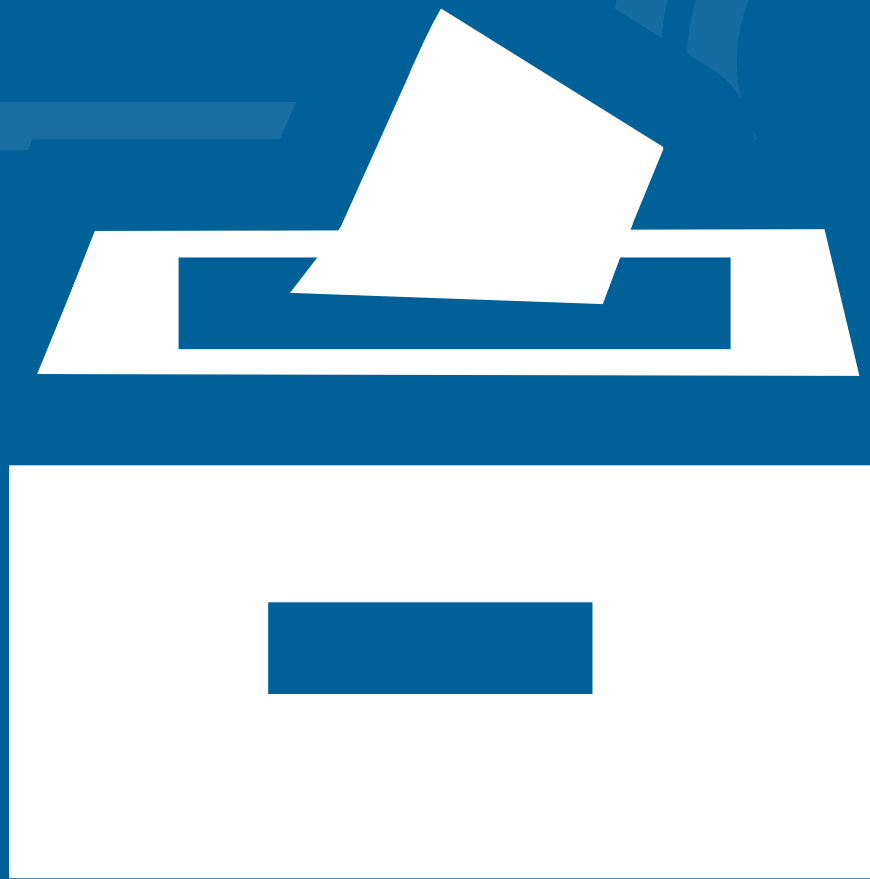


The 2021 German federal election in retrospect:

A meta-analysis of the online election campaign



About

Democracy Reporting International

DRI is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. Our work centres on analysis, reporting and capacity-building. For this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law. Headquartered in Berlin, DRI has offices in Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Ukraine.

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pollytix

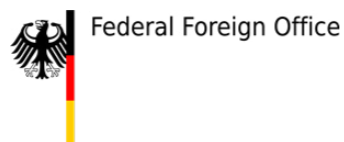
pollytix strategic research gmbh is based in Berlin and offers research-based consulting at the interface of politics, economy and society. Its main areas of expertise lie in the fields of issue management, opinion research and election campaigns.

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Executive Summary

Germany's Federal Elections in September 2021 took place at a time when the electorate was more active online than ever before, increasing risks of digital violence against politicians, negative campaigning and attempts at coordinated online disinformation. These potential threats to democratic discourse did not go unnoticed – numerous organisations analysed social media discourse in the run-up to election day.

Our paper compiles and synthesises key findings on **platform use, the targets of online campaigns and the most-covered topics** identified by think tanks, civil society actors, news media and academia in their studies on the German elections.

