

From Conspiracies to Insults: A Case Study of Radicalisation in Social Media Discourse

Thea Riebe, Katja Pätsch, Marc-André Kaufhold, Christian Reuter

Research Group KontiKat, Institute for Information Systems, University of Siegen
Science and Technology for Peace and Security (PEASEC), TU Darmstadt

Summary

Online radicalisation is often linked to discourses on social media. In this context, the question arises how populist online discourses radicalise in social media platforms. With a quantitative content analysis of supporters of the German party “Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)”¹ and their contributions on Facebook between March 2014 and May 2017, this preliminary analysis illustrates how the discourse shifts from a dominantly neutral debate to insult-driven and discriminatory contributions. It provides insights into the dynamic of political social media discourses and shows a tendency of correlating language style and topics that can be further studied in Social Media Analytics.

1 Introduction

Social media discussions can lead to radicalisation of their members when false claims are used to push discriminatory or delegitimizing narratives. However, radicalisation is not a linear process but is a result of a combination of narratives. In order to provide preliminary insights into these processes, the paper presents findings of a Facebook group of AfD supporters and selected discourses comparing their contents between 2014 and 2017 through a quantitative content analysis. The research question “**How do discourses in social media groups change or radicalise their rhetoric and what are their narratives?**” is approached the following way: Based on background and related work about radicalisation of online discourse, as well as using the case of AfD supporters (section 2), our paper describes the methodology including data selection, operationalisation and the codebook development (section 3). Furthermore, the

¹ Translated as *Alternative for Germany*. The name expresses the rejection of the so called main stream political parties and was founded in 2013 with the goal to leave the eurozone of the common currency and return to the national currency.

results and trends are presented (section 4), lastly, followed by a discussion and conclusion (section 5). Hence, our research presents that the topics have changed, while the language style is increasingly insulting. Nevertheless, there are some preliminary indicators that certain opinions go together with insulting language, such as the rejection of gender equality, (Muslim) migration and the disassociation from the establishment. On the other hand, there are preliminary indicators of so called fake news claims, false narratives and conspiracies to correlate with a more neutral language. Finally, we found a topic-related peak speaking of mistrust in the credibility of institutions after the 2016 city council election in Hessen in the sample, where the AfD achieved 11,9% of the votes on average.

2 Radicalisation in Social Media

Social media have become a place where all kinds of information are shared not only in everyday life, but also during human-induced disasters (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018), such as shootings, terror attacks, and uprisings, which may result from the process of radicalization (Reuter et al., 2017b): Political movements and protests use online platforms to connect, to construct and share their identity as a group or mobilise social movements (Ray & Tarafdar, 2017). This effect is amplified by the users' tendency to share information without verifying the source (Ha & Ahn, 2011). However, rather than the source, the relationship to the individual or the community generating content, the number of likes and comments are often most influential on the users' attitude and readiness to share (Koroleva et al., 2011). Besides, prior research has shown that emotionally charged information spreads faster (Hariharan et al., 2017). Social media allows gathering user information and selecting displayed content, thus supporting the formation of filter bubbles that mostly display information which confirms pre-existing assumptions (Holone, 2016; Pariser, 2011). Accordingly, studies have supported the effect of discussion in an online community to polarise group positions towards the extreme (Peng & Slaughter, 2011). Although identity-disclosing features of social media profiles moderate user behaviour, the possibility to remain anonymous online still allows users a more unconstrained expression of negative emotions and verbal attacks on others without fearing social consequences (Huang et al., 2015). This can lead to a process of radicalisation, as mostly studies concerned with salafist and jihadist radicalisation have shown (Aly et al., 2017; Frindte et al., 2016).

