GERMANY ELECTIONS REPORT SERIES

AfD Party, AfD Politicians, and Other Far-Right News Outlets Post More Frequently and Vitriolically on Facebook and Telegram than on Twitter

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The GEC used text similarity analysis to compare how far-right accounts in Germany, including AfD Party accounts, individual AfD politicians, and other far-right news and forum sites, use Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter. Further, we compared narratives propagated by these accounts on each platform. All the examined accounts posted more frequently on Facebook and Telegram relative to Twitter. Specifically, AfD Party accounts posted most frequently on Facebook, while individual politicians were more prolific on Telegram. AfD Party accounts often published identical (or nearly identical) posts from AfD politicians' accounts—AfD Party accounts were most influential[1] on Facebook (relative to other platforms) in amplifying individual politicians. On the other hand, politicians typically focused on their own original content, frequently publishing the same text across different platforms. Overall, the most critical content about the German government and its COVID-19 containment strategies surfaced on Telegram and Facebook—likely because of Twitter's stricter enforcement of its rules and policies.
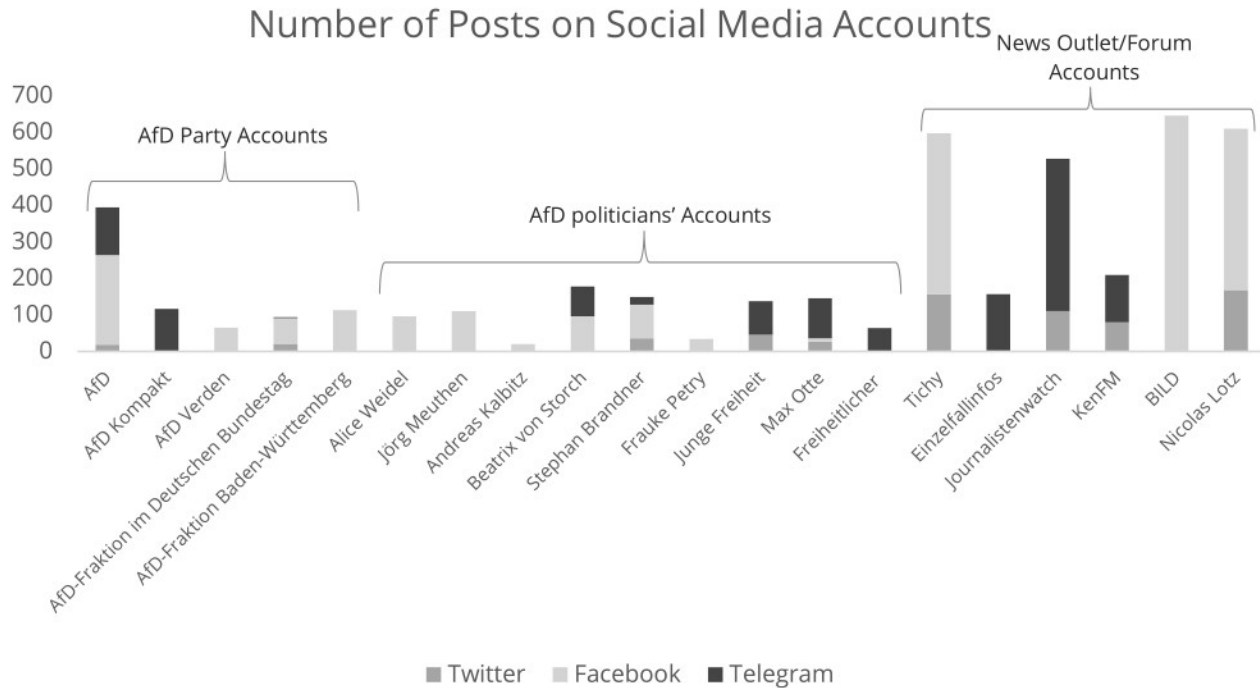
REPORT

Cross-Platform Analysis

As part of a German Election Series, the GEC previously examined German discourse on Twitter about COVID-19—particularly related to the far right—and the Green Party between posted between 5 May and 4 August 2021. We identified clusters of accounts—160 in total—that amplified tweets from the far right and likely engaged in inauthentic and coordinated behavior.[2] In order to compare narratives on Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook, and to compare how these far-right accounts utilize these platforms, the GEC conducted a cross-platform analysis on posts published by influential, far-right accounts between 5 May and 4 August that referenced either COVID-19 or the Green Party. The analyzed accounts included official AfD Party accounts,[3] accounts of individual AfD politicians, and news accounts known to publish far-right content—to include pro-AfD content. In addition to publishing original content, AfD Party accounts seemingly focused on amplifying AfD messaging from politicians and news outlets/forums by posting identical or near-identical content from these accounts. Alternatively, politician and news accounts published original content across the three platforms.

