

Asocial media

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The incidence of abusive commentary on social media is rising. Media specialists Carsten Reinemann and Christoph Neuberger are exploring the grounds for this development, and have invited journalist Dunja Hayali to discuss the issue.

In terms of verbal abuse and worse, many users of social media seem to be gifted with amazing powers of inventiveness. What's up on the internet?

Reinemann: Everything you care to think of. The gamut ranges from crude insults to statutory offences and death threats, directed against individuals and whole groups. Violent and repulsive posts and content know no bounds.

Neuberger: That even applies to those still at school. Cybermobbing has caused youngsters to commit suicide. But it also extends to States involved in civil wars or in international conflicts that are fueled by hate. The [internet](#) has given us an entirely new form of public space, where emotions are in constant turmoil. There are no gatekeepers, and feelings can get out of hand to a degree that is unknown in the classical media.

Does this involve a substantial proportion of users or is it the work of a lunatic fringe that has attracted more than its fair share of attention?

Reinemann: It is indeed a mass phenomenon. Some 20% of young people claim to have been targeted by cybermobbing, and 70% of all users take note of offensive posts directed against others. Among younger users, who are particularly active online, the latter figure rises to around 90%. – Who writes such posts? In a representative survey carried out by Bitkom, the trade association of the German telecommunications sector, 6% of respondents admitted to having posted an abusive comment online – an amazingly high fraction. Even more shocking are the reactions. Two-thirds of the authors of such posts said that their views were supported by others in their personal milieu. In other words, these are not the views of a few disgruntled trolls holed up at home with

their laptops. Even the most absurd assertions and the most vitriolic comments are applauded by kindred spirits. That's what makes the issue so problematic.

Neuberger: This is not how people behave in personal interactions in real life. These are sudden, livid outbursts, facilitated by anonymity. I can always log out of the chatroom, and nobody is any the wiser. I don't need to worry about sanctions or exposure. I can remain anonymous, and never have to think of my victim as a person like myself, but only as the representative of a group.

Do those who post such abuse actually hate their targets?

Reinemann: It is difficult to unravel the motivation for such outbursts. On the one hand, there are the trolls, who have no fixed opinions. Their goal is to provoke, and then enjoy the reactions of those who rise to the bait. Trolls most probably make up a relatively small group. Then there are the more or less normal users who use the internet as a platform on which to give vent to their emotions. Thirdly, there are substantial numbers of people who have their own political or religious agendas and go online to mobilize support for their views. And finally there are those for whom the internet is a political battleground. One must remember that [social media](#) also provide a platform for radical groups that espouse extremist positions and have no hope of getting a hearing in the mainstream media.

But what accounts for the total disregard for civilized norms? Does it reflect developments in the real world or is it largely specific to the new media?

Neuberger: The internet became a mass medium in Germany in 1994, so

it's not all that new anymore. In the wake of 9/11, public commentary on the internet became strongly politicized in the US. But in Germany the blogosphere was long seen as irrelevant and as a source of amusement, if anything. It was viewed as a playground for narcissists, and the urgent social and political issues found no place there. That changed had dramatically by the time of the Federal elections of 2013 at the latest. Today, social media play an important role in debates on social issues, such as immigration, banking and financial crises, inequality and questions relating to identity – that whole complex of 'We and the Others'.

Reinemann: Nevertheless, social media still play a far larger role in the political sphere in the US than they do in Germany. That results from the collapse of the [traditional media](#), which have been very badly hit by the internet, as witnessed by the disappearance of so many newspapers. On top of that, there has been a strong polarization of radio and television networks, which has been further facilitated by the internet. In spite of its problems, Germany still has a functional media landscape, with its public broadcasting services, commercial stations and a strong regional newspaper market.

With the help of an online campaign marked by verbal abuse, the "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) was conspicuously successful in the recent Federal election. How did the party exploit social media – or did the mainstream media supply the real echo chambers?

Reinemann: There are webpages that don't just criticize Angela Merkel, but express blatant hatred of her, which had been voiced in a less virulent form during demonstrations. The distinction between offline and online worlds is becoming obsolete. The two spheres have become entangled and mutually reinforcing. The hooligan element can express itself more explicitly and aggressively online than on a TV talk-show. The question is whether or not the classical media make things worse by

reporting and commenting on such tactics. The overt disregard for norms is intended to draw attention to oneself and one's aims, and the traditional media respond by providing it. This poses a dilemma, but it is the media's task to point out such violations of civilized behavior, because they tell us something vital about the nature of the party. That over 80% of voters take the view that the AfD has failed to distance itself from right-wing extremists is the result of the coverage that has appeared in the mainstream media. But that doesn't resolve the dilemma in which journalists and media find themselves. Ignoring the infringement of norms cannot be the solution.

