

Modern lifestyle and right-wing recruiting tactics on Instagram

Right-wing extremists use memes and offer recreational activities to lure young people

Since its very beginning in 2010, Instagram has taken on enormous importance and is one of the major key players in the social web today. Specifically young people in Germany are attracted to Instagram and use the service on their smartphones. This increased importance also drew the attention of right-wing extremists to the platform and they increasingly build Instagram into their propaganda strategy.

Hip self-staging: Right-wing extremists present themselves 'cool' and approachable

PROPAGANDA SPECIFICALLY APPEALING TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND REACHING A BROAD AUDIENCE

Right-wing extremist players present themselves hip and cool on Instagram, a platform specifically popular among young people. There, they stage themselves inconspicuously and only discreetly spread explicit right-wing extremist content and propaganda at the same time. Especially those extremists who base their activities on the typical behavior of Instagram users reach a huge number of followers. They post 'personal moments' from their everyday life conveying the feeling of privacy. This strategy can lead to a higher Instagram reach: e.g. the profile of one of the most well-known female Identitarians has 2979 followers, whereas the profile of the Identitarian movement Germany itself is only sparsely populated and has merely 636 followers.

Right-wing extremists follow up on popular topics stirring up desire and longing like city life, travelling or nature and associate these with images of political demonstrations and activities. The aim is to convey an own, alternative lifestyle. The line between political activism, agitation and private life is deliberately blurred and right-wing extremism is staged as normal everyday life. The promise for having fun and becoming part of a 'cool' community without fearing any negative effects shall attract new followers. This also includes advertising typical right-wing extremist clothing that is available for purchase in online shops that they often link to.

Illegal content, reports and reactions from Instagram

During the research for this paper, jugendschutz.net recorded 70 cases of illegal content; among these symbols and slogans of unconstitutional institutions, incitement of the people and Holocaust denial, found in images and memes on anonymous profiles and pages. Instagram removed more than 90 percent of all illegal content reported.



A Christmas photo, only the T-shirt logo reveals: the user is a female right-wing extremist (Source: Instagram; original not pixelated)

Gateway for propaganda: Images, memes and hashtags

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS USE INSTAGRAM AS AN 'EYE CATCHER'

Right-wing extremists mostly use Instagram in combination with other social media and set links to further content in their profiles or in individual posts. Exploiting Instagram as an 'eye catcher' and a gateway for their right-wing ideas is part of this media strategy. Here, they place subtle propaganda often only in the background of images staging their daily life: as slogan or symbol on their clothes or rather inconspicuously on a poster, graffiti or sticker.

Next to own hashtags from the scene right-wing extremists also use other already existing ones to disseminate their content and attract other users' attention. Since Instagram

has no character limits they often post numerous hashtags in order to spread content in different discourses. When searching for a certain hashtag related to a subject users can quickly come across right-wing extremist content not recognizable as such at first sight. An appealing photo can be enough to win over new followers.



Right-wing extremist posts stylish images under the harmless, widely-used hashtag 'beard wearer'. (Source: Instagram, original not pixelated)

Initial contact: Easy access to extremist groups

PRINCIPLE OF 'YOU FOLLOW ME, I'LL FOLLOW YOU BACK' CREATES NEW FOLLOWERS

Even users having no visible connection to the right-wing scene or not posting extremist content themselves could be found among the followers of obviously right-wing extremist Instagram profiles. Instagram's general principle 'You follow me, I'll follow you back' accounts for this. Users follow their followers – even without knowledge of the content. This not only extends the reach and the suggested importance of extremist content, but also increases the risk that young people incidentally stumble across right-wing content in their news feed or through push notifications on their smart phones.

Even young people outside the right-wing extremist stage use Instagram's commenting feature for getting in touch with their peers. Their self-presentation drawn from life and subtle propaganda makes right-wing extremists seem approachable on Instagram and the interaction threshold is lowered.

This is what the comment of a young woman shows who asks the leaders of the right-wing extremist Identitarian movement for propaganda material: "Do you happen to know when the Lambda patches will be available again? Or where I could perhaps get one or several already now? I've got to pimp my backpack to get ready to go out!(:."

Reference to the world we live in: Adventures as a 'door opener'

TARGETED RECRUITING OF YOUNG USERS

Right-wing extremist groups use Instagram even for their targeted recruiting actions. For example, at the start of the summer holidays the Swabian branch of the Identitarian movement posted a photo of a young woman wearing a bikini and carrying a volleyball. The focus on the body of the young woman shall attract attention; the right-wing extremist context becomes clear only after looking more closely: a patch with the slogan 'Still not loving Antifa' on the volleyball.

Whereas the photo seems harmless at first sight, the accompanying text directly invites users to make contact and actively participate. Here, the Identitarian movement presents itself in the style of an innocuous leisure project that is 'not always out and about politics' and also offers young people 'regular joint tours'. The full description of a trip to a regional city ends with the words: "We wish all activists, supporters, sympathizers and followers a beautiful summer! Not active yet? Then quickly drop a mail to [e-mail address of the Identitarian group Swabia]!"



Using a sexist image to arouse interest and lead to right-wing extremist messages. (Source: Instagram)

Reflecting upon media activity: Empower young users

NEED FOR PRACTICAL EDUCATIONAL CONCEPTS

Instagram is not the key instrument for right-wing extremists to spread their propaganda, however, as an 'eye catcher' the social networking platform plays an important role in right-wing extremist media strategies. Through Instagram they approach young people where they hang out anyway. This is why it is not surprising that right-wing extremists follow certain already existing and tested Instagram trends when it comes to their self-staging and hide their true attitudes at first.

Specifically children and young people find it difficult to recognize the real intentions of right-wing extremists at first sight. There is a risk that they perceive the youth-oriented and modern staging as 'cool', follow right-wing extremists and thus are permanently exposed to their propaganda. This also makes initial contact easier.

In parallel to removing illegal posts, young users must be made aware of the different forms of subtle right-wing extremist propaganda in internet services specifically aimed at young people. Within their media education in and out of school they must learn how to specifically unmask the forms of inconspicuous propaganda and counter it.

Further information

www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus

www.hass-im-netz.info

What can you do?

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

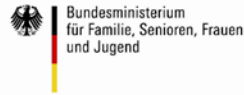
Reporting options

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

Background information

Within a project on political extremism, jugend-schutz.net looks closely at right-wing extremist content on the internet and develops counter activities. This work is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the program 'Demokratie leben!' i.e. 'Live Democracy!'.

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