The number of posts published by each account on the three platforms is shown in the chart below. It illustrates that all the accounts we examined posted more frequently on Facebook and Telegram relative to Twitter. Generally, AfD Party accounts posted more content on Facebook; content that primarily focused on criticizing German government officials about COVID-19 restrictions—claiming they were unjust infringements on citizen's rights. On the other hand, AfD politicians posted more frequently on Telegram. While these Telegram posts also opposed COVID-19 restrictions, there were also posts that were heavily critical of the Green Party and/or promoted anti-immigration narratives.

News outlet/forum accounts primarily utilized Facebook and Telegram to cover content opposing COVID-19 restrictions and disparaging the government's handling of the pandemic. From a total of 4,510 posts identified on all platforms, about 55% were from Facebook, about 30% were from Telegram, and only 15% from Twitter.[4]

Number of Posts on Social Media Accounts

Content and Text Similarity Analysis

Using text similarity analysis, which allows us to quantify how similar two or more units of text are (in this case, social media posts),[5] the GEC identified that AfD Party accounts had the most content that was identical (or nearly identical) to posts published by any of the other accounts—meaning party accounts often published other pro-AfD content as its own to increase visibility. While AfD Party accounts were central in amplifying AfD content across all platforms, they were most influential on Facebook. Accounts belonging to politicians or news websites often published via their respective accounts across the three platforms, but they were most active, and most critical, on Telegram, condemning various COVID-19 restrictions as well as the Green Party and amplified anti-immigration messages.
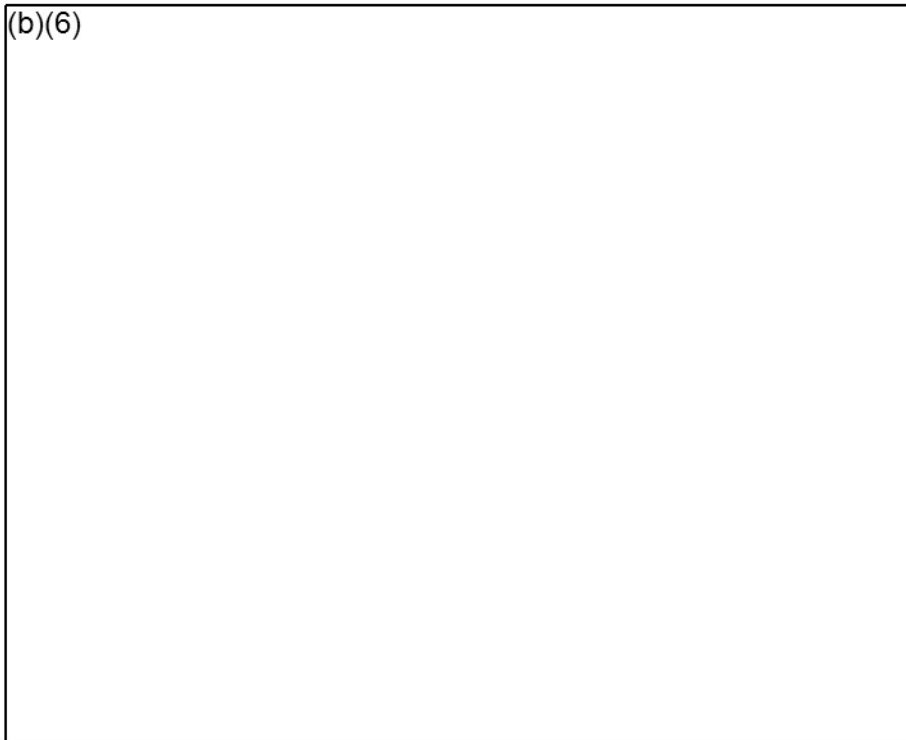
The GEC identified at least 5,121 unique pairs of posts[6] across all platforms that had identical or nearly identical text. However, most of these pairs (5,027) were from the Facebook page of (b)(6) (b)(6) ~84,000 followers),[7] which generates multiple posts per day that either redirect users to follow another Facebook page affiliated with (b)(6) or asks for monetary donations via PayPal. Most of (b)(6) Facebook posts also include screenshots of tweets from his Twitter account, (b)(6) (~42,000 followers).

We excluded the pairs of identical text from (b)(6) Facebook page and focused our analysis on the remaining 94 pairs of identical or nearly identical posts. The distribution of these pairs is shown in the table below, along with the platforms upon which they were published. The table suggest that:

(b)(6)

Example of Facebook posts by (b)(6) which are posted several times per day, suggesting spam-like behavior [Text partially translated into English]

1. AfD Party accounts were the primary amplifiers of similar content published by AfD politicians' accounts. For example, the official AfD Party Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram accounts published identical content that was also posted by Jörg Meuthen,[8] Alice Weidel,[9] Stephan Brandner,[10] and others. However, politicians seemed to focus on their own original content, as they did not share or amplify content from fellow politicians. Therefore, AfD Party accounts were the primary amplifying mechanism spreading content across the platforms.

