 makes clear that the perception of antisemitism in the “real world” and on social media is interconnected. The ongoing physical attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions lead to a feeling of being in danger for I1 when she openly shows her Judaism on social media.

Due to his anonymity on social media, I2 never experienced direct antisemitic hate on his social media accounts. He is very careful that his identity stays unknown to strangers. He makes sure that his accounts do not display that he is Jewish, which is foremost an attempt to protect his safety. He is aware of the dangers faced by those who are recognized as Jews on social media. “This anonymity protects me very much, especially not being recognized on social media [...] this keeps the hate at bay” (I2).

I3 was exposed to antisemitic hostility on Facebook and SchülerVZ,⁴ especially from classmates at school. She states that during her schooling antisemitism was very normal for her and that she had struggled with being Jewish. “For a long time I saw Judaism as a disadvantage that I have to deal with” (I3). The antisemitism at that time culminated when after an argument a friend of her posted an antisemitic comment on her Facebook page, in which she said that the nose of I3 looked like the nose of Anne Frank. After that 20–30 people also started to post antisemitic insults on her page as well. The fact that she was unable to control the situation and that she did not know what would happen next was the worst for her. “It was a huge part of my privacy that was suddenly totally public, and I did not know how to control it. I think the loss of control was the worst part of it” (I3). The loss of control, the unawareness of what would happen

next, and the silence of other users is typical for shitstorms and hatestorms on the internet (cf. Rasul, 2021, p. 304). I3 was also feeling hurt because none of her friends would intervene in public against the antisemitic hate on her Facebook page. The reaction of her friends who did not help her with the situation and even trivialized the antisemitic insult was very hurtful. The reaction of the social environment is crucial for the ability of the victims to cope with the situation. When the social environment does not react supportive toward a victim, it can lead to secondary victimization. Secondary victimization is the experience of becoming victimized again when “the affected is hurt by inappropriate reactions from his social proximity and the instances of social control” (Böttger, Lobermeier, and Plachta, 2014, p. 53). It is apparent that the lack of a supportive environment and the mass of people posting hostile comments on her public Facebook page had a huge impact on I3. She states that this antisemitic hatestorm was the reason she started thinking the first time about why she was excluded by other people because of her Judaism.

Although over the last two years she did not experience direct antisemitism against her, she is very well aware of the dangers lurking on social media. Probably due to her experiences with hatestorms and shitstorms she sees the most risk of being exposed online. She emphasized repeatedly that she is very careful on social media and checks her posts to see whether they could cause offense. She has also heard of shitstorms against acquaintances that have been very violent and frightened her. On the other hand, she states that she has a supportive environment that would help her in case of antisemitic attacks. “I have many Jewish followers and also many Jewish friends from whom I certainly know they would be on my side in case of an argument or a shitstorm” (I3). Like I1, she states that she has created a safe online bubble, where she is seldom directly confronted with antisemitism.

All three respondents are clearly aware of the dangers of being identifiable as Jews on social media. The threat of antisemitic attacks online or the possibility of physical attacks are very present for the respondents. I1 and I3 would consider themselves as part of a Jewish online community that gives them a feeling of security. Both describe the solidarity within the Jewish community as a big resource for them, and that it helps them cope with antisemitism online. I2 does not consider himself part of a Jewish online community and thinks that his anonymity on social media provides the best protection for him.

Dimensions of Antisemitism on Social Media

All respondents witness a substantial amount of antisemitism on social media. This antisemitic hate is being directed against Jewish activists and organizations. Antisemitic comments are often experienced by respondents who have recognizably Jewish accounts with many followers. From his experience monitoring antisemitic comments, I2 describes that antisemitism shows up wherever Jewish individuals and organizations are visible on social media. Antisemitism shows

up at social media pages of “big organizations to small ones, for example Jewish museums in the country or private accounts that label themselves as Jewish” (I2). The more famous an account is, the more antisemitic the comments that are being posted. I1 reports that a Jewish German politician received antisemitic hate comments under his social media postings where she and others tried to reply to those comments so that they did not stay undisputed. I1 and I3 report that officials of Jewish student organizations have received death threats in reaction to social media postings on Twitter. I2 also tells of death threats against the president of his workplace being spread on social media. I1 and I2 talk about antisemitic comments under postings of their organization. I1 reports that especially on Twitter she witnesses antisemitic comments under posts of her student organization. I2 says that antisemitic comments are present on every social media account of the organization but states that the consistent deletion of comments and reporting of users leads to a significant reduction of these comments. In conclusion, it can be said that every manifestation of Jewishness on social media is a potential target for people who spread antisemitism.

All respondents report that Israel-related antisemitism is the most prevalent form of antisemitism. I1 observes that the amount of antisemitism on social media is closely linked to news coverage about occurrences in Israel. She states that the rise of antisemitism on social media is dependent on “how much Israel is being publicly discussed” (I1). She particularly remembers the time during the Gaza war when a wave of antisemitism and anti-Israel propaganda swept through social media, and she decided to withdraw from Facebook for some time, because that was where she primarily experienced it. Amidst antisemitic comments against Israel, she observed the spread of fake anti-Israel propaganda videos and photos, especially on Facebook, in which “Israeli soldiers kill little children” (I1). Respondents say they witnessed unjustified denunciations of alleged human rights violations by Israel, supporters of the “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions–Campaign,” accusing Jews who are not Israeli citizens of the politics of the state of Israel. I1 states that Israel-related antisemitism is often combined with solidarity statements for Palestine in the form of the Palestinian flag or support for the BDS campaign. The respondents’ perceptions of the amount of Israel-related antisemitism is in line with findings of a study on antisemitism on the internet that Israel-related antisemitism is the dominant form of contemporary antisemitism (cf. Schwarz-Friesel, 2020, p. 81; Dietz and Rathje, 2020).

Antisemitic conspiracy myths are named by all respondents as a frequent form of antisemitism on social media, such as the conspiracy myths with references to COVID-19 that Jews invented the virus or are trying to make money with the vaccinations. I2 observes that users who spread antisemitic conspiracy myths are trying to verify their claims by referring to conspiracists’ videos. The relativization of the Shoah is named as another often-witnessed form of antisemitism. Especially the comparison between the measures against the spread of COVID-19 and the Shoah is perceived as shocking and disturbing. “When I saw it the first time it shocked me deeply because I refused to believe that people nowadays

compare themselves to Anne Frank. An eleven-year-old girl went on stage and compared herself to Anne Frank. This really hurt” (I1).

All respondents agree that the technology of social media favors the spread of antisemitism. The speed of social media where a post can reach many recipients in a short period of time is seen as the main cause for the rapid spread of antisemitic content. Respondents are aware that distributors of antisemitic content can create numerous anonymous accounts to circumvent the deletion of accounts by the social media platforms to spread massive amounts of antisemitic messages. As I2 observes, accounts spreading antisemitism openly were often

only a few weeks or one day old and were only registered to post openly antisemitic content. They do not have other content on their accounts. [...] It is always those accounts that are suspicious when they do not have other content. (I2)

I3 occasionally receives antisemitic comments when she posts photos with a flag of Israel or on the occasion of a Jewish holiday on Instagram. It happened that “people unknown to me had found my account through the hashtag wrote things like ‘free Palestine’ or ‘child murderer Israel’” (I3). But she has the feeling that these comments are just written from accounts that systematically scroll through hashtags and write large quantities of these comments. I3 observes that these accounts were only registered to systematically spread hate and antisemitism by using common hashtags on the platforms and posting mostly the same or similar postings without having any interest in discussing or interacting with other users. The behavior of these accounts could also be an indication for the usage of bots spreading antisemitism on social media. The observations of the respondents are also supported by research that shows that the anonymous and relatively uncontrolled communication on social media is a “catalyst for a reinvigorated antisemitism” (Becker, 2020, p. 49).

The reaction of the social media platforms to antisemitism is met by the respondents with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they appreciated that the strategy of the social media platform changed and they started deleting antisemitic postings and accounts earlier. Especially I2, who spends a lot of time reporting antisemitic comments on the accounts of his workplace, says that the platforms are becoming faster at deleting antisemitic content and users. He observes the migration of antisemitic users to other platforms like Telegram, where they have the possibility of spreading antisemitic comments without having to fear the deletion of their accounts. On the other hand, I2 and I3 state that it is hard to report antisemitic hate, especially as a single user, and that sometimes the platforms report that no violation of their policies could be identified even in the case of clearly antisemitic comments. Often the platforms only react to mass reporting of content, which, as I2 witnesses, is also a technique of extreme right activists, who purposely mass report critical accounts to the platforms in the hope that the platforms react to the pressure.

Respondents feel the societal and political reaction to antisemitism on social media is insufficient. I1 and I2 have the feeling that political reactions only follow after antisemitic incidents, but there is no continuous action against antisemitism. According to I2, the projects in civil society that combat antisemitism through monitoring and education are not funded properly. It is also apparent that all three respondents do not feel protected by the police on social media. I3 states: "In my opinion the police cannot do much on social media. I have the feeling that you can only protect yourself" (I3). Anonymity on social media is perceived as the main reason for insufficient action by law enforcement, which is seen as providing security to the offenders. I2 and I3 are seeing a legal vacuum on social media, where the police is hardly present and furthermore does not have the competence to investigate effectively. Another reason respondents voice skepticism of the police is that they are aware of known extreme right networks within the police. I1 is unsure if she can trust the police concerning antisemitic crimes.

Reaction and Strategies against Antisemitism on Social Media

The strategies to cope with and counter antisemitic content on social media differ between the respondents. I1 chooses a very active way of dealing with antisemitic content online. She says that she is at first very shocked and speechless when being confronted with antisemitic content but then goes into action. "By all means share it with others, make people aware, do not let it stand undisputed, this is very important" (I1). She activates her bubble on Instagram by writing a post or by sharing posts from other users in order to make them report the antisemitic content to the platform, block antisemitic users, and make solidarity posts when persons or organizations are attacked online. It is important for her to recruit supporters fast to counter antisemitism on social media fast and effectively. It becomes clear how important a supportive online environment is to counter antisemitism effectively on social media.

I2, who is confronted with antisemitic comments on the social media accounts of his work, reacts with a strict distinction between his private life and his work. He is able to distance himself from the antisemitism by seeing it as part of his work. He says about himself that he is hardened against antisemitic comments online through his work and therefore is unimpressed by most of the comments. On the social media accounts of his work, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, he moderates the comments very carefully, deletes antisemitic comments as fast as possible, and blocks the users. By deleting the comments, he is trying to protect other Jewish users and create a safe online environment for them on the accounts he is responsible for.

When someone on Twitter or Instagram posts in memory of the pogroms of 1938 and someone writes in the comments that everything is a lie, then

relatives of the victims of National Socialism are reading it. It affects people and makes them angry. They use social media less and I do not want that. (I2)

He witnesses that the policy of strict deletion of comments and the blocking of antisemitic users is causing them trouble because in order to post again they have to create new accounts, which is time-consuming.

I3 is also choosing an active way to counter antisemitism by trying to discuss it with users online, by making people aware of the dimensions of antisemitism online and offline, and by reporting antisemitic content online. She talks about her earlier attempts to engage with antisemitic users, but she realized soon that it was a waste of time, because she had the feeling that these were accounts created solely for the purpose of posting antisemitic content. She now raises awareness of antisemitism in general and tries to provide information for her followers on how to deal with antisemitism by sharing practical tips.

As I was very active on Twitter [...] on the one hand I provided tips on how to react when confronted with antisemitism, and on the other hand I tried to raise awareness of antisemitism in everyday life, to make it visible. (I3)

It can be concluded that all respondents are active in combatting antisemitism online by making it visible to other – especially non-Jewish – users, reporting antisemitic content to the platforms, creating a safe environment for other Jewish users on the social media accounts they are responsible for, and educating other users about antisemitism and the possibilities for taking action.

Key Findings

In the previous section, the interviews with the respondents were analyzed in order to identify key factors that play a role in the impact antisemitism on social media has on Jewish social media users. In the following, these key factors are being explained to provide a broader understanding of the reaction of Jewish social media users to antisemitic speech.

One key factor is the users' private security measures. I2 has a strict policy of being anonymous on social media and that his accounts do not display that he is Jewish. I1 also avoided displaying her Jewishness on social media for a long time, because she did not want to get attacked or insulted. The anonymity, or at least the hiding of Jewishness, is a strong protection measure that minimizes the risks of being targeted by antisemites. All respondents, also I3, who openly shared her Jewishness from the beginning, are very aware of the dangers of an open Jewish social media profile. Hiding one's Jewishness is one option to avoid being harassed online, but for Jewish social media users it can also be hurtful not being able to show their Jewishness openly.

Especially I1 and I3 are describing the great solidarity within the Jewish community that gives them the courage to fight against antisemitism. They know that they would receive support from the online community when being targeted by antisemitic insults or threats. While great solidarity within the Jewish community online and offline is highlighted by the respondents, it is apparent that the reactions to antisemitism from society, politics, and police are not perceived as helpful. There is a strong feeling that real support would only come from the Jewish community. The roots in Jewish activism and the feeling of belonging to Jewish organizations and groups is therefore a big resource for coping with antisemitism.

Another important point about antisemitism on social media is how Jewish social media users create their social media environment. If they follow many Jewish accounts, they are most likely to experience antisemitism either when it is posted by antisemitic users or when the accounts themselves make posts on antisemitic incidents. Antisemitic comments often target Jewish organizations, so it is very likely that these accounts are places where much antisemitism is witnessed. All respondents say that they created a safe and positive online environment where they do not experience antisemitism. Especially I1 and I3 talk about how important a safe social media bubble is for them. I3 even created accounts where she follows accounts that do not post about antisemitism to distance herself from this topic when it gets too stressful. Also, I2 relates that when he ends his work, he distances himself from the antisemitism that he witnesses there.

