

# Recognising extremism on the internet

## SO GEHT MEDIEN<sup>1</sup> – PUTTING A TEACHING UNIT TO THE TEST

Andrea Holler

**This article summarises the results of an evaluation of a media unit dedicated to the theme “Recognising extremism on the internet” on the German media literacy online platform *so geht MEDIEN*. 140 school pupils participated in the study.**

Professionally compiled campaigns or music videos on YouTube, posts on lifestyle, fashion and youth culture, contributions on apparently harmless issues such as the protection of animals and the environment, and allegedly pro-social campaigns: adolescents may encounter extremist messages and actors via different routes and media contexts. Social media products are used by extremists not only to communicate with like-minded people

but also to recruit new supporters and to spread their ideology as broadly as possible (Schmitt et al., 2017). In a representative study of over 1,000 adolescents in Germany, over half of 14- to 19-year-olds admit that they have recently come into contact with extremist content. 13% of these even say this contact has been frequent, and 5% say it has been very frequent (Reinemann et al., 2019, and see also Reinemann & Riesmeyer in this issue). Extremists seize upon insecurities and developmental challenges in adolescence, such as forging an identity, developing one’s own measures of value, or testing boundaries (cf. e.g., Eschenbeck & Knauf, 2018), in targeted ways by presenting their convictions as meaningful, thereby answering

questions young people are asking of themselves (Schmitt et al., 2017).

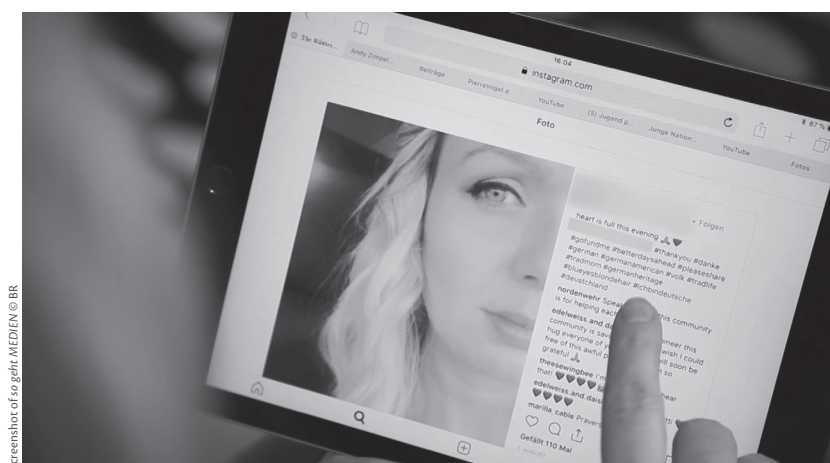
### *Covert posts by extremist organisations*

Extremist organisations employ a broad range of strategies in order to make contact with young users via social networks. They address young people in ways specific to the target group. Extremist sites, (propaganda) videos and images are technically and artistically tailored to the usage habits of adolescents and young adults. As well as references to pop culture, they use stylistic devices such as memes or GIFs or stylistic and optical elements from action films or well-known computer games which appeal to young people (Reinemann et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2017). Aesthetically, the posts are very professionally made and are always on trend with current cyberculture. At first glance, the posts on Facebook or the photo platform Instagram look like posts by private individuals, fashion and lifestyle bloggers or organisations who campaign, for example, for the environment or victims of war.

Right-wing extremist and Islamist actors try to



III. 1: The video on “Extremism and Social Media” helps pupils recognise different kinds of extremists and gives them tips on how to unmask extremist posts and videos



Screenshot of so geht MEDIEN © BR

Ill. 2: 14- to 18-year-old pupils were asked: "What is the young woman hoping to achieve with her selfie? What message might be behind this post?"

bring their issues into mainstream discourse, resorting to obscuration techniques so as not to frighten people off. For example, they combine propaganda content with unsuspecting catchwords that appeal to young people and deliberately tie in with the world of adolescents through websites and groups focused on particular themes, e.g. street art, music, fashion, football, animal protection, conservation or humour (Beyersdörfer et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2017). These are putatively harmless issues that are close to adolescents' hearts, and campaigns they are familiar with from school, such as Christmas presents for children in need, football tournaments or benefit events for Syria.