These are the most relevant and noteworthy findings and outlooks:

- The adoption of internet-based technologies greatly amplifies the impact of disinformation tactics and hate speech and has an increasing influence on political events. All studies identified disinformation narratives and digital violence online in the run-up to the Bundestagswahl, revealing the need for measures to decrease these influences by increasing digital competencies and better digital safeguards. Mainstream media play a critical role in the dissemination of disinformation narratives, an issue that calls for urgent attention and potential policy measures. The reach and influence of foreign media outlets are gaining significance and must therefore be critically monitored.
- Which social media platforms were used the most to spread hate and disinformation? The answer differs depending on the platform in focus. While DRI looked at the four big players and discovered the most negative sentiments towards candidates on Twitter, ISD and CeMAS focused on Telegram and found that the platform harbours large radicalisation potential. German news magazine Der Spiegel referred to both WhatsApp and Telegram as disinformation breeding grounds.
- Several studies found that while certain disinformation narratives – those referring to COVID-19 or the climate, for example – currently do not directly jeopardise electoral processes and decisions per se, they do correlate with specific political convictions, which are in turn employed as election-related disinformation.

- Although COVID-19 as a subject of disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories played a central role during the election phase, the climate debate may bear more long-term potential for division. Despite comparatively little posting on the topic, the AfD has already gained significant reach by establishing a narrative questioning climate politics and policies. Therefore, the topic might be specifically prone to cause great potential for division in the future.
- As an overarching pattern, attacks on democratic integrity mainly originated from the right-wing to extremist right-wing spectrum, partially supported by anti-democratic foreign actors. This could further such political parties' or groups' appropriation of one, strongly polarising topic to the disadvantage of mainstream parties, who have to cover many different topics.
- Targets of negative campaign attacks were predominantly politically opposing parties or their respective top candidates. All three of the most prominent political parties and their candidates were also targeted by other (political) actors, both online and offline. The Greens were mentioned most often as a target of disinformation tactics and subject to more rhetorically aggravated reporting by RT DE.
- Most studies agree that Baerbock was the most frequent target of hate speech and disinformation narratives, often with identity-based attacks of a different calibre than her male opponents. These misogynistic societal stereotypes were identified on several platforms, mainly Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. Other female lead candidates (Weidel, Wissler) received less identity-based and toxic attacks; however, ISD and HateAid did identify several other female politicians highly affected by digital violence during the last month of the election campaign. Gendered disinformation could lead to a distorted public perception of female politicians, potentially also leading to a lesser number of women seeking to pursue a political career.

Introduction

2021 marked a special election year for Germany for many reasons. After 16 years with former Chancellor Angela Merkel at the helm, Germans chose a parliament (and thereby chancellor) while the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects still held the country in its grip. The pandemic accelerated the use of internet-based online technologies and communication. As such, political campaigning in the run-up to the German federal election (*Bundestagswahl* or BTW) took place in a highly online setting. Opinion-forming online became a crucial aspect of parties' political campaign repertoires and, more than ever before, allowed voters to follow and comment on the online political debate. Around 2 million tweets about the Bundestagswahl were posted between June and September 2021.¹ Although social media users are not representative of the entire German electorate, certain online trends or topics regularly transcended the online sphere, reaching an even larger audience.²

In general, the increased use of online resources has also amplified the dissemination and impact of hateful content, disinformation, and other propaganda tactics about political events from both foreign and domestic actors.³ This, in turn, also impacts elections and citizens' electoral rights, as can be observed in many other countries around the world.⁴ Moreover, an uptick in incitement and anti-democratic agitation can be observed in everyday politics, especially during election cycles. The most recent German Bundestagswahl was no exception.⁵ These trends have the potential to jeopardise election integrity and collective societal trust in democratic processes. Election-related challenges are extensively discussed in German public discourse; however, the public online environment around election time remains a space vulnerable to manipulation, invasion of privacy, and digital violence - for voters, candidates and political parties alike.⁶

The dynamics of political parties and internet users, their online activities and narratives, were monitored by many actors. This meta-paper offers an overview of their findings. It compares and collates the results of many studies on online discourses and narratives and their effect on the information environment in the run-up to the German Bundestagswahl - and identifies linkages between different assessment areas and overarching patterns.