Conclusion

From the respondents' answers it is clear that they witness a lot of antisemitism on social media. All respondents developed strategies to cope with antisemitism online. The anonymous use of social media (I2), the concealing of their Jewish identity on social media (I1 and I2), the careful consideration of which impact their social media posts could have (I3), and the construction of a safe online bubble (I1, I3), which is sustained using the blocking function of the social media platforms, are defensive strategies to protect them from antisemitic attacks. Due to having experienced or witnessed antisemitism, all respondents are aware of the dangers that come with a public social media presence. Having a supportive social environment in the Jewish community that would help them in case of antisemitic attacks is the major protection factor for I1 and I3. For I2, on the other hand, it is the anonymity that provides security. All respondents are very active in the fight against antisemitism, especially on social media. They educate others, and non-Jewish followers in particular, about antisemitism, they participate in solidarity actions for threatened users online, and they report antisemitic accounts and content to the platforms to combat antisemitism on social media.

Notes

- 1 Quotes from German texts are translated by the author.
- 2 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-young-jewish-europeans_en.pdf
- 3 A very well-known example is the tagging of Jewish social media users with triple parentheses (a stylized echo symbol) by alt-right groups in the United States in 2016 to make them a target for other extreme-right social media users. To help the attacked persons many other users marked themselves with the parentheses and therefore reclaimed the symbol as a sign of solidarity with Jews (Williams, 2016).
- 4 SchülerVZ was a popular social network for pupils in Germany.

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12

TOWARD AN AI DEFINITION OF ANTISEMITISM?

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Introduction

Crafting a definition of antisemitism that can be used for the automatic detection of antisemitic messages on social media is challenging. It requires not only a comprehensive understanding of the history of antisemitism and its (re)current forms but also a comprehensive dataset that has been labeled with a clear definition of antisemitism. This labeled dataset, a “Gold Standard,” can then be used by algorithms to identify antisemitic messages. In this chapter, we describe how to build and use a definition of antisemitism that can be used to monitor online forms of antisemitism that appear within millions of social media posts or comments. Analyzing large quantities of messages that are posted online requires some form of standardization and automatic detection, even if human interpretations (and annotation) remain indispensable for meaningful interpretations of such “big data.” We exemplify how such a definition can be built with Twitter data. This needs to be expanded and updated, and data from other platforms should be added so that the definition includes forms of antisemitism that might be specific to these other platforms.

Automated detection of antisemitism on social media requires a comprehensive definition of what should be considered antisemitic in that context, and, perhaps more importantly, an annotated dataset (Gold Standard) that can be used to train algorithms. Our project on an “AI definition of antisemitism” is not different in principle from other hate speech dataset projects that include defining a classification schema, labeling guidelines, gathering adequate data, pre-processing this data according to the task, training experts for labeling, and building a final corpus. The difference is that we focus on antisemitism instead of looking at hate speech in general. We argue that hate speech has fundamental target-specific elements. Although certain characteristics are common to many forms of hate speech, forms

directed against Jews can be very different from forms directed against Muslims, Roma, members of the LGBTQ+ community, or bullying victims. Due to the heterogeneity of hate forms, we suggest approaching forms piecemeal and building labeled datasets that are specific to the target groups.

More and more labeled datasets (Gold Standards) on hate speech are publicly available (Gomez et al., 2020; Davidson et al., 2017; Waseem, 2016). These datasets were used to test models that would predict classification on a portion of the same datasets. Accuracy of prediction has reached up to 78%. One of the major challenges for models of automatic detection is the discrepancy between annotations due to subjective judgment. Human annotators have labelled many of the same tweets differently. We believe that this can be improved by helping annotators to apply a detailed definition (which they do not have to necessarily agree with personally) and by having annotators discuss their discrepancies.

Research on antisemitism is only at the beginning of the computational turn (Bruns, 2020) of social sciences. However, Chandra et al. (2021) are working on a labeled dataset specifically on antisemitism. Our study of building a labeled dataset on antisemitism seems to be similar in many ways. One of the main differences might be that we draw our data from queries from a dataset that includes 10% of all tweets on a statistically relevant basis. However, a close comparison of our datasets seems to be most promising, and combining these and other labeled datasets will increase the precision of an “AI working definition of antisemitism.”

An Applicable Definition of Antisemitism

A definition of antisemitism that does justice both to the long history of resentment against Jews and to the psychological, “cultural,” and socioeconomic conditions that contribute to its reproduction has so far only been developed in fragmented form. The classic works from the 1940s (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Sartre, 1995) and the 1980s (Fein, 1987; Langmuir, 1996; Postone, 1985) might be helpful as well as a more recent comprehensive summary of the different theoretical frameworks for defining antisemitism by Kenneth Marcus (Marcus, 2015). However, for our purposes of annotating a corpus of social media posts, we do not necessarily need a historically or philosophically satisfactory account of antisemitism. We rather need a definition as a hands-on guidance for making decisions to classify posts as antisemitic or not, similar to police or other agencies that collect data on antisemitic incidents. The most widely used definition for such purposes is the Working Definition of Antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA definition). The definition has been developed by policy makers together with major groups representing Jewish communities specifically as a definition that can be used to decide if a certain incident should be classified as antisemitic or not. Since its publication in 2016, many governments and organizations, including the United Nations, have expressed support for this definition as guidance to monitor and combat

antisemitism, and it has been used successfully for police training and data collection in many countries.¹

The strength of the definition is in its descriptive examples that cover most contemporary expressions of antisemitism, and that can be used as a guidance for annotation. Unsurprisingly, there has been a debate about some of the examples of the definition and some concerns about how the definition might be used beyond data collection and classification (Jikeli, 2021; Nelson, 2021). However, to date, this definition is the most comprehensive and most widely used definition for data collection purposes. We decided to use this definition and to apply it to our dataset (Jikeli, Cavar, and Miehling, 2019). The definition and its examples must be interpreted in context, as it is stressed in the definition itself. We do so with human annotators who look at every post in its natural context. However, many parts of the IHRA definition and its examples need to be spelled out to be able to use it as a standardized guideline for annotating tweets. For example, the definition mentions “classic stereotypes” and “stereotypical allegations about Jews as such,” without specifying what they are. Spelling out the key stereotypes is necessary due to the vast quantity of stereotypes that have arisen historically, many of which are now hard to recognize outside of their original context. We did a close reading of the definition, allowing for inferences that can clarify certain grey zones in the annotation. We also consulted the major literature on “classic” antisemitic stereotypes and stereotypical allegations to list the stereotypes and accusations against Jews that are considered to be “classical” antisemitism (Lipton, 2014; Livak, 2010; Nirenberg, 2013; Perry and Schweitzer, 2008; Poliakov, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2003a; Rosenfeld, 2013, 2015; Wistrich, 2010). The full text of the definition and our inferences (Jikeli et al., 2019) served as the basis for our annotation.

Building an Annotated Corpus: The Dataset

Our purpose for building and annotating our corpus is twofold. First, we aim to build a corpus of annotated tweets that can be used as a preliminary gold standard to automatically identify antisemitic tweets in larger sample sets. Second, we aim to get a sense of the percentage of antisemitic tweets in conversations about certain topics, such as about Jews and Israel. We were fortunate to have access to the database of Indiana University’s Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe). This database provides 10% of all live tweets on an ongoing basis, going back up to 36 months from the time of a query.² This allows us to build statistically relevant (“representative”) subsamples that can then be annotated manually.

To build our preliminary gold standard, we would ideally use a completely randomized sample of tweets spanning all variations of antisemitic and non-antisemitic tweets. However, we are limited by time and the number of annotators who manually evaluate tweets. Labeling test samples showed that the evaluation of one tweet requires about two minutes, on average, and that annotators can rarely do more than 100 tweets per day before quality suffers. As we wanted to

have each tweet labeled by two experts, we aimed for a preliminary dataset of 5,000 tweets. A completely randomized sample of 5,000 tweets would result in too few antisemitic messages and would thus have failed to include many varieties of antisemitic content. We therefore opted for keywords that would ensure gathering tweets that are thematically closer to discussions around Jews. We focused on two keywords that contain the greatest number of tweets related to Jews as a religious, ethnic, or political community: “Jews” and “Israel.” We then added a few samples with more targeted keywords likely to generate a high percentage of antisemitic tweets, that is the insults: “kikes” and “ZioNazi★.” We chose the plural form of the insult “kikes” to reduce false hits of the Spanish nickname “kiké.” “ZioNazi★” includes both singular and plural forms. It is used as a slur that conflates Zionists and Nazis and is thus antisemitic in itself according to our definition. From these query results, totaling 3,691,047 tweets across all queries, we generated randomized samples, aiming for 500 live tweets per sample. For the keyword “Jews” we generated two samples per time frame. Ten samples had between 496 and 500 live tweets at the time of sampling, and afterward we uploaded them to our “Annotation Portal” (see Table 12.1). The

TABLE 12.1 Annotation Results before Comparison

<i>Sample #</i>	<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Timespan</i>	<i>Number of Tweets (Before Discussion)</i>	<i>Not Annotated Because Deleted/Suspended</i>	<i>Annotated by</i>	<i>Percentage of Antisemitic Tweets</i>
1	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	61	jg	6.2%
1	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	45	dm	6.2%
2	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	86	jg	7.5%
2	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	72	dm	5.4%
3	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	500	32	jg	12.2%
3	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	500	34	js	9.9%
4	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	499	70	jg	12.1%
4	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	500	70	js	8.4%
5	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	496	106	jg	12.1%
5	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	496	91	sm	9.4%
6	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	498	112	js	14.5%
6	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	498	102	sm	10.9%
7	ZioNazi★	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	152	js	88.2%
7	ZioNazi★	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	109	dm	82.4%
8	ZioNazi★	Jan.–Apr. 2020	232	83	dm	83.9%
8	ZioNazi★	Jan.–Apr. 2020	232	92	sm	85.0%
9	Israel	Jan.–Apr. 2020	499	158	js	5.0%
9	Israel	Jan.–Apr. 2020	499	19	dm	0.4%
10	Israel	May–Aug. 2020	500	69	js	13.2%
10	Israel	May–Aug. 2020	500	88	ks	14.6%
11	Kikes	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	205	dm	35.3%
11	Kikes	Jan.–Dec. 2019	500	217	sm	11.7%

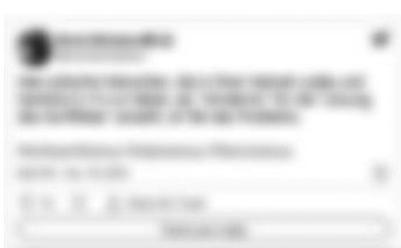
sample “ZioNazi* (January to April 2020) had only 232 live tweets at the time of sampling due to the overall small number of tweets from that keyword. For the “kikes” query, we added a filter that deletes (most) non-English tweets, using Google’s language-detection library. Nontext tweets, such as those only containing URLs, were exempt from language detection.

Annotating Tweets with Our Annotation Portal

Manual annotation is the most time-consuming part in building an annotated corpus that can be used as a gold standard for machine learning programs. Annotation tools accelerate the annotation process and can improve accuracy (Neves and Ševa, 2019). We decided to build our own tool that visualizes each tweet of our samples and a form that allows annotators to quickly answer questions about the tweet. It is designed to facilitate annotation and reduce annotation errors. The Annotation Portal is accessible at <https://annotationportal.com>. It is open to the scientific community.

Figure 12.1 shows a tweet example and the annotation form. The Annotation Portal pulls up live tweets of the samples that we previously uploaded.³ It includes all images and links to the original tweet. The tweets in the samples are shown in a preset order. We assign a number to each tweet for later comparison. Changes in the annotation for a tweet are registered when the annotator hits the next button. The annotator can go back to each tweet and change the selections they made at any time.

If annotators are unsure of the meaning of the tweet, they can click on the tweet, which then opens a new tab in the browser and reverts to the tweet on the Twitter page where annotators can see the entire thread, replies, likes, and comments. They can also click on the user to get a better picture of them. This, as well as the Twitter Advanced Search function, can be used to see what other messages the user has sent with the same keyword or with other keywords. This is done on the Twitter page, not the Portal, but it is all within the reach of a few clicks. Annotators can export their annotation at any time in a CSV file that includes the Twitter tweet ID number, the number that we assign to each tweet in a sample, and all annotations, including comments. The main purpose of our annotation is to determine if a tweet is antisemitic or not, based on a detailed definition of antisemitism, reducing the subjectivity of the annotator to a reasonable minimum. The annotation form is designed to help make that decision as simple and univocal as possible and to focus on the application of the definition of antisemitism (Jikeli et al., 2019) that we gave to the annotators. The first question in the annotation form is if the tweet is still live. Although we filtered for live tweets when we generated the samples, some tweets had been deleted after sample generation. This explains some of the discrepancies between the annotators as they did not annotate the samples at the same time. In some cases, messages from suspended users reappeared. The second question is if the tweet is in English. Twitter is most prominent among English speakers and our keywords



Viewing Tweet #1 of Israel2019.rep1

Still exists: Is the tweet active?

Can read: Can you read the tweet?

Antisemitism rating: According to IHRA which can be found here

IHRA section: If antisemitic this IHRA paragraph applies.

Disagree with: I disagree with IHRA in this case

Content type: Main content type of tweet that indicates possible antisemitism.

Sentiment rating: The sentiment toward Judaism/Jews/Israel is

Calling out: This tweet is calling out (alleged) antisemitism

Holocaust: This tweet is related to the Holocaust, including comparisons to contemporary issues.