Neuberger: It is a difficult balancing act. During this year's election campaign, the AfD made far more use of Twitter than all the other parties – although Twitter use in Germany, at less than around 5%, is negligible by international standards. Political parties recruit their followers from among their own supporters, who don't need convincing. So the election campaign fought on social media did not have much effect, at least not directly. However, journalists keep a close eye on Twitter and they tend to pick up on tweets. The highly pointed and often provocative nature of tweets gives them a certain news value, even if in a negative sense. – And here too, journalists face a dilemma, between their duty to report and the risk of instrumentalization. On the whole, however, the kind of mischief we saw in the American presidential election, which may have influenced the result, did not feature in the German election. Social bots did not play a significant role, fake news rarely turned up and nothing leaked out of the Bundestag.

Reinemann: It is however quite difficult to find out what exactly the AfD and other groupings actually disseminate online. During the campaign, the AfD provided more information in Russian than any of the other parties, and did relatively well among Russian immigrants of German extraction. Moreover, thanks to the increasingly fragmented nature of the internet, we very often know little about what goes on

politically in certain online communities made up of people of Turkish origin, or even East German online communities.

Neuberger: Much has been said about echo chambers and filter bubbles. But empirical investigations show that ideological enclaves that are completely cut off from the rest of the world are exceedingly rare, and there is no sign of a disintegration of the public sphere. Users still spend most of their time on websites maintained by the [mainstream media](#), even when they distrust them.

And talk of the "deceiving press"?

Reinemann: Yes. The data come from a survey of "Trust in and Use of the Media" carried out among AfD sympathizers in the spring of 2017. These people actually use the traditional media quite intensively, although they complain about them. They probably have a different attitude to the evening news on TV, and are either angry or quite pleased when they hear what they expect. Initial results from another current study with former radical Islamists suggest that some people even run the risk of becoming entrapped in the multitude of hate and propaganda videos on YouTube. They later realized that YouTube's search algorithm had presented them only with channels and videos of that sort. This probably applies only to very small groups, but they may pose a bigger problem, because they tend to become obsessed with this type of content.

Neuberger: It would be a mistake to underestimate how much of right-wing protest is deliberately dramatized. The idea is to give the impression that that it is an authentic and spontaneous expression of the will of "the people". The AfD and the anti-Islam Pegida movement are perfectly aware that personal appearances by Angela Merkel are always attended by swarms of journalists, and so they simply exploit the multiplier effect of the classical media. But what these

demonstrations articulate is not just dissatisfaction, it is a disintegration of perceptions. Very many people have embraced conspiracy theories which are very difficult to refute by means of rational arguments. Up to now, there has been overwhelming support for, and trust in expertise and professional journalism, but this trust is now being questioned, among the wider public at any rate. It's no longer a matter of disputing particular assertions, which may be either true or false, but of rejecting certain conceptions of the world and modes of understanding reality. We now have the phenomenon that only the individual's own position, or that taken by one's circle of friends, and the arguments that support it are taken to be valid. The like-minded confirm each other's standpoints, so the process is self-sustaining.

You mentioned earlier that social bots did not play much of a part in the recent German election, in contrast to the referendum campaign in Britain and the presidential election in the US. How do these bots work, and how do they contribute to the rise of online abuse?

Reinemann: Bots are short computer programs that autonomously execute a particular activity, such as automatically propagating on Twitter preselected messages that conform to a specific pattern. By coupling different bots with one another, one can quite easily reach a very large audience. Researchers have tried to work out who is responsible for the dissemination of tendentious and propagandistic reports by Russian media. Is this driven by social bots or are real people behind it? Interestingly, they discovered that a number of people in Germany who are close to, and sometimes have organizational ties with, the AfD have been particularly active and effective in this regard.

Neuberger: Identifying social bots is quite challenging. The purpose of a social bot is to disguise one's true identity and create the impression that large numbers of people are involved. The best way to convince someone to adopt any given opinion is to persuade her that it is already shared by many others, as revealed by their tweets. How then does one recognize social bots? There are a number of clues, such as a sudden spate of identical messages or IP addresses, or very unusual transmission times at which most people are asleep in bed.