Right-Wing Populist Movements: The right-wing narratives are often focussed on resentment towards different ethnicities, the idea of a superior group, and dissatisfaction with the political establishment (Rydgren, 2005). One reason for the current success of right-wing populism is that "far right racism has taken on a much more politically correct character" (Williams, 2010). Right-wing populism benefits from the transformation of biological racism into a racism based on cultural differences. "This new cultural racism advocates the 'right to difference' in which different cultures, viewed as incommensurable 'totalities', needed to be preserved and separated in order not to corrupt the 'authenticity' and 'integrity' of each culture" (Zúquete, 2008). The right-wing parties present themselves as the last hope for a culture that is doomed to destruction by foreign infiltration and loss of identity (cf. Zúquete 2008). Other important factors for success of such mobilisations are a feeling of being oppressed in

the population, perceived uniformity in the established political landscape, address of fresh issues, availability of mass communication channels (Rydgren, 2005). The ease of control is equally important: In Germany, the right-wing movement network focuses mainly on political parties as well as a few central figures (Caiani & Wagemann, 2009).

Research Gap: Taking into consideration the given research on social media communication of social and political groups as well as studies focusing on radicalisation in right-wing populist groups, the research gap can be found in connecting how the register of the language changes and how it is linked to topics or shared positions. Although the features of online communication that benefit right-wing populist movements have been systematically outlined by Krämer (2017), this study contributes preliminary empirical insights into recent tendencies of radicalisation in social media of right-wing populist discourse.

3 Methodology

In HCI, empirical studies may provide new knowledge through findings based on observation and data-gathering, serving as a foundation for the development of HCI artifacts, guidelines and principles (Wobbrock & Kientz, 2016). Given the impact of AfD-related groups on social media as a forum for exchange and mobilisation (Krämer, 2017), it seems to be a promising approach to examine the process of radicalisation by means of conversations, posts and replies from relevant Facebook groups and pages. Thus, we selected and collected data from the official Facebook presences of AfD and applied qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010) to develop a codebook (Table 2). Based on the quantification of codes, we applied descriptive statistics to identify trends along frequency and temporal metrics (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013).

To extract comments from the Facebook pages, the free Facebook app *Netvizz* was used. Excluded from this extraction were private profiles and closed groups. In summary, 12,471 posts and comments in the period from March 17th, 2014 to May 8th, 2017 have been extracted from Facebook groups. By observing the activities in the Facebook groups mentioned above, we could determine that successes or failures addressed in mass media (see below) led to a higher frequency of user reactions. Therefore, the data collection periods between 2014 and 2017 have been set at significant points of the past in regular intervals (Table 1).

	Mar 17 th –24 th , 2014	Mar 18 th –19 th , 2015	Mar 6 th , 2016	Apr 24 th , 2017	Sum (N)
Posts	18	5	2	50	75
adjusted	17	5	2	33	57
Comments	2055	563	400	8114	11,132
adjusted	1746	530	243	4265	6784
Likes					322,152
Subscribes					311,600

Table 1. Facebook profile of AfD (<https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/?fref=ts>) and top comments for @alternativefuerde on Facebook