2. Many politicians and news accounts were less focused on amplifying other accounts' content, instead publishing original content across their respective online presences. In particular, *Journalistenwatch*,[11] Beatrix von Storch,[12] and Stephan Brandner made use of cross-platform narrative amplification by consistently posting identical content on different platforms. *Journalistenwatch* shared 32 identical posts on Twitter and Telegram, all of which included headlines and links to articles posted on journalistenwatch.com.

3. Politicians and news outlets/forums primarily used Telegram as their platform of choice, the platform where we also observed the most content criticizing the German government. These narratives included opposing COVID-19 restrictions and anti-immigration sentiments.

Source	Target	Total Identical Posts	Twitter and Twitter	Twitter and Facebook	Twitter and Telegram	Facebook and Facebook	Facebook and Telegram	Telegram and Telegram
Journalistenwatch	Journalistenwatch	33				32		1
AfD	Jörg Meuthen	16				16		
Beatrix von Storch	Beatrix von Storch	10					10	
AfD	Alice Weidel	9				9		
Stephan Brandner	Stephan Brandner	7			1		6	
Tichy	Tichy	6	5			1		
AfD-Fraktion Baden-Württemberg	Alice Weidel	4	1			3		
AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag	AfD-Fraktion Baden-Württemberg	3				3		
AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag	AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag	2	1			1		
AfD	AfD	1				1		
AfD	Stephan Brandner	1	1					
KenFM	KenFM	1						1
Max Otte	Max Otte	1						1
Nicolas Lotz	Stephan Brandner	1	1					

When looking at identical posts, AfD Party and politician accounts focused on anti-lockdown messaging, often arguing against stricter COVID-19 policies. They criticized promoters of lockdowns and mask usage such as Chancellor Merkel (AfD on Facebook, Alice Weidel on Facebook)[13] and Karl Lauterbach (SDP member) (AfD and Alice Weidel on Facebook).[14] They also highlighted the consequences of lockdowns, including increased panic/fear (AfD and Alice Weidel on Facebook),[15] increased private bankruptcies (AfD-FBW on Twitter, Alice Weidel on Twitter),[16] and restricted freedom. Other narratives included criticisms of the current government and policies not supported by the AfD such as the government's plan to close of all nuclear power plants in Germany (AfD on Facebook, Alice Weidel on Facebook).[17]

Politicians and news websites used Telegram extensively, and it was seemingly the preferred platform for politicians. Furthermore, politicians' and news accounts Telegram posts by were more critical of the Green Party and of COVID-19 restrictions than posts by AfD Party accounts. Additionally, we consistently observed more

Identical post from AFD Party account and AFD Politician Alice Weidel criticizing Chancellor Merkel's COVID-19 restriction policies.

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vitriolic content being shared on Telegram compared to more mild rhetoric on Twitter. A possible reason why more caustic posts were shared on Telegram and Facebook rather than on Twitter could be Twitter's increased strictness in enforcing its rules and policies. For example, Beatrix von Storch pointed out that Twitter deleted some her tweets that contained Islamophobic content. In her Telegram post, Beatrix von Storch stated she posted a tweet— which appears to have been removed by Twitter— that anti-Semitism in Germany is "imported through migration." Beatrix von Storch then described Twitter as "anti-Semitic" for deleting the tweet, presumably for violating Twitter's hateful conduct policy (Beatrix von Storch on Telegram and Facebook).[18]
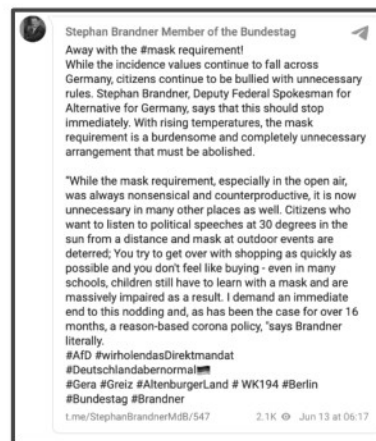
Accounts belonging to *Journalistenwatch*, Beatrix von Storch, and Stephan Brandner were the most prolific in sharing identical posts across the different platforms. Many of these cross-platform posts criticized COVID-19 restrictions, as seen in the example to the right. Although the main narratives focused on criticizing restrictive COVID-19 policies (Stephan Brandner on Telegram and Facebook),[19] posts by these three accounts also contained anti-immigration (Beatrix von Storch on Telegram and Facebook)[20] and anti-Green Party narratives (*Journalistenwatch* on Telegram and Twitter).[21]

ANALYST COMMENT: None

Twitter

Telegram

Example of identical Telegram and Facebook posts by Stephan Brandner containing anti-mask message [Text translated into English]

We would appreciate your feedback by completing a short survey here.