What else can bots do?

Neuberger: At the moment they are used primarily as artificial multipliers of identical messages. Attempts to simulate real discussions, in which bots interact with each other, have so far failed. But when that becomes feasible, one could nudge public opinion in the desired direction. We are still learning what sorts of manipulations are possible. One is to plant "false flags". As the height of the latest influx of refugees, reports began to come out which suggested that newspaper articles describing good deeds performed by refugees – for example, cases where refugees had returned lost handbags to their owners – had been shown to be false. But the stories cited had never appeared. The whole thing was a scam to discredit the "lying press" and their alleged publicity for the Willkommenskultur. There were also cases of false leaks, cases in which journalists were supplied with manipulated or ostensibly secret information – as happened in France just before the parliamentary election. We continue to use the terms 'mass media' and 'mass communication' – but what we really mean is the isolated individual sitting in front of a TV screen. What we haven't yet understood is the mobilized mass, like those who manned the barricades in the urban flashpoints in 1848 and 1871 – the crowd, whose members interacted with and upon each other. This is the agitated mass whose reincarnation we are now experiencing online. We are just beginning to understand the dynamics of shitstorms, for example.

Reinemann: The important question also relates to history: Has the internet actually caused this new surge of outrage? Needless to say, hating and hatreds have never gone away, and politics or media have always exploited them. There are countless examples of the awful repercussions of hate speech and media have at times also had a major part in spreading it – a particularly dramatic example being the role played by certain radio stations in initiating the genocidal massacres in Rwanda in 1994. In the industrialized West since World War II, we have had a domesticated public sphere, in which certain relatively civilized "rules of engagement" were respected. The recent fragmentation of the public sphere has created niches in which hatred of minorities or particular politicians can be expressed unchecked.

How should one deal with hate speech?

Reinemann: How does one define a troll? If someone writes something provocative just for the sake of being provocative, I can ignore it. These are people who have psychological problems, probably a narcissistic disturbance, maybe sometimes even in association with a sadistic streak, and there is no point in trying to argue with such individuals. I also don't really have to talk to people who have extremist views and disseminate hatred. The European model of freedom of expression is not compelled to follow the Anglo-Saxon one. We have a different tradition in this respect. The same rules should apply on the internet as those that we follow in our interpersonal interactions. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to take steps to ensure that these norms are respected online – if necessary by making use of the criminal law. The standards set out in German law are those that must be applied, not those that Facebook, Twitter and Google choose to adopt. The platform providers have already committed themselves to taking the necessary steps to ensure that these legal norms are enforced. But that hasn't worked.

The Bundestag passed a law against the online publication of hate speech last summer.

Reinemann: The great advantage of the new law is that it obliges platform providers to publish the criteria they use to define which offensive or otherwise objectionable posts are deleted. That does not mean that any opinions that someone finds distasteful should be deleted. But where incitement and defamation are concerned, the same rules should apply online as offline.

And you believe that the new law provides a tool that will bring the high-tech giants into line?

Reinemann: It is at least a serious attempt to do so. The status quo is that the platforms say they delete such material. But they all have their own rules, which nobody outside the firm knows anything about, and they do not reveal these rules. Now they must publish complaints and specify how they have responded to them. And there is now a statutory body to which complaints can be submitted. It is a step in the right direction.

Neuberger: The problem is whether such a law is enforceable in practice, given that the main protagonists are globally active. The firms who run [social media platforms](#) are coming under greater pressure in Germany than in many other countries. But they must accept that they have a responsibility to society, and cannot continue to hide behind the notion that they only provide technical infrastructures. On the other hand, one cannot expect them to check every post that turns up. There must be room for compromise. So, what demands can one make of platform providers? Is it possible to develop algorithms that can distinguish between permissible and improper content, or does this need to be done by human editors? How much content is it possible to process? We need flexible regulation, but above all we need transparency.

Reinemann: It's clear that the new law cannot hope to eliminate extremism and distasteful content from the internet, and that raises the question how one goes about combating the extremist propaganda that does appear. This requires sensibilization and preventive measures. We must enable young people to recognize the dangers, and strengthen their values and self-identity, so that they do not succumb to hatred. We are now intensively studying how often young people come across extremist content online, and whether they recognize it as such.

