

How adolescents come into contact with extremism

A CONVERSATION WITH CARSTEN REINEMANN AND CLAUDIA RIESMEYER*

In your project you focused on extremism, adolescents and media. Why did you choose this subject matter?

Reinemann: Although there is a lot of public discussion about the activities of extremists on the internet, up to now we have unfortunately had too little knowledge about how adolescents generally come into contact with extremist actors and messages, and, if they do, then where? We asked: What role do media and the direct social environment play in this? And are adolescents able to identify extremist actors, their intentions and messages? Finally, of course, we asked what the effect of these messages might be. This was the starting point for our research project with German adolescents.

What do you understand by “extremism”?

Riesmeyer: Without doubt one of the major challenges of the project was establishing a manageable concept of extremism in order to create questions to put to adolescents. This is because if you ask adolescents about their conceptual understanding, the answers range from a very vague idea (people doing something extreme, e.g. extreme athletes) through to very concrete ideas on political extremism, for example, which political or religious organisations are extremist (e.g. skinheads, so-called Islamic State). In order to ensure, nonetheless, that the adolescent respondents had a consistent understanding of extremism,

we gave them a definition focused on the rejection of principles and values defined in the German “Grundgesetz” (Basic Constitutional Law) as well as on the acceptance or execution of violence in order to achieve political aims. Although many adolescents cannot define extremism precisely, they do have quite a good idea of the fundamental ideas within the “Grundgesetz”.

What exactly were you investigating?

Riesmeyer: Our research project was divided into 3 parts and ran for over one and a half years. The 3 parts built upon one another. The focus was on adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19. The first sub-project consisted of a representative survey of adolescents in Germany. We asked them about their contact with extremist actors and messages as well as about possible influencing factors. Here, we were trying to acquire a basic knowledge and also compile a typology which would identify the various groups of adolescents on the basis of the pattern of their contact with extremism via media. This typology was the starting point for the second sub-project: 23 qualitative interviews with adolescents of the same age. The emphasis here was on the question of how well adolescents identify extremist actors and messages. We presented them with posts containing potentially extremist content, or from potentially extremist senders, and the adolescents had to evaluate these. As we established

that identifying extremist messages was so important and yet, at the same time, so problematic, this aspect was also a focus of the third sub-project, a controlled reception and effects study. Here, our aim was to find out how the characteristics of the message and the sender influence the identification of a meme¹ as extremist.

Do adolescents in Germany come into contact with extremism?

Reinemann: Yes, absolutely. Just over half the adolescents told us that they had recently come into contact – at least sometimes consciously – with at least one form of extremism, i.e. right-wing, left-wing or religious extremist attitudes and messages. 13% said that this happened frequently, and 5% said it happened very frequently. Two fifths of the adolescents said they at least sometimes had contact with right-wing extremist attitudes and messages, a third with religious extremist ones, and a fifth with left-wing extremist ones. In the case of all 3 types of extremism, the proportion of those who were frequently or very frequently confronted with these was, however, no more than 11% (Ill. 1).

Where does this contact take place?

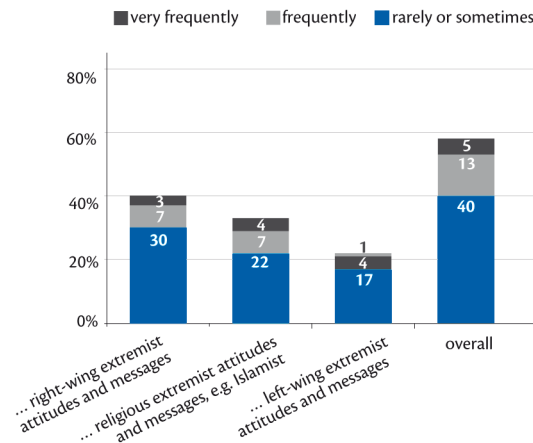
Reinemann: This takes place in very different places and in different situations. On the one hand, the direct personal environment plays an important role in the contact. These encounters may arise, for example, if family mem-

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bers, friends, fellow pupils, teachers or club members represent extremist views in conversations, if adolescents see slogans, posters or stickers in public places, or if they encounter an action or demonstration by extremist groups.

On the other hand, adolescents may come into contact with extremism via a broad range of media, and here we must differentiate between 2 kinds of media contact points. Firstly, adolescents may encounter journalistic coverage of extremism, whether this be in the traditional formats of press, television and radio, or in journalistic products online. Corresponding reports may, for instance, take an event-focused approach and deal with individual actions by extremists and, respectively, their consequences (e.g. demonstrations, attacks, court cases), or – on the other hand – they may take an issue-focused approach and deal with the phenomenon of extremism in background reports about particular groups, organisations and their members.

Secondly, adolescents may, in media contexts, be confronted with extremist attitudes which are expressed or mediated indirectly. Corresponding messages may appear in user commentaries on media sites or in social network products, in WhatsApp messages or on websites, on YouTube channels, in blogs or in social media appearances by extremist actors and organisations. However, adolescents may also come across extremist messages when using search engines, consuming music or playing computer games. The essential characteristic of such encounters is that they will often lack a classification of actors and messages as extremist – unless there is some indication of this, e.g. a form of counter-speech which explicitly calls a commentary extremist.