Category	Definition	Example	Coding rule (inclusion /exclusion criteria)
Neutral comments	Residual category for comments that are not insulting or discriminating, nor overly supportive	<i>“Alternative for Germany: I, as a voter, would like to know the position on the situation in Ukraine”</i> . (95 th of AfD Mar 2014 ➔9; Mar 17 th , 2014; 2 likes).	Including remarks and questions that lack emotional indicators, or that focus on fact-driven contributions, excluding discriminating remarks.
Insults	Utterances in strong informal language mostly directed at representatives of the (political) system to discredit them	<i>“Stupid, stupider, German electorate!”</i> (42 nd of AfD Mar 2014 ➔1682; Mar 18 th , 2014; 5 likes).	Including all expressions that follow the goal to discredit and disrespect individual or groups, and that are not specifically racist, or discriminating against women and the LGBTQ community.
Anti (political)-establishment	Remarks referring to the established parties, the government and the civil society as an enemy	<i>“The parties Linke, Grüne and FDP are political whoremongers, who, without any moral restraints, sell their ‘matters of the heart’ to anyone who will share the honeypots with them. The rest of established democrats like CDU/CSU and the SPD are not any better, only they are sitting higher than the former ones. They all are a hodge-podge of characterless, neo-feudal exploiters of the population”</i> (20 th of AfD last 50 ➔54; Apr 30 th , 2017; 1 like).	Including all comments that express a rejection of the political actors as part of a corrupt establishment, presented in a “them vs. us” rhetoric.
Anti-Muslim Immigration	Utterances that discredit the Islam and its members due to their beliefs	<i>“The Islam only brings war, misery, terror, suppression, death and poverty all over the world. Germany does not need these achievements and this is why I despise this religion”</i> (9 th of AfD last 50 ➔3326; May 04 th , 2017; 7 likes).	Including all remarks that identify the Islam as a foreign religion, that is invasive and inherits a violent and oppressive ideology.
Media criticism	Utterances that criticise the partisanship of the media	<i>“The Süddeutsche (Southern German newspaper) has always been and will stay a rag of left-wing green propaganda. Completely unreadable”</i> (61 st of AfD Mar 2014 ➔132; Mar 19 th , 2014; 7 likes).	Including all negative and discrediting remarks on the news and media, such as calling them “Lügenpresse” (<i>lying press</i>), or propaganda.
Fake news claims and conspiracies	Remarks that question the reliability of information, news or the social and political system	<i>“The election is rigged like in the GDR. You can draw your own conclusions!”</i> (52 th of AfD 2016; March 06 th , 0 Likes).	Including remarks that mistrust the reliability of information, and implicitly or explicitly offer alternative narratives. Excluding critique of the media.
Misogyny (and homophobia)	Remarks that are discriminating against women and LGBTQ community	<i>“It’s all right as long as gays, lesbians, transsexuals etc. are completely equal... what a shitty country!”</i> (67 th of AfD Mar 2015 ➔460; Mar 18 th , 2015; 8 likes).	Includes utterances that discredit the gender and equality policies, or view women and members of the LGBTQ community as subordinate to men or unworthy of their civil rights and/or equality.
Racism	All remarks that express the superiority of one race or ethnicity over another for whatever reason	<i>“We have been force-rescued during a banana boat trip at the Tunisian coast. Now we are only wearing NIKE clothes, we all have the newest mobile phone and can live well on Hartz 4. The only thing that is bothering me is that I have to get used to the name Ali...”</i> (79 th of AfD last 50 ➔3576; May 04 th , 2017; 9 likes).	Including all expressions that have been used by the racist language of the Nazi Regime in Germany and that are recycled by the right-wing movement or statements that contain the ideology of the supremacy of the white race or the western culture.

Table 2. Codebook Content analysis

The first period for data collection of AfD comments was set in the week from *March 17th – March 24th, 2014*, when the program for the European elections of 2014 was published. We collected 18 posts with a total of 2055 comments. In mid-March 2015, the split of the party around their co-founder Björn Höcke was the subject of many discussions. Accordingly, the data collection period was set to *March 18th – 19th, 2015*, where five posts with 563 comments were generated. On *March 6th, 2016*, after the AfD reached 11.9% at the council election in the state of Hessen, we collected two posts with 400 comments.

Excluded from the data sets have been all such comments that would announce election dates, contain only images, single letters, links or emoticons. Afterwards, this data set contained in total 151 posts and 8013 comments. The categories have been operationalised based on an arbitrary sample of 50 posts taken from the AfD Facebook page on *April 11th, 2017*. These comments have been further reduced by choosing 30 of the most liked to serve as the sample for category development. From this selection the categories have been developed inductively. Further, all the extracted posts and comments have been interpreted and assigned to the categories. The interpretation of the posts and comments has been done according to the codebook (Table 2).

4 From Fact-Driven to Conspiracies and Insults

Sometimes, it was required to allocate posts and comments to multiple categories (Table 3). This occurs due to the variety of utterances, and sometimes their length, covering different issues, or being both racist and anti-Muslim immigration. Therefore, we can see a correlation between categories, such as between *racism* and *anti-Muslim immigration* (Figure 1). As Krämer (2017) suggests, the leaders do not often directly engage actively on social media. As the administrators of the AfD Facebook page not get involved in the discussions, the users themselves took control. Very often, they use *@username* to make a direct reference to other users' comments. This way, a genuine discussion can evolve where the participants refer to each other.