What can one find on the market for the incitement of hatred?

Reinemann: Right-wing extremists and Islamists are now using variants of the wolf-in-sheep's-clothing strategy. They first try to draw young people with hip-hop music, with cool content and an appealing design. In other words, they latch onto features of contemporary youth culture. The so-called Identitarian movement also works with aesthetic trappings and trimmings, like those used in "The Hunger Games" or "Game of Thrones". The use of so-called memes, which aim to activate subliminal perception, is also important. Memes combine image and text in a manner that may at first seem straightforward or even amusing, but on consideration one may begin to question the implication of the juxtaposition. Only then does the veiled threat or thinly disguised call for action become manifest. To give you an example, in our tests with youngsters, we use the following combination. We show side-by-side pictures of Kim Jong Un and Angela Merkel, together with the text: "If you have been deprived of your rights, then you are living in North Korea or in Germany." Then we add a suggestive reference to violence: "We've had enough, and we will defend ourselves with all available means." This sort of thing is fairly frequent online and is rapidly shared by youngsters, whose most important sources of news are items passed onto them online by their friends.

Neuberger: Education can effectively diminish the impact of these strategies, and exposés in the press can play an important part. That was shown when debates about the social media centered on the issue of privacy, and how much information one can unwittingly divulge online. The degree of awareness and the overall level of media competence among young people subsequently improved significantly. It is also vital to create contexts in which civilized discussions can take place. There are lots of possible ways of opening up spaces for discussion which would help to bridge the gap between the one-way communication that is typical of traditional mass media and that found in the wilder reaches of the internet. One could for example set up forums in which a larger number of preselected people take part. In such deliberative polls, 100 to 200 persons – a representative sample of the population – could discuss socially relevant issues over a longer period, in a structured fashion, with experts. That would certainly make far better use of the opportunities for participation provided by the internet than the present situation allows.

But emotions are the lifeblood of social media, in particular on Facebook. In fact, it can be argued that the incitement of rage is an integral part of the business models adopted by all social media. Angry posts draw attention, and attention is what sells advertising.

Reinemann: Certainly, and plenty of classical media make use of these strategies also, drastically overstating headlines on social media relative to the versions on their own web pages. Focus Online is a well known example.

Neuberger: Attracting attention is everything, and anything that does so is fair game. That's why hosting the whole spectrum from the

aesthetically appealing to the obnoxious and disgusting is in the interests of platform providers. Many newspaper editors adopt this line too, and try to tweak headlines via SEO (search engine optimization) in the hope of pushing them up in Google's rankings. That is a deformation of journalism and damages its standards. I worry a lot when I see editors in Germany becoming heavily involved in social media. It may be a natural impulse in light of the economic woes of the print media, but these companies place themselves in the hands of platforms that make their own rules. And here I would point the finger at the public broadcasting services, which have sufficient resources to set up their own platforms. However, funk.net, a platform which presents youth-oriented programs produced by the two national TV channels (ARD and ZDF), and costs 40 million euros a year, operates virtually in disguise. No reference is made to the platform's public status, because it might scare [young people](#) off. Instead, it tries to attract viewers via Instagram and YouTube, because that's where they expect to find their youthful audience. It all looks rather like throwing in the towel.

Reinemann: In the end, everything comes down to the question: Does society want to retain and maintain a non-commercial segment in the media sector, which is not entirely dependent on economic logic, and which – despite all the influence that politicians can exert – is neither a state-run network nor one that represents the interests of any single political party? This is an enormously important question, as a cursory knowledge of history or a look at other countries can teach us. What happened after the mass shooting in Las Vegas in October shows us where the logic of hunting for attention can lead. The leading platform providers were forced to apologize publicly for the levels of hatred and fake news to be found on their networks.

Neuberger: The internet is huge laboratory, in which everything is possible. What do we want to make of this medium, which knows no limits? And how do we find the means to shape it in a sensible way? The

strategy used to regulate a manageable number of publishers and broadcasting services – which has worked well for traditional media – doesn't work anymore. But I'm sure there are many other ways – self-regulation, co-regulation or the promotion of talent – to regulate a medium that converts us all from passive recipients into active communicators.

Reinemann: And whatever one may say about how they deal with rage and hatred, social [media](#) have perhaps given us an unprecedentedly clear picture of social realities – which may make it easier to tackle their underlying causes.

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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