Sarcasm: This tweet is sarcastic

Additional comments:

[Previous Tweet](#) [Next Tweet](#)

FIGURE 12.1 Annotation portal with tweet example. This is a screenshot of our updated form. The question about the content type was not used for the annotation of this dataset.

were all in English. However, in some samples we had non-English tweets that our annotators did not label.

Annotators had five options for the antisemitism rating according to a detailed definition of antisemitism: “confident not antisemitic; probably not antisemitic; I don’t know; probably antisemitic; and confident antisemitic.” Annotators read the definition and explanation carefully and they were trained on some samples before they started the annotation process. All annotators had taken at least one university course on antisemitism or similar training. If the annotators labeled the tweet as “probably antisemitic” or “confident antisemitic” according to the definition, they had to choose 1 of the 12 paragraphs of the definition that

informed this decision. If none of the paragraphs applied, they were instructed to not label the tweet as antisemitic. They could, however, check a box that they disagreed with the definition of that tweet and put an explanation in a comment box. This further helped the annotators stick to a standard rather than their personal interpretations. Asking the annotators to choose between a “very negative, negative, neutral, positive, or very positive” sentiment for the tweet with regard to Jews, Judaism, or Israel further helped the annotators apply the definition because they could express that the tweet had negative connotations even if they were not able to find a section of the definition that applied. Many tweets were related to anti-Jewish sentiment, but they were in fact calling out antisemitism and thus antiantisemitic. Annotators could also label tweets that they understood to be sarcastic. Finally, we wanted to know if a tweet was related to the Holocaust in some way.

Challenges and Decisions in the Annotation Process

One of the advantages of the IHRA definition is that antisemitic intent is not a necessary requirement to classify a message as antisemitic. Intent is generally difficult to prove, but it seems even more difficult in an online context in which users often remain anonymous, and in which readers and viewers often only see the message and do not know anything else about the sender. What is more, motivation and intent of the sender do not seem to be relevant for evaluating if the message of a certain post is antisemitic. A post on social media can still carry an antisemitic message even if the sender does not show any hatred against Jews, and even if they do not have any views of Jews. This can be illustrated with a tweet by a Twitter bot that sends out random short excerpts from plays by William Shakespeare. We came across a tweet that reads “Hebrew, a Jew, and not worth the name of a Christian,” sent out by the user “IAM_SHAKESPEARE.”⁴

A look at the account confirms that this bot randomly posts lines from works of Shakespeare every 10 minutes. Antisemitic intent of the bot and its programmer can almost certainly be ruled out. However, some of the quotes might carry antisemitic tropes, possibly the one mentioned above because it suggests a hierarchy between Jews and Christians and inherently negative character traits for Jews. We thus look at the message itself and what viewers are likely to take away from it. However, it is still necessary to look at the overall context to understand the meaning and likely interpretations of it. Some, for example, might respond to a tweet with exaggerated stereotypes of Jews as a form of irony to call out antisemitism. However, the use of humor, irony, and sarcasm does not necessarily mean that certain stereotypes are not disseminated (Vidgen et al., 2019, p. 83).

Although we concentrate on the message itself and not on the motivation of the sender, we still need to examine the context in which the tweet is read, that is, the preceding tweets if situated in a thread. Reactions to it can also provide information on how a particular tweet has been interpreted. We are looking at

all the information that the reader is likely to see, and which will be part of the message the reader gets from a given tweet. We also examine embedded images and links.⁵

We consider posting links to antisemitic content without comment a form of disseminating content and therefore, an antisemitic message. However, if the users distance themselves from such links, in direct or indirect ways, using sarcasm or irony which makes it clear that there is disagreement with the view or stereotype in question, then the message is not considered antisemitic. Part of the context that the reader sees is the name and profile image of the sender. Both are visible while looking at a tweet. A symbol, such as a Nazi flag or a dangerous weapon might sway the reader to interpret the message in certain ways or might be antisemitic in and of itself as is the case with a Nazi flag.

When it comes to grey zones, we erred on the side of caution. We classified tweets as antisemitic if they added antisemitic content, or if they directly included an antisemitic message, such as retweeting antisemitic content, or quoting antisemitic content in an approving manner. Endorsements by antisemitic movements, organizations, or individuals are treated as symbols. If they stand for taking harmful action against Jews, such as the German Nazi party, the Hungarian Arrow Cross, Hamas, Hitler, well-known Holocaust deniers, Father Coughlin, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, David Duke, or The Daily Stormer, then direct endorsement of such individuals, organizations, or movement is considered equivalent to calls for harming Jews and therefore antisemitic. If they are known for their antisemitic action or words but also for other things, then it depends on the context and on the degree to which they are known to be antisemitic. Are they endorsed in a way that the antisemitic position for which these organizations or individuals stand is part of the message? The British Union of Fascists, Mussolini, Hezbollah, or French comedian Dieudonné are likely to be used in such a way, but not necessarily so. Despite our best efforts to spell out as clearly as possible what constitutes antisemitic messages, there will remain room for interpretation and grey zones. Our clarifications (Jikeli et al., 2019) are the results of our discussions about tweets that we classified differently in a preliminary study. We also noticed that some tweets in our dataset express negativity toward other groups. Our annotation approach for this study focused on the components that pertained to antisemitism only, even while we acknowledge that animus toward other groups is also widespread on social media and often related to antisemitism.

Annotation Results of Expert Annotators

Five expert annotators of multiple faiths and genders went over 11 samples of tweets. Each sample was annotated by two annotators separately. Table 12.1 shows the annotation results of the antisemitism rating (probably and confident antisemitic) for each sample and each annotator before the annotators discussed their discrepancies.

The annotators did not annotate the samples at exactly the same time. This explains the discrepancy in the number of tweets that were not annotated because they were deleted or suspended at a given time. In this table and in our labeled dataset we use binary categories and treat ratings of “confident not antisemitic; probably not antisemitic; and I don’t know” as not antisemitic and “probably antisemitic and confident antisemitic” as antisemitic. For most samples, the annotators found a similar percentage of tweets to be antisemitic. However, the number of tweets that were rated as antisemitic by only one annotator and not the other was high for some samples, particularly sample 11 with 74 tweets that were rated differently (see Table 12.2).

The high level of disagreement in sample 11 before the discussion is related to the fact that this sample includes a high number of nonsensical tweets from bots. Only a discussion of these tweets led to a consensus that tweets that include the insult “kikes” should only be classified as antisemitic if the inference is that this word is used to describe a group of people and is therefore likely to be associated with Jews. It is not antisemitic if the sequence of words is nonsensical (e.g., put together randomly by bots) to the extent that it is not even clear that the word stands for a group of people.

Many of the tweets with the word “kikes” were about a famous soccer player, Enrique García Martínez or a famous baseball player, Enrique Javier Hernández, both nicknamed “kiké.” However, most of those tweets were in Spanish and are not included in our Gold Standard. In some cases, this might have been confused with the antisemitic slur. The many nonsensical tweets from bots, a large number of anti-antisemitic tweets, and tweets that refer to the nickname kiké explain why the percentage of antisemitic tweets was relatively low for a sample queried with an antisemitic slur.

After the annotation, we identified the tweets for which the annotators disagreed in their antisemitism rating, that is, if one of the annotators had annotated

TABLE 12.2 Number of Tweets that Annotators Rated Differently
(Antisemitic/Not Antisemitic)

Sample #	Keyword	Timespan	Number of Tweets in Disagreement
1	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	9
2	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	20
3	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	19
4	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	36
5	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	43
6	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	34
7	ZioNazi*	Jan.–Dec. 2019	13
8	ZioNazi*	Jan.–Apr. 2020	4
9	Israel	Jan.–Apr. 2020	19
10	Israel	May–Aug. 2020	44
11	kikes	Jan.–Dec. 2019	74

a tweet as antisemitic (probably or confident) and the other had not. The raters then discussed their disagreements. In many cases, human error, such as mis-clicking, or some oversight of some aspects of the tweet, could be identified quickly and the annotators corrected their annotation. In other cases, a detailed discussion about which paragraph in the definition could be applied (or not), or a detailed discussion about the context and the meaning of a certain tweet would clarify the matter and an agreement was reached. This discussion about meaning and context turned out to be particularly helpful for annotators who were initially unfamiliar with some political context or celebrity events in the United States, Britain, India, or elsewhere. The annotators became increasingly familiar with the contexts as they often revolved around similar topics. The annotators went through three rounds of discussion and eventually came to an agreement in almost all cases. Please note that the agreement was not made on the basis of what the different annotators personally perceived as antisemitic. The classification as antisemitic means that at least one paragraph of the IHRA definition and our detailed inferences applies (Jikeli et al., 2019). If annotators felt that the tweet was antisemitic but no paragraph of the IHRA definition applied, then they would classify the tweet as not antisemitic according to IHRA and check the box that they disagree. On that basis, annotators could come to an agreement in all but two cases for which sufficient context was missing. Table 12.2 shows the annotation results prior to discussion, and Table 12.3 shows the results after discussion.

After the elimination of tweets that could not be annotated due to deletion or suspension, tweets that were in a foreign language, two duplicates, and tweets that found no agreement between the annotators, 4,014 tweets remained in the dataset. Of these, 929 (23.1%) tweets were rated by two annotators as antisemitic according to the IHRA definition of antisemitism. Table 12.3 shows the number of tweets of each sample of the Gold Standard that were annotated by two expert

TABLE 12.3 Samples of Preliminary Gold Standard Corpus

	<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Timespan</i>	<i>Number of Tweets in Gold Standard Corpus</i>	<i>Percentage of Antisemitic Tweets</i>
1	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	435	6.2%
2	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	409	7.6%
3	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	461	12.1%
4	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	424	11.6%
5	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	390	14.1%
6	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	387	16.3%
7	ZioNazi*	Jan.–Dec. 2019	371	89.2%
8	ZioNazi*	Jan.–Apr. 2020	154	85.7%
9	Israel	Jan.–Apr. 2020	294	11.9%
10	Israel	May–Aug. 2020	408	13.7%
11	kikes	Jan.–Dec. 2019	283	33.2%
SUM		Jan. 2019–Aug. 2020	4,014	23.1%

annotators and the percentage of antisemitic tweets. In some cases, the number of tweets is significantly lower than the original sample size (compare Tables 12.1 and 12.3) because tweets were suspended or deleted when at least one of the annotators evaluated them or because they were in a foreign language. In some samples, such as sample 9 with the keyword “Israel,” suspended tweets reappeared during the discussion process and could then be annotated. This explains the higher percentage of antisemitic tweets after comparison. Some antisemitic tweets went live again after having been suspended. As expected, our samples with the generic keywords “Jews” and “Israel” had relatively low percentages of antisemitic tweets. The “Jews” query had between 6.2 and 16.3% with an average of 11.2% (281 tweets) for all samples and was lower in 2019 and higher in 2020. The samples with the slur “ZioNazi★” also met expectations with a high percentage of antisemitic tweets, between 85.7 and 89.2%. By contrast, the sample with the slur “kikes” had fewer antisemitic tweets than expected with 33.2%. This is in large part because many tweets were anti-antisemitic and calling out those who used this slur, or they referred to two celebrities whose nickname is “kike,” as discussed above.

The number of anti-antisemitic tweets that were calling out (alleged) anti-semitism in some form exceeded the number of antisemitic tweets in the samples with the keywords “Jews” and “kikes.” For the keyword “ZioNazi★” there was only a small minority of anti-antisemitic tweets and for the keyword “Israel” the number of antisemitic and anti-antisemitic tweets was about the same. About 25% of the tweets in our dataset were such anti-antisemitic tweets. The majority of tweets in the dataset, 2,506 tweets (62.4%), are tweets generated using the query with the term “Jews.” We therefore focus on a description of these samples.

Discussions about Jews on Twitter: Antisemitism and Other Prominent Themes

We queried four keywords for three distinct time periods, the entire year 2019, January–April 2020, and May–August 2020, drawing on a large dataset composed of a 10% sample of all tweets. This allowed us to generate representative samples of 500 live tweets at the time of sampling. (The sample size was smaller when annotators rated them because some were then deleted and some were in a foreign language.) For the keyword “Jews,” we generated two representative samples for each of the three time periods. This allows us to draw some conclusions about the overall discussions about Jews on Twitter from January 2019 to August 2020.

A closer look at the metadata of our raw data already provides some indications about prominent themes and users. This includes 1,230,801 tweets with the word “Jews” that were posted in 2019; 238,965 tweets with the word “Jews” that were posted from January to April 2020; and 329,804 tweets with the word “Jews” that were posted from May to August 2020, that is 1,799,570 tweets with the word “Jews” from January 2019 to August 2020. It can be estimated

that there are about 18 million live tweets in that time period that include the word “Jews.” Figures 12.2–12.4 show the time series for the three periods of our queries.

These three figures show significant peaks that relate to specific events, such as, a statement by President Trump about disloyalty of American Jews on August 20, 2019; the shooting in Jersey City on December 10, 2019; the Monsey Hanukkah stabbing on December 28, 2019; Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27, 2020; a statement about Jews by NYC Mayor de Blasio on Twitter on April 28 that read “My message to the Jewish community, and all communities, is this simple: the time for warnings has passed.”⁶ This was interpreted by many as singling out the Jewish community with antisemitic overtones. Another peak correlates with a viral video of Orthodox Jewish protesters cutting locks at a Brooklyn playground on June 15, 2020; and a statement by Nick Cannon about Jews (and his apology) on July 15, 2020. These seven narratives are thus prominent in our original query and also in the samples that were drawn from this raw data.

