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Social media analysis: Telegram as a breeding ground for coronavirus conspiracies

Professor Ralf Hohlfeld, the holder of the Chair of Communication Studies at the University of Passau has, with his students, analysed more than 1800 Telegram and Facebook posts of conspiracy influencers and prominent AfD members about the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies show that the discourse on Telegram is much more radical. However, the term “coronavirus denier” is largely not applicable.

The group of researchers looked into a deep abyss, explains the supervisor Professor Ralf Hohlfeld, holder of the Chair of Communication Studies at the University of Passau: “In the posts as a whole, we primarily see a crude mixture of historical misrepresentation, disparagement, agitation, incitement and anti-Semitism.” The term “coronavirus denier”, however is an inadequate description of the movement in the social networks. The existence of the virus is largely not denied, but is at the centre of the conspiracy theories.

Together with 24 students from the master’s degree programme “Media and Communication”, Professor Hohlfeld looked at groups and channels of prominent populists, including Attila Hildmann, Eva Hermann, Michael Wendler and Rüdiger Dahlke. They also looked at posts by selected politicians from the party Alternative for Germany (AfD), including Björn Höcke. From March to December 2020, the team from Passau analysed more than 1,800 Telegram and Facebook posts whose content is connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers worked with a quantitative content analysis, which they augmented with computer-aided processes for generating random samples.

More radical discourse on Telegram

“We were able to establish that the negative attitude towards the pandemic and towards the triggering virus Sars-COV-2 is a consistent pattern in all the examined groups,” summarises Professor Hohlfeld. The examined people and groups expressed themselves more radically on Telegram than on Facebook. Telegram has become the main platform for conspiracy theories. This is hardly surprising because: “Whilst regulatory measures have had a civilising effect on the communication on Facebook in the recent past, Telegram is completely unregulated and violations of the law cannot be penalised here.”

Coronavirus at the heart of the conspiracy theories

“In 40 % of the communications of the right-wing populist players and their groups, there are clear references to conspiracy theories,” says Isabel Käsbaier, who coordinated the project on the part of the students. The conspiracies are generally related to the pandemic and create a highly interconnected parallel universe. Coronavirus is, for example, regarded as an artificially bred control instrument, with which the government intends to control the population and force it to submit to its will. The establishment of a dictatorship is where most of the conspiracy theories overlap.

Disparaging rhetoric against politicians

According to the team of researchers from Passau, almost three quarters of the posts on the right-wing populist platforms were characterised by negative rhetoric and disparagement. This was aimed at politicians in 53 % of the cases, whilst 9 % of the posts targeted representatives of the media and another 9 % scientists. As well as attacks on specific people, the researchers found a clear scepticism with regard to science in every third post.

30 % of hate posts with calls to action

The radical rejection of the measures to combat the pandemic also had an effect on the comments of the Facebook users: the more negatively the policy was assessed, the more negative were the corresponding comments.

Just under 30 % of the pandemic-related communications of right-wing populist players on Telegram and Facebook contained calls to action. In a quarter of these cases, these were extremely radical. They included calls to storm the Bundestag and death threats against the Chancellor.

The study by the group of researchers took place within the framework of the main seminar "Populism, Post-truth Discourse and Media Communications" in the winter semester of 2020/21 at the University of Passau and fits into the chair's research on fake news and disinformation. The team published the English-language study as a preprint on the research platform ResearchGate under the title "Communicating COVID-19 against the backdrop of conspiracy ideologies: How public figures discuss the matter on Facebook and Telegram".

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Professor Ralf Hohlfeld and Isabel Käsbauer, who coordinated the project on the part of the students
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