Music is one of the most important methods of addressing adolescents. Music videos offer a low-threshold entry point, for the extremist context of the songs is often not immediately recognisable, rather only upon closer inspection of the lyrics or the source. Particularly in combination with appealing video content that ties in with youth culture and dissemination via social video platforms such as YouTube, music is an important element in extremist propaganda strategies, regardless of the type of extremism (Reinemann et al., 2019).

### *School pupils often do not recognize extremist content in posts and videos*

The problem here is that, as the study by Reinemann, Riesmeyer and colleagues (Reinemann et al., 2019) shows, in many cases, school pupils do not recognise posts and videos with extremist content, or they do not classify the senders as extremist actors. If adolescents like or share posts or videos, they go from being mere consumers of propaganda to being propagators of it. This may give rise to a so-called filter bubble, i.e. algorithms give adolescents access to more and more information and contacts from an extremist scene, showing or suggesting similar content or sending cleverly made propaganda materials, thereby garnering new recruits.

Adolescents need very concrete media literacy here to enable them to unmask propaganda material by extremist organisations. Once the results of the aforementioned study by Reinemann et al. (2019) were made available and it became clear how important it is for pupils to be able to access the relevant information, a teaching unit was developed on this theme for *so geht MEDIEN*, the online platform of the German broadcasters ARD, ZDF and

Deutschlandradio (under the auspices of Bayerischer Rundfunk), to promote media literacy.<sup>2</sup>

### *Raising adolescents' critical awareness*

## THE ONLINE PLATFORM SO GEHT MEDIEN

*so geht MEDIEN* offers themed modules on promoting media literacy and information on public service broadcasting. The online product provides teachers with materials, picks up on different areas of media education with its detailed teaching units, and explains, for example, how news develops or why it is important to have a variety of opinions in a democracy. One area of focus is on engaging adolescents' critical awareness when dealing with the internet and social media. For example, *so geht MEDIEN* also provides teachers with teaching units on fake news or on the phenomenon of influencers. A key aim of the individual units is to promote critical awareness among adolescents over 14 years of age in their handling of media. Each teaching unit includes a video, detailed information and a suggested lesson plan focused on promoting the pupils' active engagement with the respective theme. Audios, video tutorials, interactive graphics and quizzes offer additional opportunities for rich and varied lessons.

## "EXTREMISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA" AS THE THEME OF A UNIT ON MEDIA LITERACY

The learning objective of the unit (Ill. 1): The pupils learn to recognise and classify the current strategies used by extremist actors in social networks and, if possible, counteract these strategies. Within the teaching unit, the adolescents research via mobile

phone or computer what extremism is and where lists of extremist organisations are located. Video clips explain how extremist organisations approach adolescents on the internet in covert ways, e.g. via targeted music videos, lifestyle posts or calls to apparently pro-social activities. They are given information on the subject of filter bubbles, and they are encouraged to engage more consciously with the issue of “liking” and “sharing” websites or posts. The lessons alternate between active group work and watching video clips produced especially for the unit together as a class. Using real posts on a worksheet, pupils are shown the perfidious mechanisms employed by extremist organisations. The pupils identify the strategies exemplified in the explanatory videos and develop counter-strategies to these.

## EVALUATION OF THE UNIT

The media literacy unit was implemented and evaluated with the participation of  $n=140$  pupils from years 9 and 10 (aged between 14 and 18 years) from intermediate secondary school and grammar school<sup>3</sup>. Before and after the lesson, the 14- to 18-year-olds filled in a questionnaire containing questions, inter alia, on their knowledge, and evaluated the teaching unit.

“So, what is the young woman who posted her selfie on Instagram hoping to achieve (Ill. 2)? Please try to work out what message might be behind this post.”