Year		2014	2015	2016	2017	Sum
Register-based	Neutral	557	77	37	639	1310
	Insults	113	58	21	702	894
Topic-based	Anti-Muslim Immigration	32	63	29	671	2204
	Racism	30	46	5	389	470
	Anti-establishment	106	72	42	343	563
	Fake News Claims and Conspiracies	137	44	59	385	625
	Media Criticism	76	9	8	291	384
Misogyny	5	1	-	39	45	

Table 3. Frequency of categories, $N = 6840$

The sample of comments and posts reaches back to *March 2014*. Posts and comments of this period consisted of *neutral comments* with 83%, opposed to 17% *insulting comments* (Figure

1). The sample of 2015 was characterised by the discussion about the split of the party around Björn Höcke and our data showed a visible change in users' discussion behaviour. The topic of the so-called "refugee crisis" was not yet prevailing, as there were more discussions about European politics and Ukraine. Therefore, comments that reject Muslims or Islam (*anti-Muslim immigration*) and racist comments (*racism*) are still rare in 2014 but have increased since then from 8% up to 32% (*anti-Muslim Immigration*) and from 8% to 18% (*racism*) in 2017. Both categories often appeared in more than one contribution at the same time.

People's dissatisfaction reflected in the increase of *anti-establishment* comments stayed relatively stable from 27% in 2014, to 31% in 2015, 29% in 2016, and has decreased in the sample of 2017 to 16%. In 2016, most of the comments contained congratulations to the parliamentary election for the council elections in the state of Hessen, where the AfD achieved 11.9% of votes on average. Thus, the elections have been seen as a preview for the federal election in 2017. Users have discussed elections in Hessen and in general, therefore, *fake news claims and conspiracy theories* reached its highest relative frequency with 41% in the posts and comments. Here, the dominant topic was election fraud and mistrust in the credibility of the system. Hence, the same year of 2016, *anti-establishment* utterances peaked as well with 29%, in contrast to 27% (2014) and 16% (2017, before the federal election). Contrasting this, the critique on the traditional media was in a low range between 20% (2014), 4% (2015), 6% (2016) and 14% (2017). Although, this seems not intuitive, it could be caused by the focus on other narratives that have drawn more attention, such as *conspiracies and fake news claims*.