The top ten influencers, defined as users most often mentioned in tweets with the word “Jews,” also provide some information about our dataset and prominent themes. In 2019, the top ten influencers were realDonaldTrump, IlhanMN, AuschwitzMuseum, _SJPace_, AOC, Imamofpeace, RashidaTlaib, charliekirk11, jeremycorbyn, and LizaRosen101. “realDonaldTrump” had 32,173 mentions in the dataset, “IlhanMN” 21,967, and “AuschwitzMuseum” 15,999. The prominent role of “realDonaldTrump” in tweets about Jews in 2019 might be related to the highest peak that year that coincided with a statement by Trump about the alleged dual loyalty of American Jews.

Between January and April 2020, the top ten influencers were the users AuschwitzMuseum, LizaRosen101, Imamofpeace, IlhanMN,realDonaldTrump, NYCMayor, TheRaDR, DavidAstinWalsh, DineshDSouza, and _DavidAsher. “AuschwitzMuseum” was mentioned most often. This correlates to the second highest peak in that period, related to Holocaust Memorial Day. The highest peak in that period is related to a statement by NYC Mayor de Blasio. “NYCMayor” was number six in the ranking of most mentioned users.

Between May and August 2020, the top ten influencers were the users AuschwitzMuseum,realDonaldTrump, NYCMayor, SecPompeo, TheRaDR, jeremynewberger, DineshDSouza, CalebJHull, DonaldJTrumpJr, and marklevinshow. The peaks in this time frame were less pronounced. However, the highest peak coincided with a video of Orthodox Jewish protesters cutting locks at a Brooklyn playground. Related tweets often mentioned “NYCMayor,” the third most often mentioned user during that time period. One of the most frequent retweets (third place with 1,066 retweets in our dataset from May to August 2020 with the keyword “Jews”) read “Jews in NYC just cut the lock @NYCMayor put on their park” and showed an image of just that.⁷ While this is not antisemitic, another popular retweet relating to the same event has antisemitic overtones. The 14th most retweeted tweet commented on the same image

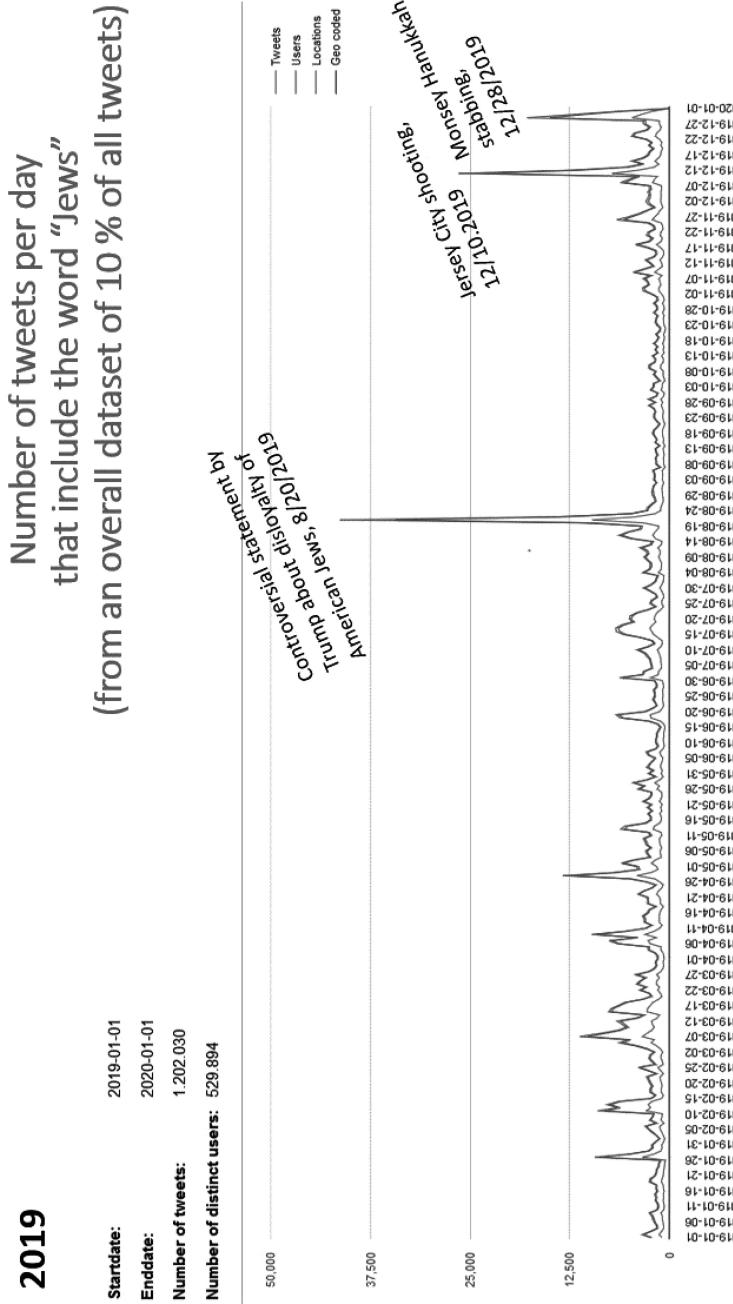


FIGURE 12.2 Timeline of tweets with the word Jews in 2019.

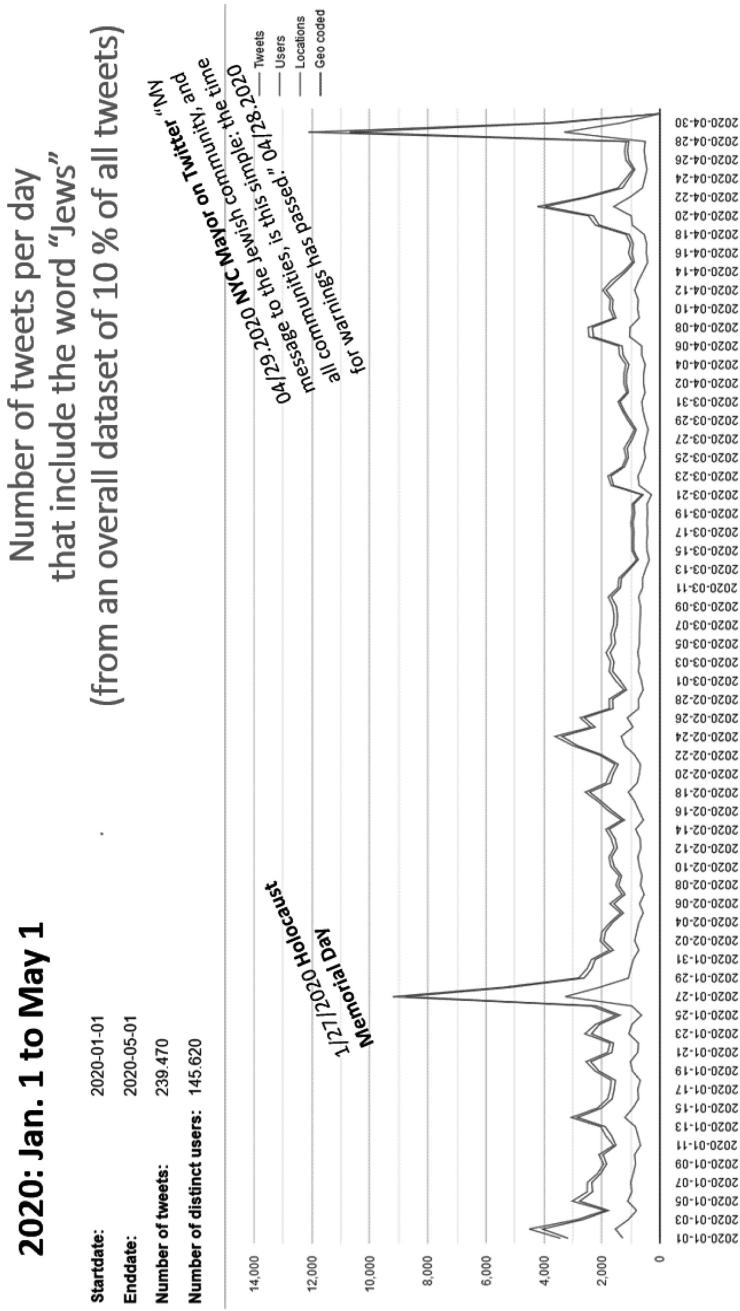


FIGURE 12.3 Timeline of tweets with the word Jews from January to April 2020.

2020: May 1 to Sept 1

**Number of tweets per day
that include the word "Jews"
(from an overall dataset of 10 % of all tweets)**

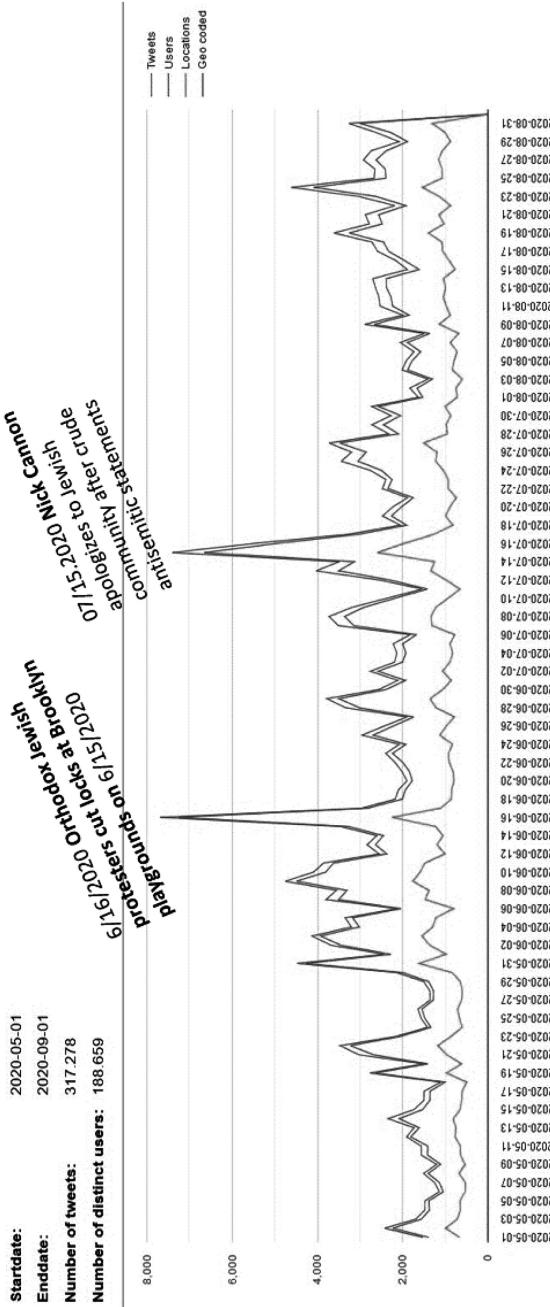


FIGURE 12.4 Timeline of tweets with the word Jews from May to August 2020.

alluding to a special influence and power of “the Jews” in New York by saying “This is a perfect example of how Jews across NYC are allowed to do as they please.” The second highest peak was related to antisemitic statements by Nick Cannon. The user “NickCannon” was mentioned 1,122 times, the 15th most often mentioned user in that period.

Most tweets in the samples with the keyword “Jews” were not antisemitic. However, a significant percentage, that is, between 6.2 and 16.3% of live tweets of conversations about “Jews,” were antisemitic, depending on the time frame with margins of error between 2.3 and 3.7% at a confidence interval of 95%. The paragraph that was used most often to classify tweets with the keyword “Jews” as antisemitic was 3.1.2,

Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective – such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions,

followed by 3.1.4, “Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).” The percentage of antisemitic tweets increased significantly from 2019 to 2020, see Figure 12.5.

The results of the two samples of each time period are well within the margin of error, which further validates the results, see Table 12.4.

About 6.2 or 7.6% antisemitic tweets in conversations about Jews in 2019 might not sound like much. However, that translates to an estimated number of 763,097–935,409 antisemitic tweets in conversations about “Jews” on Twitter in only one year, or between 87 and 107 antisemitic tweets per hour, and this only

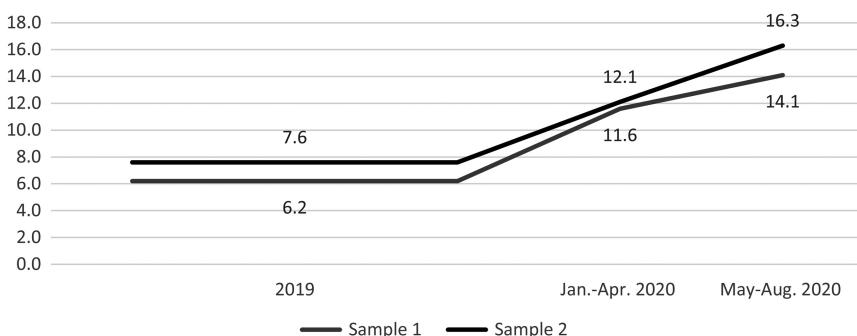


FIGURE 12.5 Trend percentage of antisemitic tweets on discussions about Jews, January 2019–August 2020.

TABLE 12.4 Percentage of Antisemitic Tweets and Margin of Error of Samples with the Keyword “Jews”

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Timespan</i>	<i>Annotated Tweets</i>	<i># Tweets in Dataset (Drawn from 10% of All Live Tweets)</i>	<i>Percentage of Antisemitic Tweets</i>	<i>Margin of Error</i>
1	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	435	1,230,801 as of 12/26/20	6.2%	2.3%
2	Jews	Jan.–Dec. 2019	409	1,230,801 as of 12/26/20	7.6%	2.6%
3	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	461	238,965 as of 05/15/20	12.1%	3.0%
4	Jews	Jan.–Apr. 2020	424	238,965 as of 05/15/20	11.6%	3.0%
5	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	390	329,804 as of 09/01/20	14.1%	3.5%
6	Jews	May–Aug. 2020	387	329,804 as of 09/01/20	16.3%	3.7%

includes tweets that include the word “Jews.” For the period January–April 2020, the number of estimated antisemitic tweets rose to 96–100 per hour for conversations on Twitter about “Jews” and for the period from May to August to a staggering 158–182 antisemitic posts per hour. This is a significant increase from 2016, when a study by Vigo Social Intelligence (2017) found 382,000 antisemitic posts, or 44 posts per hour across several social media platforms and for several keywords (World Jewish Congress and Vigo Social Intelligence, 2017). Twitter might have taken measures to suspend and delete hate messages. However, this has not resulted in an overall reduction of antisemitic messages, neither in the percentage nor in actual numbers; indeed, the total number of antisemitic tweets have increased. From May to August 2020, every seventh tweet in conversations about Jews was antisemitic, counting only live tweets.