Pupils in a year 10 class in an intermediate secondary school in Bavaria approached this task within the *so geht MEDIEN* teaching unit on the topic “Extremism and Social Media” in very different ways: 2 girls went through the text next to the photo on the worksheet word by word and, after a brief discussion, they agreed that “She wants to thank her community for supporting her” but also to “evoke sympathy” so that she can perhaps reach her funding goal more quickly. In the next

row of seats, one of the pupils took out his smartphone so he could find out more about the sender and check whether the post printed on the worksheet actually existed. He retrieved the Instagram profile and made notes. At the back of the classroom, a group of 3 pupils talked animatedly about the hashtags under the selfie. They shared their observations in the subsequent class discussion: “Just look closer at the hashtags! For instance, she writes #volk [“people” or “nation”<sup>4</sup>] or #ichbindeutsche [“I am German”], or look at #blueeyesblondhair, crazy or what? I think she’s actually a Nazi.” Some of their fellow pupils were amazed and surprised by this. Most of them would not have thought that there might be an extremist message behind an apparently harmless selfie, or a typical beauty or lifestyle post.

Overall, the adolescents engaged with and evaluated the project lesson positively. They particularly appreciated the opportunity to inform themselves about such an important subject, one which is not, in general, taught in schools. They picked out the explanatory video clips (Ill. 3) as particularly successful and informative. The pupils also enjoyed researching and executing the tasks themselves.

The before-and-after test showed that before the teaching unit, for example,

only 1 in 10 adolescents (7.1%) believed there was an extremist background behind a Facebook post on the subject “Nature”. After the teaching unit, 8 in 10 pupils were able to recognise the intentions behind covert posts by extremist organisations.

Subsequent to the teaching unit, 80% of the participants were able to name strategies employed by extremists, such as “Lifestyle: they include new, fashionable things in the posts so that they can influence us and so we like what they say” (girl, 15 years old, intermediate secondary school). Pupils even remembered the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” strategy, as one 15-year-old pupil from intermediate secondary school described: “They pretend to be socially-minded.” After the teaching unit, over 90% of the adolescents were aware of several possible actions they could take if they encountered extremist posts or websites within social networks, such as “reporting the sender to the operator” (boy, 15 years old, grammar school), “not liking, otherwise they get even more attention, or unfollowing, if you only realise afterwards” (girl, 15 years old, intermediate secondary school).

85% of the pupils in the study indicated that they had learned something or taken something concrete away from the teaching unit, e.g. a 14-year-old girl



Ill. 3: In the explanatory video, a dropout from the Islamist scene (right) explains the extremists’ strategies to recruit new members and spread their ideology

from grammar school: "It is usually not obvious if an extremist is behind a post." Many said that there had been an improvement in their information literacy and that they had committed to memory very concrete tips for dealing with social media: "You should look at e.g. Instagram posts twice and also look at the hashtags, as extremist suggestions are sometimes hidden there" (girl, 15 years old, grammar school), or "You should not simply scroll down but report it if something is false or racist." (girl, 16 years old, intermediate secondary school)

8 in 10 of the participants wished more such units on media issues were taught in school. They saw these issues as particularly relevant and of high practical value in everyday life, "because it's more important than Pythagoras' theorem and it can protect us in our daily lives" (boy, 15 years old, intermediate secondary school). In contrast to school knowledge, dealing competently with digital media was regarded as essential "for real life" and particularly useful: "In our working life in the future we will have to deal with media more and more, but we have to do it PROPERLY!" (girl, 14 years old, grammar school). Others emphasised the educational and informative aspect of a teaching unit like this, e.g. a 15-year-old girl from intermediate secondary school: "It is

just good to make yourself aware of all the lies and deception on the internet." Taking into account the pupils' learning experience and evaluation, the teaching unit was optimised and is now available online.<sup>5</sup>

What the evaluation also showed is that on a deeper level we must take adolescents seriously and see them as whole people, not just as school pupils who have to achieve results. School is an important place for personality development and political education. Discussions on current political issues, the background knowledge required for a basic education in democracy and, above all, critical media literacy in dealing with social networks should self-evidently be included in school lessons, where pupils and teachers can learn a lot from each other. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Meaning: "This is how media work"

<sup>2</sup> The teaching unit was developed by Dr. Maya Götz, Anja Schäfer, Christoph Wittmann and Katrin Wiewe in collaboration with Dr. Claudia Riesmeyer (LMU).

<sup>3</sup> Intermediate secondary school (Realschule) provides an extended general education, grammar school (Gymnasium) prepares pupils for university entrance.

<sup>4</sup> The term "Volk" (nation/people) took on racial and nationalistic connotations during the Third Reich.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.br.de/sogehtmedien/stimmt-das/extremismus-erkennen-100.html>

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