Ill. 1: Adolescents' contact with different types of extremism. Basis: all respondents (n=1,061)

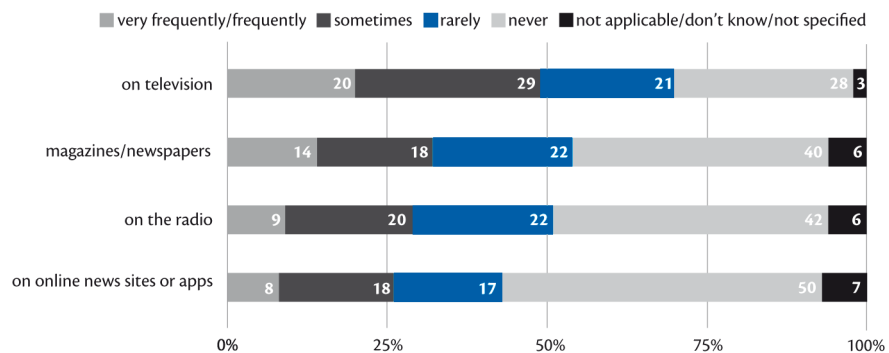
What proportion of the journalistic coverage comes from public service media?

Reinemann: We captured a very broad spectrum of media products, but we were not able to differentiate between public service and private commercial media. We may, however, assume that this contact with journalistic reportage about extremism reflects adolescents' general tendency towards consuming information-based media content. In general, though, we can say that news media have a significant role to play, for it is in news reports that adolescents most frequently come into contact with extremist messages or organisations (Ill. 2). Here, television is in first place: 20% of the adolescents said they encountered extremist attitudes or content on television (very

frequently. 14% said they encountered extremist messages or actors (very frequently) in newspapers or magazines, 9% on the radio and 8% on online news sites or apps. However, it is also worth looking at the other end of the scale: almost 30% of the adolescents said they had never encountered anything about extremism in their television viewing. These values are even slightly higher for newspapers and magazines and, respectively, radio (40 and 42%) and the online news sites and apps (50%). So, whereas many adolescents have the opportunity to benefit from the classification and evaluation of extremist messages and actors generally provided by journalistic coverage, and to improve their skills in identifying and evaluating extremism, this is clearly not the case for other adolescents. They either do not use the media in question, or they are not in a position to recall the coverage that has undoubtedly been provided.

What strategies do organisations or actors use to appeal to adolescents?

Riesmeyer: Extremist actors use the internet in diverse and quite creative ways to deliberately appeal to, mobilise, recruit and, in some cases, radicalise adolescents. They produce videos or memes, comment and share true, or even false, news that fits in



Ill. 2: Media contact with extremism in journalistic reportage. Basis: all respondents (n=1,061)

with their worldview, operate groups and channels on social media, and try to capture current events, e.g. using particular hashtags. Recently, as well as messenger services, it is primarily YouTube that has been playing an increasingly important role in this. Using these media, it is possible to publish messages quickly, cheaply, and often under the radar of platform operators and regulatory or security authorities, thereby effectively reaching the adolescent target audience. Here, the actors rely on modern forms of representation with a social relation to the adolescents; they compile videos, produce music or use social networks to link up with and reach new adolescents. In their symbolic and pictorial language, too, they consciously latch on to youth culture phenomena, ranging right through to fictional entertainment formats.

Are these strategies clearly identifiable?

Riesmeyer: Unfortunately, not always, for extremist actors also often operate in disguise and use “wolf in sheep’s clothing” strategies. For example, they adorn extremist content with what at first glance appear to be unsuspecting terms or buzzwords, or they deliberately use search engine optimisation in order to appear at the top of the search results list for particular search terms. This means that when doing an online search for an innocuous term, people might land on the websites of extremist actors or organisations. The other possibility is that they pick up on current themes and re-interpret these according to their own intentions.

This became apparent, for instance, in the debate around refugees. Finally, they devote themselves to what at first glance appear to be unproblematic issues, such as protecting nature and the environment, and then they package their messages up with these issues. In this way, the intention behind the message remains, at first glance, concealed.

Are adolescents able to decode these messages?

Riesmeyer: Yes and no. In our project we distinguished between 4 types of adolescents. These types are not only differentiated by their contact with extremism but also by their ability to identify the messages (Ill. 3). **Naïve recipients**, i.e. those who say they have had almost no conscious contact with extremist messages, do not identify these messages as such, or their contact with such messages is presumably often not a conscious one. This group is the largest among adolescents in Germany (49%). They rarely come into contact with politics via their social environment. They clearly lack the political interest and knowledge as well as the skills in identifying and evaluating extremism which would be necessary for contextualising extremist content. As well as weaknesses in their identification, these adolescents also lack the ability to expound the problems of extremist content – sometimes also because they recognise the content and therefore initially evaluate it positively, whereas a critical perspective

on the source of that content would be required in order to ascertain its problematic meaning.