References

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[1] As measured by centrality.

[2] For more information regarding this previous GEC analysis, please see "AfD and Other Far-Right Accounts' Tweets About COVID-19 and the Green Party Likely Amplified by Accounts Engaged in Inauthentic and Coordinated Behavior," GEC2021-EUR-595, 13 August 2021.

[3] AfD, AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag, AfD-Fraktion Baden-Württemberg, AfD Verden

[4]

Number of Posts on Social Media Accounts[4]			
Politician/Organization Name	**Twitter**	**Facebook**	**Telegram**
Journalistenwatch	110	0	417
Junge Freiheit	45	---	92
Max Otte	27	9	109
Einzelfallinfos	2	---	155
Freiheitlicher	---	---	64
Tichy	157	440	---
KenFM	80	---	129
BILD	0	645	---
Anabel Schunke	0	**	---
Nicolas Lotz	168	441	---
AfD	18	245	131
AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag	21	70	3
Jörg Meuthen	0	110	---
Alice Weidel	0	96	---
Andreas Kalbitz	0	20	---
Tino Chrupalla	0	**	---
Beatrix von Storch	0	96	82
Stephan Brandner	36	92	21
AfD-Fraktion Baden-Württemberg	0	113	---
AfD Verden	0	65	---
Frauke Petry	0	34	---
Marcus Pretzell	0	1	---
Afd Kompakt	---	---	116
TOTAL	**664**	**2477**	**1369**

--- Account does not exist/could not be found

** Account does not allow public access unless user signs in with private account

[5] Our algorithm, which utilizes cosine similarity measure, compares the texts of two posts to determine their similarity. This measure gives a score between 0 and 1 for each pair of posts such that 0 represents no similarity between posts and 1 represents identical posts. Although we set a threshold of 1 for the cosine similarity score for this report, there were posts that were not entirely identical. This was mainly due to the preprocessing step required for the algorithm, which removes certain texts from a post (e.g., URLs) before determining its similarity score compared to other posts in order to improve the results of the algorithm.

[6] A pair consists of two posts that contain identical or nearly identical text. Those post could have been made on any combination of the three social media platforms. Since there were a total of 4,510 posts, there can be a total of 10,170,050 unique pair combinations (i.e., $4,510^2/2$). Each pair is given a score from 0 to 1 which determines the similarity of the texts found in a pair of posts. In this analysis, we focused on pairs that had a score of 1, i.e., there were identical or nearly identical.

[7] German YouTuber (b)(6) whose most amplified tweets expressed anti-immigration messaging

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[8] Federal Spokesperson of AfD

[9] AfD leader

[10] AfD MP

[11] A far-right internet blog that shares Islamophobic and antisemitic content

[12] Deputy Leader of AfD

[13] Posted by AfD (Facebook) and Alice Weidel (Facebook):

https://www.facebook.com/540404695989874/posts/4481561165207521

https://www.facebook.com/1061322973878937/posts/4549894235021776

[14] Posted by AfD (Facebook) and Alice Weidel (Facebook):

https://www.facebook.com/540404695989874/posts/4453966594633645

[15] Posted by AfD (Facebook) and Alice Weidel (Facebook):

https://www.facebook.com/540404695989874/posts/4453966594633645

[16] Posted by AfD-Fraktion Baden-Württemberg (Twitter) and Alice Weidel (Twitter):

https://twitter.com/AfDimBundestag/status/1399693586032214018

https://twitter.com/Alice_Weidel/status/1399683662610903041

[17] Posted by AfD (Facebook) and Alice Weidel (Facebook):

https://www.facebook.com/540404695989874/posts/4320078478022458

https://www.facebook.com/1061322973878937/posts/4390683904276144

[18] Posted by Beatrix von Storch on Telegram and Facebook:

https://t.me/BeatrixvStorch/927

https://www.facebook.com/549796328395150/posts/321122629377266#channels

[19] Posted by Stephan Brandner on Telegram and Facebook:

https://t.me/StephanBrandnerMdB/547

https://www.facebook.com/1550798871807977/posts/3039424442945405#channels

[20] Posted by Beatrix von Storch on Telegram and Facebook:

https://t.me/BeatrixvStorch/927

https://www.facebook.com/549796328395150/posts/321122629377266#channels

[21] Posted by Journalistenwatch on Telegram and Twitter:

https://t.me/jouwatch/27939

https://twitter.com/jouwatch/status/1404000713303375876