It can be assumed that the percentage of antisemitic tweets is higher in deleted or suspended tweets. Our observations on conversations about Israel are based on fewer representative samples. However, we saw a slight increase from the first third of 2020 to the second third of 2020, from 10.2% of antisemitic tweets to 13.0%, that is, every eighth tweet in conversations about Israel was antisemitic from May to August 2020.

Conclusions and Outlook

Our preliminary definition of antisemitism for AI purposes, that is, a dataset labeled according to a consistent definition, needs to be further improved, adding a wider range of antisemitic and non-antisemitic narratives as well as (constantly) updating the evolving narratives. It can be used to identify antisemitic content within large numbers of posts, helping to monitor antisemitism. Experiences

from automated hate speech detection show that this will not replace human annotators, but it can assist them.

The majority of the tweets in our labeled dataset come from representative queries with the keyword “Jews,” thereof 11.2% antisemitic tweets. It is reasonable to assume that our dataset reflects discussions on Twitter about Jews and covers the most prevalent topics, at least when the word “Jews” is directly implicated, and for the time period that the dataset covers: From January 2019 to August 2020. Stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews were often mentioned, followed by some form of Holocaust denial.

The dataset also includes many tweets with the keyword “Israel” from the first eight months of 2020, of which 91 (13%) were rated as antisemitic. This significantly increases the variety of topics that the corpus covers; however, the subset of 91 antisemitic tweets with the keyword “Israel” might miss important topics of Israel-related forms of antisemitism. This is supplemented by two samples with the keyword “ZioNazi*” of 525 tweets altogether, with 463 being antisemitic. However, the variety of topics of this subset is very limited, and this word is not used very often by Twitter users as the query results with that keyword show. The subset of tweets with the slur “kikes” might be particularly useful because it can help to distinguish antisemitic from non-antisemitic messages that include the word “kikes.” The assumption that most messages that contain this slur are antisemitic is wrong. It depends on the context. In our sample, “only” 33.2% of such tweets were antisemitic and more tweets were in fact calling out other users who employed that term.

We will share our Gold Standard upon request and we provide access to our Annotation Portal to the academic community so that scholars can use it to annotate their own samples, perhaps even contributing to a more comprehensive “AI definition of antisemitism,” which requires collaborative efforts.

Acknowledgments

This chapter used the Extreme Science and Engineering Discovery Environment (XSEDE), which is supported by National Science Foundation grant number ACI-1548562. We are grateful that we were able to use Indiana University’s Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) tool and data (Davis et al., 2016). We presented a significantly shorter version of this chapter at the International Workshop on Cyber Social Threats, Co-located with the 15th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, June 7, 2021.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>. The Kantor Center at Tel Aviv University counted 450 leading organizations worldwide that have adopted the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism as of May 26, 2021, five years after its release.
- 2 The database is compliant with Twitter policy and removes deleted tweets on a regular basis. As such, we use live tweets only.

- 3 Twitter gives each tweet a distinct ID number. However, retweets without any comments do not get a distinct ID number. They have the ID number of the original tweet before the retweet. What we visualize in case of a retweet is the original tweet. This explains why we get some tweets multiple times in our randomized samples.
- 4 https://twitter.com/IAM_SHAKESPEARE/status/1333276038768504832
- 5 Annotators were instructed not to spend more than 5 minutes on links, significantly more than the average smartphone user spends on longer news items (PEW Research Center, 2016).
- 6 <https://twitter.com/NYCMayor/status/1255309615883063297>
- 7 <https://twitter.com/CalebJHull/status/1272669507778207744>

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13

“TO REPORT OR NOT TO REPORT”

Antisemitism on Social Media and the Role of Civil Society

Yfat Barak-Cheney and Leon Saltiel

Introduction: Importance of Combating Antisemitism on Social Media¹

In 2006, the same year that Facebook became available to the public, less than a year after the creation of YouTube, the World Jewish Congress (WJC) published an article by Haim Fireberg titled “Antisemitic Hate on the Internet.” Fireberg noted that “Cyberspace” poses a challenge to those seeking to identify and document antisemitic information – or, for that matter, any kind of data – passing through it, as well as those wanting to retaliate against hate messages and their distributors. This is due to “the Internet’s intricate structural composition, application topology and operational systems” (Fireberg, 2006). At the time, one had to lure people to visit websites and use chat rooms and email messages to spread messages and create a community. “Hate distributors in cyberspace must use every means available to promote their messages,” Fireberg noted. Little did he know that soon thereafter social media would erupt and the distribution of antisemitic messages would become possible with a mouse click.

In 2017, 11 years after that first publication on the subject, the WJC released an unprecedented report for which they analyzed tens of millions of posts in 20 languages on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, blogs, and other online forums (World Jewish Congress, 2016). The data analysis found that more than 382,000 antisemitic posts were uploaded to social media platforms over the course of 2016 – an average of more than 43.6 posts per hour, or one post every 83 seconds (World Jewish Congress, 2016). It was clear then that social media was fast becoming a mega-spreader of antisemitism, a trend that is continuing to this day.

Moreover, violent extremists are using social media as a public platform to disseminate hate and violence. In recent years, we have seen antisemitic messages on

social media relate to antisemitic terrorism offline. Robert Bowers, the man who killed 11 people during Shabbat services in October 2018, had social media accounts that showcased his antisemitism (Roberston, Mele, and Tavernese, 2018). His bio on the social media site Gab read, “Jews are the children of Satan” (Roberston, Mele, and Tavernese, 2018). Before Bowers entered the Pittsburgh synagogue he wrote on the same site, “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. I’m going in,” (Roberston, Mele, and Tavernese, 2018). John Earnest, the mass shooter at the San Diego Chabad of Poway, used the social media platform 8chan to post a public letter outlining his antisemitism (Paul, 2019). He wrote, “I did not want to have to kill Jews. But they have given us no other option” (Marantz, 2019).

These developments have motivated many civil society organizations to prioritize dealing with hate speech on social media. Unfortunately, many civil society organizations working in this field are also themselves targets of hatred on social media and can give first-hand accounts of the gravity of the problem. Civil society, broadly understood as organized groups outside the family, market, or state, has been a driving force in fighting online hate, and specifically antisemitism on social media. We are both full-time staff of one such organization – the World Jewish Congress, and this chapter draws on our experience.

This chapter maps the types of interventions and methods employed by civil society organizations for combating antisemitism on social media, includes examples of the work being done by civil society, and makes recommendations for the role of civil society moving forward. We have surveyed dozens of different projects’ and organizations’ works on antisemitism on social media, including think tanks such as the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), academia such as the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism (ISCA) at Indiana University, and organizations such as A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI). Where challenges have been especially noticeable, they are noted as well. In our review, we were looking to understand what activity civil society organizations were most engaged in, and understand whether the focus on organizations should shift toward other types of activities.

We find that civil society has successfully raised awareness about antisemitism on social media and has brought it to the forefront of fighting hate on social media. However, the main focus has been on reporting antisemitic hate speech when encountered, and monitoring compliance of social media platforms with their own hate speech policies. These areas of activity are important, but they put too much of the emphasis on short-term goals. They are also facing technical challenges and are difficult to do at scale. There is space to expand the work of civil society through informing legislative processes, designing guidelines on the international level, and improving policies of social media companies on antisemitic hate speech. Reliance on civil society reporting of antisemitism should also be replaced with a stronger emphasis on enforcement by social media platforms themselves.

While this chapter deals with antisemitic hate speech, we strongly believe that countering antisemitism should be part of a general strategy for countering

hate speech. It is important to note that the lack of a common definition of hate speech and the lack of, or consistent use of, a common definition of antisemitism still pose a serious challenge for all who are working to confront antisemitism on social media.

Civil Society and Antisemitism on Social Media – Current Activities

Civil society organizations have increasingly focused on combating antisemitism on social media. This objective can be attributed initially to a lacuna in the field – governments were and continue to be slow to identify and respond to regulating social media and hate speech. The social media companies themselves were hesitant to recognize the extent of the problem, their responsibility to deal with it, and their ability to do so. Antisemitism specifically remains a minority issue, a mere fraction of the billions of messages and posts on social media platforms. However, consistent work of civil society organizations, strong data, and, unfortunately, some real-life consequences of the rise of antisemitism on social media, have brought the issue into the spotlight. This section maps activities of civil society organizations and initiatives against antisemitism on social media.

For a list of all civil society organizations mentioned in the article please see Table 13.1.

Reporting Antisemitism on Social Media

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is starting to account for the majority of action taken on hate speech, including antisemitism, at least on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook. It is important to note that social media platforms do not provide data on the type of hate speech they remove, and therefore it is impossible to understand how much of it involves antisemitism. For example, Facebook reported that in the last quarter of 2020 it took action on 26.9 million pieces of content for reasons of hate speech, and that 97.1% of hate speech violating Facebook standards was found by Facebook before users reported it (Facebook, 2021). While impressive, that still leaves over 800,000 pieces of content flagged by individual users that violated Facebook's own definition of hate speech.

While AI is improving rapidly, social media companies still rely heavily on users reporting for the flagging and removal of antisemitism from their platforms. Many platforms have programs that enable civil society organizations, among others, to use enhanced reporting mechanisms, most known as "Trusted Flagger" programs. YouTube has over 200 individuals, organizations, and government bodies in their trusted flaggers program (YouTube, 2021). TikTok, a relatively new player in the field, has a "community partner" program that it has been rolling out. These programs enable the partner users to draw upon multiple tools such as prioritization of reported content, increased feedback on

TABLE 13.1 List of Referenced Civil Society Organizations

Organization	Country	Method	Project Name	URL
Alfred Landecker Foundation	Germany, France, United Kingdom	Software and AI Development	<i>Decoding Antisemitism: Combating Online Hate and Imagery with Artificial Intelligence</i>	https://www.alfredlandecker.org/en/article/decoding-antisemitism
ActiveWatch Romania	Romania, Slovakia, Estonia, Poland, Spain	Software and AI Development	<i>The Open Code for Hate-Free Communication</i> (OpCode)	https://www.nigdywiecjej.org/en/projects/the-open-code-for-hate-free-communication
Online Antisemitism Task Force	Global	Monitoring and Flagging	N/A	https://www.antisemitismtasforce.org/
World Jewish Congress Network Contagion Research Institute	Global	Monitoring and Flagging Researching and Reporting	N/A	https://networkcontagion.us/reports/antisemitic-disinformation-a-study-of-the-online-dissemination-of-anti-jewish-conspiracy-theories-project
Media Diversity Institute	Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, United Kingdom	Counter-speech	<i>Get the Trolls Out!</i>	https://getthetrollsout.org/the-project
Online Antisemitism Working Group of the Global Forum to Combat Antisemitism A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe	Global	Education	<i>Online Antisemitism Working Group</i>	https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/source/anti-semitism/onlineantisem2013.pdf
			<i>Facing Facts Online</i>	https://www.facingfactsonline.eu/

the reported content, special reporting tools, and training on content policy and moderation.

Many of the civil society groups surveyed have projects monitoring and reporting antisemitism. In addition, several groups are working on developing tools to enable more efficient monitoring of antisemitism on social media through the use of sophisticated AI and algorithms. For example, the Alfred Landecker Foundation is currently piloting *Decoding Antisemitism: Combating Online Hate and Imagery with Artificial Intelligence*, a project that aims to use AI to recognize implicit antisemitic social media content (Alfred Landecker Foundation, 2020). By training and using artificial intelligence, the Alfred Landecker Foundation should be able to flag more antisemitic content for removal.

While not exclusively focused on antisemitism, ActiveWatch Romania partnered with several other European NGOs to develop free and open software titled, *The Open Code for Hate-Free Communication* (OpCode), to monitor and analyze online hate, including antisemitic content, and subsequently further civil society collaboration (Never Again Association Poland, 2015). OpCode, operating between September 2019 and September 2020, aimed to improve existing hate speech monitoring software by pointing out instances of hate speech to social media platforms, and to increase interest in coding software that flags hate speech (Erbes and Dziegielewski, 2019).

The Online Antisemitism Task Force engages over 100,000 volunteers worldwide who work to monitor and report antisemitic content (Online Antisemitism Task Force, 2019). Since its establishment in 2013, the Task Force claims to have reported over 99,000 pieces of hateful content that were subsequently removed, over 900 YouTube accounts along with over 400 Facebook pages (Online Antisemitism Task Force, 2019). Volunteers report hateful content in multiple languages.

The World Jewish Congress takes part in social media reporting partnerships with many platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. The WJC operates through close cooperation primarily with local Jewish communities, along with other NGOs, student organizations, and other stakeholders. The WJC reports antisemitic individuals and posts, as well as tracks trends to raise awareness and to advocate for change on the policy and enforcement levels. Along with its in-house regional specialists, the WJC often works with external professional consultants and specialists, such as historians and lawyers, to target antisemitism and spreaders of antisemitism on social media. For example, the WJC contributed to the removal of Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, a French comedian known for his antisemitic material, from YouTube and subsequently Facebook. Dieudonné's content was not only reported directly to the platform as trusted flaggers, but also to a French governmental reporting mechanism and to the governmental body that fights antisemitism. Other organizations were also pushing for the removal of the French comedian's channel. Ultimately, Dieudonné was banned from YouTube and from Facebook, significantly decreasing his exposure and influence.