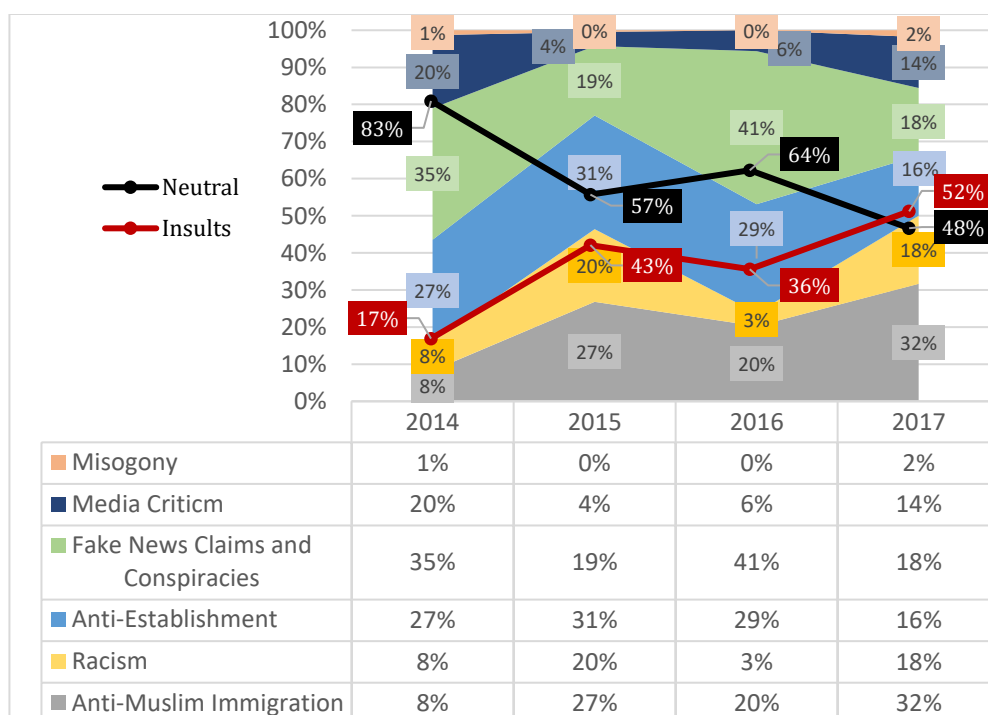


Figure 1: Relative frequency of categories, $N = 6840$

Moreover, the tendency towards violent language and racist comments significantly increased. Since 2014, the ratio of *insults* steadily increased from 17% in 2014 to 52% in 2017, displaying an up-and-down dynamic but overall rising tendency. Although the majority of the posts and comments have started in 2014 with the greatest relative frequency of *neutral comments* (83%). Further, the data shows a lack of trust in the credibility of political institutions due to the peak of *fake news* accompanied by expressions of mistrust after the elections in Hessen in 2016. Whereas in 2017, the discussions have shifted towards a comparably stronger *media criticism* and utterances that express *resentment towards Muslims and Immigration*.

The analysis is not representative due to the limited data sample and the case study design, underlining its explorative character. The sample is further not representative for the party AfD and its supporters, but only shows the development of certain discourses and their tonality and register in the AfD-Facebook group and therefore does not represent the political program of the party and their individual members.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Prior research indicates that specific characteristics of social media discussions in an online community may polarise group positions towards the extreme (Peng & Slaughter, 2011), thus facilitating the process of radicalization (Aly et al., 2017; Frindte et al., 2016). This paper examined the communicative behaviour of the discourse of AfD supporters in Facebook and found preliminary indicators concerning the radicalisation of the discourse style (register-based indicators), which seems to be linked to discussion about resentment of social groups (topic-based indicators).

Question: How do discourses in social media groups change or radicalise their rhetoric and what are their narratives?

Result: The sample shows a steady increase of insulting language, while at the same time discriminating contributions show a similar dynamic, in which the rejection of Muslim immigration, race-discrimination and the mistrust of the establishment show preliminary indications of possible correlation. Therefore, we see a preliminary tendency of insults being linked to the topics of immigration and race within the sample.

Nevertheless, radicalisation of discourse is not a homogeneous or linear process, but rather builds up or can decrease dynamically over time and can include a combination of different targets of discrimination (Neumann, 2013). Although discriminatory comments have increased within some Facebooks comments, we have only observed a comparably low and stable amount of comments that discriminated against women and members of the LGBTQ community (2% of the comments in 2017), which seems also not to follow the same dynamic as other topic-based categories. The AfD Facebook group comments in 2014 displayed a relatively objective discussion culture where the users exhort and reprove each other. This can lead to a process in which insulting expressions are seen as more normal, and thus might have been more expected than in the beginning of the sample in 2014. The analysis of the process

throughout time, however, shows that there is an overall increase in insulting contributions between 2014 and 2017.

The contributions within the sample focussed on questioning the legitimacy and credibility of the institutions. Along with this change in communication there is hardly any linear development noticeable. Adverse behaviour was only documented in the form of comments lamenting the deletion of posts. This means there are indeed reactive responses, however, they mostly stay invisible. Due to the non-linear development of topic and comment tonality, we cannot predict the future neither about the discourse that we have studied, nor about the development of radicalisation outside of the social networks. Further, we can make no predictions about the development of the individual process of radicalisation or deradicalization. However, although the empirical findings have to be complemented by further studies, the insights about the correlation of the register and topic-based indicators, the dynamic of political social media discourses and tendency of correlating language styles may inform (1) the development of HCI artifacts, guidelines and principles (Wobbrock & Kientz, 2016), as well as (2) the application of Social Media Analytics, which is the process of social media data collection, analysis and interpretation in terms of actors, entities and relations (Stieglitz et al., 2018), to gain further insights into the processes of online radicalization.

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