The **informed recipients** group (33%) stands in contrast to this. It encompasses adolescents who come into contact with extremist content in classic news formats. They typically have a high degree of political and media literacy; they can contextualise extremist content and evaluate it accordingly – their lack of experience of deprivation is possibly an advantage here. As well as a higher level of political interest, they also have a noticeably critical perspective on the media, which may be linked to their aspiration to be as broadly and well informed as possible.

With respect to the adolescents who come into contact with extremist content in very different ways – via traditional media and its news formats as well as via online channels – (the **reflective recipients**, 11%), we see that although this group consumes media less actively and more routinely, they come into contact with politics through their interest in current events and via their social environment. Overall, their political and media literacy in identifying and negatively evaluating extremist content seems somewhat more pronounced than any corresponding incompetence.

The **endangered recipients** group (7%) seems to be problematic. This group comes into contact with extremist content within a broad spectrum of media.

	Naïve recipients	Informed recipients	Reflective recipients	Endangered recipients
Identify	underdeveloped	pronounced	generally pronounced	underdeveloped
Evaluate	(generally) positive	negative	(generally) negative	(generally) positive
Factors influencing identification and evaluation	(generally) positive	political knowledge and interest, media literacy	conversations in the social environment	lack of political interest, lack of media literacy, experiences of deprivation

Ill. 3: Influences of recipient characteristics on the perception of online content (Think-Aloud)

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The content, which is sometimes received multiple times, is not generally identified as extremist here. The cause of this misjudgement may be the fact that these adolescents, who are at best interested in specific-issue politics, lack a critical perspective on the sources and unreflectively pigeon-hole extremist content as “normal politics”. Because, at the same time, these adolescents exhibit experiences of deprivation, such as identity conflicts, intensive contact with extremist content may have negative consequences, particularly where there is a desensitisation effect, or where extremist content is evaluated more positively because the recipient recognises particular people or messages.

Need of institutionalised political and media education

What skills do adolescents need to be able to identify extremist messages?

Reinemann: On the one hand, it’s about very general elements of media literacy, such as source criticism in everyday reception situations, which are often characterised by a low level of attentiveness and a profusion of content. This ability is fundamental to how adolescents classify any information they might come across, and should exist irrespective of media, content and reception situation. Here, however, source criticism also means having background knowledge about the strategies of extremist actors and organisations. A message can only be identified and correctly classified if this knowledge is available. However, we do not relate skills in identifying and evaluating extremism to media literacy, rather we see these as including political skills too. Political knowledge and interest are part of this. These skills are also relevant in decoding messages. To give an example: I can only identify the intention of the sender if I know that a statement is directed against the

basic liberal principles of the Federal Republic of Germany (and, of course, if I am familiar with these fundamental values). Institutionalised political and media education are imperative prerequisites for this.

Finally, adolescents will only evaluate extremist content as negative and problematic if they possess an appropriate value structure that leads to a rejection of extremist positions. It is therefore not only about developing skills but also about conveying values and promoting democratic principles.

Prevention work at home, school and extra-curricular institutions

What preventative measures need to be taken?

Reinemann: Our findings show that it is important to promote general political and media literacy in order to sharpen adolescents’ powers of judgement. As part of this, it is important to convey standards and values for living together within society in order to increase adolescents’ sense of belonging. At the same time, we must promote skills specific to extremism. We must foster adolescents’ knowledge about extremist actors and their typical narratives (e.g. knowledge about extremist actors’ strategies). At the same time, adolescents lack background knowledge about mechanisms of propagation and recommendation algorithms. They need to know the consequences of posting, sharing and liking content (instead of reporting it), and how search engines work (key word: filter bubbles).

Our suggestions are directed at various potential actors: conveying the necessary knowledge to adolescents is something that needs to begin at home, but school and extra-curricular institutions engaging in prevention work need to continue this. As our findings show, the latter two institutions are above

all necessary where political and media literacy are not conveyed at home. This potentially creates space for conversations about extremism and (possibly) one’s own experiences with extremism, for – as our findings show –, adolescents have a need to talk about these issues, but they often do not have a point of contact. ■

NOTES

¹ A meme is a word developed by the biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 which describes units of cultural information, ideas, beliefs, patterns of behaviour.

² Dr. Carsten Reinemann and Dr. Claudia Riesmeyer, with Dr. Nayla Fawzi, Angela Nienierza and Katharina Neumann, undertook the project “Verdeckter Extremismus, offener Hass? Hinwendung, Wahrnehmung und Thematisierung extremistischer Botschaften in sozialen Online-Netzwerken durch Jugendliche” (“Hidden extremism, open hatred? Adolescents’ inclination towards, perception and discussion of extremist messages in social online networks”), commissioned by the Media Authority of North Rhine Westphalia (LfM). The core findings of this project were introduced at the IZI conference in 2018 and are published in Reinemann, Carsten, Nienierza, Angela, Fawzi, Nayla, Riesmeyer, Claudia & Neumann, Katharina (2019). *Jugend – Medien – Extremismus. Wo Jugendliche mit Extremismus in Kontakt kommen und wie sie ihn erkennen*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.



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