In 2017, the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism (ISCA) at Indiana University listed recommendations for NGOs in a research report titled, “Best Practices to Combat Antisemitism on Social Media” (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). Overall, ISCA recommends monitoring and reporting antisemitic content through crowd reporting to effectively inform social media companies (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). However, ISCA also notes several challenges to reporting. The vast quantity of antisemitic accounts that are shut down are often recreated within minutes under different aliases posing a clear obstacle (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). Other obstacles include the limited monitoring resources of NGOs and individual users, and the lack of human resources and expertise at social media platforms allocated to decide what content should be taken down (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). Furthermore, as each social media platform creates/uses its own definition of hate speech and has different types of content, tailored reporting needs to take place for each platform (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). A video that could be reported on one platform for removal might not receive a similar response on another platform.

Monitoring Compliance

Civil society organizations monitor social media platforms for their adherence to legal obligations, voluntary standards, such as the EU code of conduct,² and the companies’ own community standards. *Get the Trolls Out!*, an interfaith project launched in 2015 and led by the Media Diversity Institute along with six other European partners, seeks to reduce the amount of religious hate speech on social media platforms through monitoring and counternarratives (Media Diversity Institute, 2015). Every month *Get the Trolls Out!* releases a roundup that outlines the results of that month’s hateful content and exposes perpetrators. However, the process of “data mining,” that is extracting the information from social media sites which is necessary for this kind of research, has become ever more difficult in recent years. To extract material that remains online, one must either manually review social media platforms or use automatic systems for extracting the information. One challenge that civil society organizations note repeatedly is that there is a lack of common databases of antisemitic words, images, memes, and other content on social media (Network Contagion Research Institute and Rutgers University, 2020) that organizations wishing to review the existence of antisemitic hate speech on social media can use for the extraction of data. Without a common database, each organization must create their own resource of the material they wish to track, which is a time-consuming task. It also means that consistency across the monitoring is low. In addition, antisemitism on social media constantly evolves with attempts at evasion of content moderation, encouraging the use of more discreet and indirect terms and images. Words used to refer to Jews, memes depicting Jews, hashtags noting antisemitic notions

change rapidly, and any database needs to constantly monitor these changes and update their research accordingly (Weimann and Ben Am, 2020).

Further, monitoring compliance has become increasingly difficult as companies practice what is known as "platform lockdown." Material that was previously available for research and monitoring to academics and NGOs is now limited, if not impossible to obtain. In addition, removed material from platforms is not always accessible for research because the content usually disappears from databases.

Advocating Policy and Enforcement Changes to Social Media Platforms

Through monitoring and reporting of antisemitism on a variety of platforms, combined with in-depth knowledge and experience dealing with manifestations of antisemitism, and analysis of social media community standards, civil society is able to evaluate policies of social media companies as related to antisemitism, flag trends, and highlight gaps. Furthermore, it can train social media staff on recognizing antisemitism when it appears on the platforms.

Various civil society organizations, including many academics, conduct research on social media platforms' existing efforts to combat antisemitism, and subsequently release recommendations. For example, the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), in partnership with Yad Vashem, published a 2020 report titled "Reducing Online Hate Speech" (Yad Vashem, 2019). The report makes recommendations for relevant stakeholders to reduce online hate speech. For NGOs, the report advises improved communication between social media companies and civil society. In order to aid communication, creating an "advisory council" with representatives from all parties that would regularly evaluate the state of online hate speech regulation and facilitate procedures for information exchange could be helpful (Yad Vashem, 2019).

The Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism (ISCA) at Indiana University as well as the IDI both note that a partnership with social media companies is useful to advocate for a standard antisemitism definition that all companies abide by, and for the immediate removal of particularly harmful material. Furthermore, both encourage internet etiquette advocacy and public pressure to encourage the prompt removal of hateful content (World Jewish Congress, 2020). Last, both note that civil society can help social media providers acquire expertise in identifying antisemitic messages.

The World Jewish Congress has engaged in this practice for many years. In several instances, this has been very successful. In August 2020, Facebook announced a change to its community standards that would prohibit Facebook and Instagram users from posting hate speech by also identifying and removing content perpetuating harmful stereotypes such as "Jews control the world." According to Facebook, the idea of banning content that promotes stereotypes of Jewish global control came up a year before this announcement, in a meeting

with several Jewish groups convened by Facebook, and was pushed primarily by the WJC (Feldman, 2020).

Similar work has been done to convince Facebook to change its policy in relation to Holocaust denial, leading to a successful announcement by Facebook in October 2020 that it will no longer allow Holocaust denial and distortion on its platforms (Frenkel, 2020). TikTok, a rising star in the social media scene, initially lagged behind in dealing with antisemitism on its platform. Research and advocacy by civil society organizations as well as governments have forced TikTok to take more public and concrete actions against antisemitism on its platform. An in-depth study by Professor Gabriel Weimann, senior researcher at the Institute for Counterterrorism, whose follow-up research on the platform is published in this volume, was key to getting the company to pay attention to the issue (Weimann and Masri, 2020). The present volume includes several examples of work that aims to highlight gaps in policies and enforcement of antisemitism on social media. Such work remains crucial.

Government Advocacy

While there is a clear onus on social media companies to improve their standards and enforcement, governments have an important role to play as well. NGOs should therefore also advocate that governments address antisemitism on social media. WJC works with governments worldwide to promote adequate legislation, regulation, and enforcement efforts to combat the spread of antisemitism, primarily on social media. Governments are also crucial in dealing with fringe platforms. This is where the majority of violent extremism on social media currently manifests itself, and where such toxic ideas reach those who are most receptive to such content. Public pressure on governments should not, however, focus only on regulating social media platforms, but also on broader related issues such as defining hate speech and antisemitism, demanding civil and criminal liability for antisemitism, enforcement of regulations, and more. And of course, education and dealing with the underlying intolerance that manifests in antisemitic posts on social media platforms is a key government responsibility.

Cooperation with International and Regional Intergovernmental Organizations

In addition to governments, civil society organizations have been consistently advocating and cooperating with international and regional bodies, which are increasingly playing a role in the regulation of the social media sphere, including on hate speech and antisemitism. The UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect launched the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2019) following consultations which included civil society organizations. Regular consultations with civil society also aid in

follow-up and implementation of the Plan of Action. These efforts target online hate more broadly and focus on the applicability of international human rights standards.

A leading force in raising awareness at the international level on the need to fight antisemitism is undisputedly the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed. Dr. Shaheed regularly consults with Jewish organizations and other relevant NGOs. In his landmark 2019 report, the first-ever UN report dedicated to combating antisemitism, Dr. Shaheed called on governments, NGOs, and the media to report and take measures on antisemitism online (Shaheed, 2019). The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Dr Fernand de Varennes, has also held a series of regional workshops on the theme of Hate Speech, Social Media, and Minorities with the participation of experts and civil society, and dedicated a recent report on the same issue (Tom Lantos Institute, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and Federal Ministry Republic of Austria, 2020; UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, 2021).

In the same spirit, UNESCO has focused its efforts on the online sphere and is currently working on a study to map Holocaust denial and distortion on social media, in cooperation with the Oxford Internet Institute and the WJC (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2021). In the European space, the EU has been a leader in this field with the above-mentioned code of conduct on online hate. As part of discussions and negotiations on the European Union's Digital Services Act, the WJC and other major Jewish organizations work together to see that online antisemitism and antisemitism on social media are addressed (World Jewish Congress, 2021). Civil society organizations regularly engage with the EU, especially through the role occupied by Katharina von Schnurbein, the first European Commission Coordinator on combating Antisemitism.

Working with Law Enforcement

Law enforcement is a crucial part of the equation when dealing with antisemitism on social media, as behind the algorithms and spread mechanisms sit people who can harbor antisemitic, sometimes violent, ideas. The IDI report recommends to NGOs to work on making law enforcement and judicial authorities more aware of the problem of content that might violate laws, and help to build up expertise within police and judicial authorities (Yad Vashem, 2019).

Counter-speech, Counternarratives, and Awareness Campaigns

Social media companies are investing significant efforts in counter-speech, the posting by credible, capable, and willing actors of information to rebuke antisemitic content as an effective measure to prevent harmful narratives. This enables civil society to reach audiences with counter-narratives and awareness

campaigns. Funding and active cooperation exist and is increasingly getting attention from civil society. However, as ISCA notes, NGOs view this critically, with some seeing it as an “ineffective approach that social media platform providers are pushing in order to avoid taking action and responsibility” (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). Civil society only seldomly focuses on systematic counter-narrative efforts. One example is the *Nichts Gegen Juden*, or the Nothing Against Jews project by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which worked with bots to expand semiautomated messages (Nichts Gegen Juden, 2021). The automatic use of the bot was ceased and its success is unclear. Most importantly, the majority of social media users do not understand how algorithms work, and that their well-intentioned counter-speech actually ends up promoting the initial hate speech even further.

Education

In 2013, the Online Antisemitism Working Group of the Global Forum to Combat Antisemitism (GFCA) released a set of recommendations geared toward NGOs based on previously conducted research and projects (Oboler and Matas, 2013). GFCA recommends uploading informative websites and social media content to educate social media users about antisemitism. Facebook announced in January 2021 that it will connect people to credible information about the Holocaust of Facebook by directing users to aboutholocaust.org, a website intended to inform about the Holocaust, by the WJC and UNESCO (Rosen, 2021). Such initiatives that are promoted by platforms themselves should be increased to other topics and platforms.

A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI) leads a joint project, *Facing Facts Online*, to educate civil society, law enforcement, and other groups about hate speech on social media (A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, 2012). Since 2014, Facing Facts Online has offered various courses and custom training sessions for all different contexts regarding hate speech on social media platforms, including antisemitism.

Discussion

Our review of dozens of projects and the work of organizations dedicated to combating antisemitism on social media shows clearly that a lot of focus of civil society efforts is given to reporting mechanisms. Reporting of antisemitism has an immediate and visible effect on antisemitism on the platforms. However, this focus presents challenges, including the vast amount of effort it takes to do this at scale, the need to have specialty in languages as well as in the policies of the different platforms, and it has short-term effects in many cases. As ISCA noted, NGOs do not have the resources to monitor and flag antisemitic messages comprehensively (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017). As platforms only describe their hate speech policies vaguely to the public and civil society,

it is difficult for individual users or civil society organizations not specifically trained on this to identify and correctly flag material. Moreover, there is usually a delay between the time content that violates the policy is being uploaded and the reporting and removal of it, which in the world of social media means that by the time it is removed, it may already have been seen millions of times.

This also sends the wrong message to the social media platforms that relying on reporting by individual users is acceptable. In conversations with social media employees in preparation for this chapter,³ we learned that they agree that increased proactivity on their part would reduce the need for reporting by civil society. In addition, in many cases civil society organizations use methods of "mass reporting," requesting that their followers report the same pieces of content, though that does not have an influence on the removal of the content. The platforms have the capability, financial and otherwise, and the information required, to remove antisemitic speech on social media platforms before it reaches any user. They are responsible and must be held accountable for enforcing their own terms of service.

As demonstrated above, the work of civil society is crucial for reporting new trends, explaining the context of issues and events, and ensuring social media platforms have policies that are comprehensive on antisemitism and understand the many ways it manifests itself on their platforms. This has led to substantial changes in policies and enforcement by major social media platforms. Social media platforms have also expressed that reports by civil society are valuable in identifying trends, questions, and concerns regarding policies. Local Jewish communities worldwide are able to assist, for example, by exposing trends in antisemitism on social media or giving context to messages that may not appear on the face of it to be antisemitic. The WJC has been facilitating the exchange of information between the Jewish communities it represents and social media platforms. Facebook has recently appointed a high-level employee as Public Policy Director for the Jewish Diaspora, and we recommend other platforms do the same to strengthen the focus on and attention to the issue. Civil society has been a force of advocacy and has also played an important role in bringing the issue of antisemitism on social media to the attention of lawmakers and international and regional organizations, and they deserve credit for the increased efforts of governments and parliaments to ensure a safe environment on social media (Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2017).

The use of counter-narratives and public awareness campaigns are popular yet expensive undertakings, and their effects on the existence of antisemitism on social media need to be further researched. Education outside of social media of course remains a core strategy to reduce antisemitism in society and also on social media.

Civil society has been the driving force of combating antisemitism on social media, and the expertise gained by organizations, academics, and other institutions, who also represent those suffering from antisemitism on social media and whose safety is at stake, must be a guiding path in informing legislation,

designing guidelines, and improving policies. Reliance on civil society reporting of antisemitism should be replaced with a stronger emphasis on enforcement by social media platforms.

Notes

- 1 We would like to express our very great appreciation to our research assistant Mollie Blum, whose work and dedication were invaluable to the writing of this chapter.
- 2 The EU Code of Conduct on countering Illegal Hate Speech Online can be accessed at https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en#theeucodeofconduct
- 3 The employees wished to remain anonymous.

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14

ANTISEMITISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Placing the Problem into Perspective

Michael Bossetta

To date, research on digital forms and dissemination of antisemitism remains scarce. As evidenced in this volume, academic interest in antisemitism on social media is increasing, however. The bulk of existing knowledge on the topic mainly stems from two types of research. The first is reports from nongovernmental and government bodies, and the second is academic investigations into the quantity of antisemitism detected in various online spaces. While the former are valuable in filling empirical gaps, reports by civil society and public sector actors are not peer-reviewed and typically lack the methodological rigor of published scholarly work. Meanwhile, much of the extant scholarship in this area takes the form of conference papers that seek to quantify the amount of antisemitism in online spaces or develop automated tools for doing so.

Unfortunately, measuring the true amount of antisemitism on social media is difficult for four main reasons. First, with the exception of Twitter and Reddit, most social media platforms do not currently offer data on citizens' posts, which scholars need to measure antisemitism in public online spaces. Second, antisemitic content can be shared through private messaging channels (e.g., direct messages on Instagram or Twitter) or social media specifically designed for private messaging (e.g., Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or Signal). These private channels are increasingly encrypted, meaning they are unreadable to both the platforms themselves as well as law enforcement. Third, antisemitism can be expressed in disguised or subtle ways, such as through coded phrases or pictures, which makes detecting antisemitism difficult via computational methods. Fourth, the majority of existing research by academics, organizations, and governments focuses on "hate speech" broadly, and rarely do such reports distinguish the amount of antisemitism within overall hate speech content.

Despite these limitations, however, scholars have made progress in detecting and measuring antisemitism on social media. My aim in this chapter is to

contextualize the extant quantitative scholarship in this area through three main arguments. First, I survey the existing research that quantifies the extent of antisemitism on social media to make the argument that its prevalence is much less than commonly perceived. Second, I argue that social media posts challenging antisemitism are an important counterpoint to include in quantitative work. Third, I argue that deconstructing the design components of social media platforms provides a valuable heuristic for understanding the relationship between antisemitism and its likelihood of appearing in various online spaces. In particular, I discuss key technological differences between social media platforms and online forums, and explain how the design components of each lend to antisemitism being disseminated across a broad digital ecosystem. Future quantitative work would therefore benefit from theory-driven approaches that consider platform design, in order to inform cross-platform investigations that reveal how antisemitic actors leverage specific platform properties to diffuse their message across the internet.

Diagnosing the Extent of Antisemitism on Social Media

Relative to overall social media traffic, the identified extent of antisemitic content on social media is extremely small. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that online antisemitism is not a problem; rather, the bulk of evidence points to antisemitic content being much less visible on social media than commonly perceived. In this section, I support this claim with a survey of existing empirical research seeking to quantify the extent of antisemitic discourse within various online spaces.

The survey begins in 2016 with a landmark report by the World Jewish Congress (2016). The report is notable, since it diagnoses antisemitism on social media using a cross-platform, cross-country, and mixed-methods approach combining quantitative measurements with qualitative coding. The results of their analysis estimate, conservatively, that approximately 382,000 antisemitic posts were sent on social media during 2016. Globally, the report estimates that most antisemitic content appeared on Twitter (63%), followed by Facebook (10%) and Instagram (6%).

While the fact that antisemitic content can be identified on social media is troubling, it is important to put these numbers into perspective. On Twitter, the platform where most antisemitic content exists, at least 500 million tweets are sent every day (Stricker, 2014). The daily average of images and videos posted on Instagram was 95 million in 2016 (Abutaleb, 2016), and 2.5 billion comments were left on public Facebook pages each month in 2015 (Facebook, 2015). Across these three platforms, then, the amount of tweets, Instagram posts, and public Facebook comments can be approximated to 250 billion posts per year. Although the World Jewish Congress report did not evaluate every country, the 382,000 antisemitic posts they identified constituted 0.00015% of global traffic on these three platforms around the time the report was conducted.

Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League (2018) reports finding an average of 81,400 antisemitic tweets in English on Twitter during 2018. This equates to approximately 0.0002% of weekly Twitter traffic. These numbers align with a study that examined hate speech on Twitter in the United States during the 2016 election (Siegel et al., 2021) and found through a much more rigorous analysis that antisemitic content rarely rose above 0.0001% in tweets mentioning Donald Trump (where antisemitism might be expected according to mainstream media reporting).

My point here is to illustrate that nonacademic studies that only report raw numbers can lead to misperceptions about the overall scope of antisemitism on social media. The existing academic research fairs better in contextualizing the extent of antisemitism relative to an overall dataset. However, like in the Trump example above, many studies report the percentages of antisemitic discourse relative to a sampled dataset that, arguably, constitutes oversampling or a case study bias more generally.

Within the context of antisemitism research, case study bias refers to selecting empirical cases where antisemitic discourses are most likely to appear. This can refer to sampling the social media accounts of far-right groups (Weimann and Masri, 2020), media articles by far-right news organizations (Barna and Knap, 2019), or posts in alternative online spaces popular with the far-right (Ridenhour et al., 2020; Zannettou et al., 2020). Other studies sample conversations around events or conspiracies likely to harbor antisemitic content, such as attacks on places of worship (Zelenkauskaitė et al., 2021) or mentions of George Soros (Kalmar et al., 2018). While it is important to probe these spaces and events for antisemitism in order to understand its digital manifestations, an emphasis on searching for antisemitism where we know it exists can constitute an oversampling problem. That is, scholars may be overreporting the amount of antisemitism on social media by pre-selecting datasets and cases where it is most likely to surface. More worryingly, overattention to obvious spaces for antisemitic content may mask uncovering where it is more subtle and perhaps, more impactful.

Such oversampling is not specific to antisemitism research; most social media platforms that offer data to researchers require data collection based on keywords or specific accounts. This built-in filtering mechanism nudges researchers toward collecting data around specific topics, events, or actors, and the resulting datasets reflect a nonrandom portion of the overall content circulating on a platform (Tromble, 2019). While oversampling is often unavoidable due to how platforms deliver data, it can still lead to overreporting the existence of digital phenomena if not properly contextualized. Therefore, in reviewing the academic research quantifying antisemitism on social media, I aim to place the findings into a broader perspective by highlighting the proportions of antisemitism reported in relation to how the studies' datasets were constructed.

As is well-acknowledged in social media scholarship, Twitter receives a disproportionate amount of academic research due to its relatively open data

availability in comparison to other platforms. However, since the World Jewish Congress report (2016) suggests that the bulk of antisemitic content is hosted on Twitter, the platform is an appropriate site to measure the quantity of antisemitism. In one of the few peer-reviewed studies of antisemitism on social media, Ozalp et al. (2020) find that *within a dataset of tweets mentioning Jewish keywords and derogatory slurs in the United Kingdom*, only 0.7% of tweets were antagonistic toward Jews. Similarly, Kalmar et al. (2018) find that *in a dataset of tweets mentioning “Soros,”* only 0.8% of tweets contained the word “Jew.” However, the amount of these tweets that could be considered antisemitic was not studied, which is important information to analyze and report.

Research finds that only a fraction of social media posts mentioning Jews are antisemitic. In Jikeli et al.’s (2019) random sample of 11 billion tweets sent during 2018, about 3 million (or 0.03%) mentioned Jews. Through a manual annotation of 400 randomly selected tweets from this smaller dataset, between 5% and 6% could be labelled antisemitic with confidence, whereas an additional 7–12% were “probably antisemitic” (Jikeli et al., 2019, p. 12). Thus, if we take an upper bound of 20% of tweets mentioning Jews to be antisemitic, this comprises 0.005% of their overall dataset of 11 billion tweets (with the true proportion of antisemitic tweets likely being lower). Woolley and Josef (2019), meanwhile, in their dataset of 5.8 million tweets containing political keywords around the 2018 US election, find that 1.7% contained keywords associated with antisemitism. Their computational analysis suggests that within this 1.7% subset, just under half of tweets (46%) could be classified as derogatory or leaning derogatory toward Jews. Thus, 0.8% of their electoral tweets may be antisemitic, a percentage which likely drops significantly when viewed in the totality of nonelectoral tweets sent during the same period.

Even in online forums well-known to harbor extreme views, such as 4chan’s subcommunity /pol (short for “politically incorrect”), not all posts discussing Jews are antisemitic. One study found that between July 2016 and January 2018, mentions of the word “Jew” comprise between 2% and 4% of overall posts on /pol, with the derogatory slur “kike” comprising around 1% (Zannettou et al., 2020, p. 4). In qualitatively analyzing a sample of 100 posts mentioning “Jew” with a binary categorization of hateful/non-hateful, 42% of posts were found to be hateful, with all posts mentioning “kike” considered hateful. Thus, while the authors note that their figures are likely conservative, this equates to less than 2% of posts on /pol being hateful toward Jews with an additional 1% for mentions of kike. Thus, within one of the most hate-filled spaces on the internet, approximately 3% of posts are identified as hateful toward Jews.

Zelenkauskaitė et al.’s (2021) data from /pol during February and March 2019 finds similar results. Their results show that terms like “Jew” and “Jewish” ranged between 3.3% and 5.5% in the period during the Christchurch and Pittsburgh shootings at a mosque and synagogue, respectively. Posts with the term “kike” constituted an additional 1.5–2%. Although the authors did not analyze the content of these messages to investigate whether all were hateful,

their results suggest that between 4% and 7.5% of posts on /pol mention Jews or derogatory slurs about them. If findings from the aforementioned studies of both /pol and Twitter apply to their case, less than half of these posts would likely be considered explicitly antisemitic, derogatory, or hateful.

Taken together, the extant research points to antisemitic content being an extremely small percentage of Twitter traffic (fractions of a percent) and in low, single-digit percentages for /pol. While the proportion of antisemitism on /pol is higher than on Twitter, it is important to note that the amount of content generated on /pol is only a fraction of the content generated on Twitter. In one of the largest academic reportings into /pol's activity, scholars estimate that users issue around 150,000 posts per day (Papasavva et al., 2020). That equates to 0.03% of Twitter's 500 million tweets per day. Thus, although the proportion of antisemitism on /pol is higher than on Twitter, the sheer volume of content on /pol pales in comparison to the daily activity on any major social media platform.

It is perhaps surprising to see the data presented this way, since it suggests a disconnect between the extent of identified antisemitism on social media and the lived experiences of the Jewish community. Jews across Europe rank online antisemitism as one of the most widespread problems facing their communities (EU Agency for Human Rights, 2018, p. 22). There are three potential explanations for this discrepancy between the low proportion of observed antisemitism on social media and the high concerns about online antisemitism expressed by the Jewish community. One likely explanation, and an important contextual factor, is that Jews comprise a minority of the world population (about 0.2%) and therefore constitute a minority of overall social media users. Thus, the raw numbers of antisemitic posts observed by quantitative studies may be a low proportion of overall traffic but disproportionately affect the Jewish community. Another possible explanation is the "third-person effect," where research shows that people perceive the influence of hate speech on social media as harming others more than themselves (Guo and Johnson, 2020). A third explanation is that, due to limits in data collection, quantitative studies measuring antisemitism cannot observe nonpublic spaces like direct messages, which may be where higher levels of antisemitic attacks are occurring.

A recent survey by the American Jewish Committee (2020), for example, finds that one-in-five American-Jewish adults report being the target of an antisemitic attack or remark either online or on social media. Facebook was the predominant platform for experiencing such an attack or remark (62%), but the survey did not investigate whether these instances occurred through comments on public pages, within private networks, or via direct messages. Data from each of these Facebook channels is currently unavailable to researchers, and therefore the numbers and percentages of antisemitism identified by prior studies likely does not reflect the overall scope of antisemitism online. Thus, in addition to quantitative reporting about its extent, scholars interested in antisemitism on social media should move toward qualitative designs incorporating interviews with those who experience antisemitic attacks, particularly on Facebook. This

would help uncover where antisemitism takes place on social media and whether its manifestations are more prevalent on channels currently inaccessible for computational research.

Counter-narratives to Antisemitism on Social Media

In addition to contextualizing the amount of antisemitic content relative to platform traffic, another key component – posts challenging antisemitism – is often overlooked in studies of antisemitism and social media. Studies that report only the raw numbers of antisemitic content may create an implicit assumption that these posts circulate unchallenged, whereas evidence points to the contrary. This section argues that these counter-narratives are valuable from a sociological perspective, as they may stunt the effect of antisemitic content by shaping community norms that refute its presence within a given online community or platform.

According to estimates by the Anti-Defamation League (n.d.), one-in-four individuals hold antisemitic attitudes worldwide. These figures suggest that on aggregate, people not holding antisemitic attitudes outnumber those who do. It is therefore unlikely that antisemitic content on social media will go unchallenged, and existing research supports this notion. In their random sample of tweets mentioning “Jew” and related keywords from 2018, Jikeli et al.’s (2019, p. 12) findings suggest that tweets “calling out antisemitism” outnumbered those that express strong antisemitism. Similarly, the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernization (2016, p. 23) finds that antisemitic discourses on social media rarely remain unchallenged by others. In a particularly promising finding, Ozalp et al. (2020) find that tweets from Jewish organizations countering antisemitic content have a longer life cycle on the platform than tweets agonistic toward Jews. A longer life cycle signals that counter-narratives to antisemitism receive more engagement – likely in the form of user endorsements – than antisemitic content. Situating antisemitic discourses alongside those that challenge them is important, since social media users can work to correct misinformation (such as conspiracies) or moderate social norms on a platform.

Research on health misinformation, for example, suggests that exposure to user-generated “social corrections” (comments countering false claims) are effective in lowering misperceptions, especially if accompanied by a credible source (Vraga and Bode, 2018). While the study deals with misperceptions around verifiable evidence in the context of disease, it shows how social media users can influence the perceptions of others on a platform. Moreover, norms of appropriate behavior within a group are collectively negotiated. Social media users set the boundaries for appropriate discourse and behavior through social sanctions: Rewarding users for following social norms and punishing those who deviate from them (Newman, 2020; Rashidi et al., 2020). Users can positively reinforce posts through reactions (such as “liking” a post on Facebook or Instagram or gifting an “award” on Reddit), leaving positive comments, or sharing a post across their networks to show agreement. By the same token, users

can negatively sanction posts by leaving negative reactions (such as an ‘angry’ reaction on Facebook or a downvote on Reddit), calling out users in comments, sharing content with added text signaling disapproval, or even reporting content to a community or platform moderator.

In addition to being a form of hate speech, antisemitic posts can violate social norms on a platform along several dimensions, such as spreading false information or being overly aggressive. Each of these factors – hate, false information, and aggression – has been shown to provoke counter-responses from users. In the context of racism and hate, research on Facebook comments to Canadian news finds comments countering racism outnumbered racist comments by a 2:1 margin (Chaudhry and Gruzd, 2020). In a qualitative study, Matamoros-Fernández (2017, p. 940) highlights how in a racist controversy in Australian football, social media users “took the lead in denouncing abusive practices” by posting screenshots of offensive content. Aligning with Ozalp et al.’s (2020) findings, Twitter’s internal research suggests that during the 2016 US election, retweets calling out disinformation from the Russian Internet Research Agency received eight times the impressions and engagements by ten times as many users than the disinformation tweets themselves (US Senate, 2018). Aggression, meanwhile, has been shown to be a consistent feature that generates replies on both Facebook and news websites (Ziegele et al., 2014). At a more subtle level, even mild disagreement between commenters attracts users’ visual attention to Facebook comments relative to comments in agreement (Dutceac Segesten et al., 2020). Although these insights draw from various contexts and sources, they point to a general trend that users actively engage in confronting misleading or offensive content, which can lead to the expression of social sanctions that signal to others that such content is not welcome on a platform.

When sanctions and counter-narratives outweigh the volume of antisemitism on a platform, strong social signals are sent to other users about what the community considers appropriate and inappropriate. These sanctions are not likely to inhibit the spreading of antisemitic or racist content by the vocal minority of users who post it (Chaudhry and Gruzd, 2020); however, they can create the perception that a community of users views such content as violation of social norms. Recent survey research finds that specifically for antisemitic sentiment, perceptions of social norms have significant implications for Jewish prejudice. If individuals perceive that *others* in their community hold positive attitudes toward Jews, then this perception reverses the well-established link between right-wing authoritarianism and out-group prejudice (Górska et al., 2021).

Thus, in cases where challenges to antisemitic posts outnumber the posts themselves, the effect of antisemitic content on the user community is likely attenuated – or even reversed – with sufficient exposure to counter-narratives. Experimental designs are best suited to test this hypothesis, and future research should measure the effect of antisemitic posts on users’ attitudes toward Jews with and without exposure to counter-narratives. Importantly, however, this argument about the efficacy of counter-narratives primarily applies to the perceptions

of the user collective. Counter-narratives may do little to attenuate the effects of a targeted, antisemitic attack to an individual user. Still, counter-narratives and their potential to shape group norms are an important component of social media research, and like antisemitic attacks, will depend on the technical design of an online space.

Antisemitism on Social Media versus Online Forums

Within a given online space, the prevalence of antisemitic content, its ability to be targeted, and the opportunity for counter-narratives are influenced by the technological design of that space. Since the design of a platform shapes digital communication (Bossetta, 2018), certain elements of platform design will directly impact the type of antisemitic content produced, how and where it is shared, and between whom. In this final section, I outline four key features of platform design and how they relate to the production, reception, and spread of antisemitic content across social media.

Supported media refers to the type of media that a platform allows to be uploaded and, in many cases, actively promotes. For example, YouTube is designed primarily to support video, Instagram is built mostly for images, and Facebook is flexible in supporting text, images, and video. When it comes to antisemitic propaganda, the most common media format is images (World Jewish Congress, 2016, p. 169) and there are two plausible explanations for this: One cultural and the other technical. First and culturally, images are powerful, not tied to a specific language, and they can depict symbols that are packed with historical meaning. Second and technically, images are easier to produce than video, and they also take up less storage memory on a device. This means that images are often easier and cheaper to produce than video, and they can be shared more quickly between users since they require less bandwidth from an internet or mobile network. As an added security measure for users who spread antisemitic content, images can be more difficult for security systems to detect, in comparison with offensive keywords often used to identify antisemitism in research applications.

However, when it comes to spreading content on social media, *sharing features* are a key element of platform design that influences the visibility of content on a platform. Sharing can occur in three ways: Sharing privately between individuals or groups (such as on WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger), sharing original content to a social network (such as posting a photo on Facebook or Instagram), or sharing someone else's content to a social network (such as retweeting a news article on Twitter or sharing a friend's post on Facebook). For antisemitic content to be widely seen, it typically needs to be amplified by many accounts in public spaces. Most social media – with the exception of Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn – lack a feature to publicly share content from another account.

This is where *user connections* come into play: The accounts that a user connects with on social media and the rules behind how these connections are formed. “Social” media is about connecting people, and a user’s online social network

is influenced by several factors. Some platforms – such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and WhatsApp – encourage connections between close friends. Others like YouTube or TikTok are more about connecting users to entertaining videos, and therefore serve a different purpose than relationship-building with friends in real life. A key element of user connections that is directly relevant for antisemitism is whether accounts are allowed, technically, to be anonymous. Platforms that encourage connections between real-life friends generally require accounts to be verified with a phone number, which helps authenticate the identity of a user to an account. Other, more public platforms allow users to remain anonymous and have less strict identity verification rules. Research shows that discussions on platforms that allow anonymity tend to be less civil than on Facebook, where one's identity is tied to an account (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013). Moreover, platforms that allow anonymity are more likely to have antisemitic content, since the spread of online hate speech can be punishable by law in some countries, like Germany.

Whereas anonymity may shield an individual user from legal accountability, social media platforms are increasingly under pressure to adjust their *content moderation policies*, which refers to the rules and enforcement of rules by social media companies about what type of content to allow on their platforms. All social media moderate content (Gillespie, 2018), but the enforcement of those policies can vary based on the size of the platforms. Bigger, more established social media like Facebook and YouTube have more resources to dedicate to removing content, so antisemitic content is less likely to stay visible on those platforms for very long. European Commission reports show that both Facebook and YouTube remove about 80% of reported hate speech content in Europe, compared to Twitter's 40% (Reynards, 2020). While all of these platforms have explicit content moderation policies banning hate speech, their ability to enforce these policies likely boils down to the amount of resources that each platform dedicates to enforcing them.

My aim here has been to briefly illustrate how four elements of platform design – supported media, sharing features, user connections, and content moderation policies – shape the type, visibility, and reach of all content on social media, including that which is antisemitic. From this analysis, antisemitic content is likely to spread on platforms that support images, have an easily accessible sharing feature (such as reweeting), allow users to be anonymous, and have less restrictive or enforceable content moderation policies. This is likely why Twitter has been detected as the mainstream social media platform hosting the most antisemitic content (World Jewish Congress, 2016), since it fulfills all of these criteria.

However, there are significant differences between the design of traditionally understood *social media platforms* like Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter and *online forums* like 4chan or Reddit. From a design perspective, online forums typically support only images, text, and hyperlinks; allow for anonymity, and do not contain sharing features within the site. Moreover, they have almost no content

moderation policies, except for those that human moderators – or “mods” – decide to impose on any specific subcommunity. Thus, these forums can allow content that expresses opinions that are viewed as extreme, hateful, and racist by the majority of society. Within online forums, anonymous individuals meet to exchange opinions on these topics, create and share images that perpetuate anti-semitic tropes (Zannettou et al., 2020), and discuss how to convert susceptible individuals to share their extremist worldview. By becoming involved in these online communities, users can engage with anonymous individuals who often have the explicit intent to manipulate and radicalize others toward their cause.

Crucially, a key design difference between most social media platforms and online forums is how users access content. On social media, algorithms curate and tailor personalized content recommendations for users, often according to what one’s *user connections* have redistributed through *sharing features*. By contrast, users of online forums must actively navigate to specific subcommunities (such as 4chan’s /pol or subreddits on Reddit), which are usually divided by topics. Therefore, users largely self-select into topical communities that can become congregation spaces for the like-minded. Rossini’s (2020) research shows that intolerant discourse is more likely to occur in Facebook threads where users express ideological agreement, a finding that suggests hate speech is more likely to occur in homophilous networks (i.e., communities of the like-minded) compared to diverse networks. Since online forums typically lack the algorithmic curation that expose users to diverse opinions (Bakshy et al., 2015), specific subcommunities within these forums – like /pol – can foster environments of like-minded users who can access lightly moderated and algorithmically unfiltered content. Moreover, the lack of opinion diversity within these spaces makes counter-narratives less likely, and therefore the promotion of antisemitic views is largely rewarded as pro-social norm, rather than negatively sanctioned as inappropriate.

Some of these subcommunities harbor discussions typically associated with the “alt-right,” such as white supremacy, Islamophobia, and antisemitic views. Members who participate in these discussions perceive of themselves as a reactionary counter-culture against political correctness, which they view as stemming from the political left, mainstream media, globalists, and feminists. They therefore turn to anonymous online forums to vent their frustration, discuss news, and more worryingly, coordinate on how to radicalize susceptible individuals to share their worldview. Although there is not much concrete evidence on who is likely to be radicalized on these forums, the general impression is that they are young, white men who lack a rich social network in real life, especially in terms of dating women (Marwick and Lewis, 2018). Most often, users in these forums seek to radicalize others through the creation and sharing of “memes,” images that are designed to be humorous and packed with ideological and cultural symbols. Even with modern deep learning techniques, detecting antisemitism in such images is difficult to automate due to the subtleties of sarcasm and irony often carried in memes (Chandra et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, research has been able to identify how antisemitic memes flow from online forums onto mainstream social media sites. Zannettou et al. (2020) found evidence that 4chan's /pol subcommunity, as well as Reddit's The_Donald (a subcommunity built around supporting of President Trump), was effective in promoting antisemitic memes on Twitter. This two-step flow of meme dissemination likely signifies a recruitment effort: Since the user connections within an online forum like /pol are typically like-minded, forum members need to reach out to more diverse user bases on mainstream social media to grow their movement. Technically, since both mainstream social media and online forums support images, forum members can develop and share memes within their homogenous networks before attempting to disseminate them more widely on mainstream social media.

For an episode of the Social Media and Politics podcast, I interviewed one of the original moderators of “The_Donald” (Bossetta, 2019), a subreddit linked to the spreading of antisemitic memes (Zannettou et al., 2020). Although our discussion focused on the subreddit’s political motivations (and not antisemitism explicitly), the moderator mentioned three key properties of a successful meme, why they are impactful in recruiting new members to their worldview, and how memes work as part of a broader process of ideological recruitment.

According to him, the three key components of a successful meme are *simplicity*, *humor*, and *exposure*. Simplicity – i.e., a single picture rather than a video or long text post – is vital to capture users’ attention in a highly saturated media environment. The moderator mentioned “fun,” or humor, as an important criteria for a successful meme because it incentivizes group association: “you want to be the fun person, and you want to be with the fun person.” Memes that achieve humor aim to tap into group psychology mechanisms that provoke emulation (“to be the fun person”) and pro-social association (“to be with the fun person”).

Importantly, the third aspect – exposure – is crucial to understanding that memes operate as the first tranche of a broader ideological recruitment process. That is, memes are used to desensitize users to certain ideas, generate interest in learning more about them, and ultimately aim to have users’ redistribute the meme across their own social networks. Repeated exposure to memes help to desensitize users to controversial ideas and generate interest in exploring them further, as noted by the moderator: “If you have a topic that gets tons and tons of memes, people casually browsing the internet keep running into the same idea over and over. Eventually, they might look into it.”

After a user follows up on a meme’s subject matter through reading articles or posts in online forums about it, the goal of meme makers is to have converted users distribute memes on mainstream platforms via their sharing features. According to the moderator:

A meme that’s funny but also has that little redpill, or that little bit of truth ... if somebody shares that on their Facebook or Twitter, people are going to ask about or comment on it. It’s gonna generate conversation, then

people start posting articles. And, it kind of solidifies your understanding of it and you might share out from there.

Thus, the flow of antisemitic memes that Zannettou et al. (2020) identify – from online forums onto mainstream media – can be partly explained through the lens of platform design. Since online forums have light *content moderation policies* and homogenous *user connections*, antisemitic discourse can thrive largely unchallenged in these spaces. Although lower in technical sophistication than social media platforms, online forums *support images*; however, they lack *sharing features* necessary to distribute them widely. In order to recruit new members and grow their ideological movement, forum users need to “push” antisemitic memes onto mainstream social media channels, with the ultimate aim of turning converts into dissemination nodes that share memes with their own personal networks. To better investigate how antisemitism spreads across the digital ecosystem in this manner, future research would strongly benefit from developing theory-driven approaches that use platform design to motivate empirical case selection, rather than seeking to quantify antisemitic content on any given platform.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to place antisemitism on social media into perspective on three fronts. Through a survey of the existing quantitative research on antisemitism and social media, I first argued that the amount of antisemitism on social media is extremely small relative to platform traffic. Second, existing quantitative studies often do not consider counter-narratives to antisemitism, which I argue is an important component in providing a full perspective of how antisemitism is received (and refuted) by social media users. That said, antisemitic content continues to circulate across the internet, and my third argument has been that platform design offers theoretical insight into why and how antisemitism surfaces across online spaces.

Ultimately, this chapter concludes by arguing that the sheer quantity of antisemitism on social media is neither a primary cause for concern nor a pressing task for research. It is not the sheer quantity, but rather the potential for antisemitic content to radicalize, that makes it an important issue for democratic societies. While limiting the visibility of antisemitism online is an important step to detoxify users’ online information environment, much more effort needs to be placed on understanding who is susceptible to being radicalized by such content and why. Only then will the role of online antisemitism be fully placed into perspective.

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