Special focus will be placed on:

- **Hate speech** or **digital violence**⁷, *an umbrella term including various forms of belittling, harassment, discrimination, social isolation and coercion of other people on the internet with the help of electronic means of communication; or toxic speech*,⁸ *language that, due to its characteristics, discourages people from reading or participating in a discussion;*
- **(Negative) online campaigning**, *a campaign directed against other parties and candidates instead of campaigning for one's own party and candidate;*⁹
- **Disinformation** *(including foreign influence and/or interference), the intentional dissemination of false information about a person or a factual matter*¹⁰; and **conspiracy narratives**, *attempts*

to explain events or the state of affairs based on conspiracies by a mostly small group of actors with allegedly sinister intentions.¹¹ The related term **fake news** is rather employed as a political expression.

Please note: The above list is not a complete representation of (problematic) online conduct and/or developments. This would involve a much larger spectrum of phenomena that cannot be covered in this meta-analysis. Moreover, when discussing the topics described above, definitions vary in scale and scope, and are not mutually exclusive. Regarding the latter, it should also be noted that emotional debates, sharp polemic or rhetoric, are a part of election campaigns and discourse, be they from political entities or individuals. Sometimes they violate laws, sometimes they do not. However, even if legal, it may represent a trend towards forms of campaigning that should worry a democratic society.¹²

Main findings

There have been many German initiatives monitoring electoral trends¹³ or online discourse in the run-up to the election. A lot of reports were published by civil society organisations, academia, think tanks, media outlets and other organisations. These research efforts had different focuses, sample sizes and observation periods. When analysing online content and activity, certain distinctions should be made. Some studies measure contributions (content/posts) from political actors, others posts about political actors from users and/or online news outlets (including foreign ones). Some studies focus on potential reach, posts or interactions, and base their selections thereon, while others look at the total amount of posts from social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and/or Telegram. They partially employ different definitions. Contributions from online news outlets and social media platforms can also overlap, as one could mention the other, which also applies to cross-platform spreading. Therefore, comparing findings with differing data is challenging.

In discussing findings on disinformation narratives, hate speech and negative campaigning, several questions arise: where do they take place (on which platforms); who do they target and with which content?

1. Which platforms?

Online media outlets

pressrelations looked into the reach of both online news outlets and posts by social media users, finding that the overwhelming majority (about 91%) of election coverage reach¹⁴ is generated by 'traditional' online news outlets,¹⁵ which have a significantly higher number of readers.¹⁶ Online media outlets, however, make up 'only' 21% of online contributions to the German Bundestagswahl. Whereas social media users generate 78% of contributions, user accounts only constitute a reach of about 9%.¹⁷

Non-trustworthy media (both foreign and domestic)¹⁸, on the other hand, comprise less than 1% of online contributions with even lower reach. The narratives these outlets generate, however, partially enjoy high popularity on social media, as they are also engaged by other users and trusted media channels.¹⁹ As such, despite not having a large audience of followers, the reach of such outlets exponentially increases if their headlines are picked up by mainstream media. As will be seen in section II.I.III Foreign influence, due to differing research methodologies, GMF and Avaaz have found very different results, deeming the reach of RT DE and other non-trustworthy media to be of very significant size. This is because these studies also looked at consequent interactions, shares, comments and views.

This presents a contemporary moral dilemma for online media and journalism: disinformation narratives significantly spread in reach when they are picked up by trustworthy media in attempts to debunk such narratives. The large reach of trustworthy online media outlets could therefore function as a digital megaphone for disinformation narratives, allowing them to transcend their initial bubbles into mainstream social networks.

Furthermore, ISD found that social media users with right-wing political leanings are, in some cases, more prone to generate 'tabloidised' headlines of previously published, established media output to fit their desired context. This ensures higher perceived credibility of specific disinformation narratives.²⁰

Social media platforms

The online sphere is used by political actors (vis-a-vis political party and direct candidate accounts)²¹ and millions of users. Although all political parties utilise social media to appeal to their target audiences, different political parties tend to operate to varying degrees on different platforms. As will be shown, this is also the case for the extent to which hate and disinformation unfold. In general, politicians make use of online platforms to address their constituencies more directly. On the one hand, this allows for more direct democratic participation; on the other hand, it could bypass journalistic fact-checking, a tactic frequently used by the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD).²²

Social media platforms are highly heterogeneous in their general organisation and usage, their viral reach and dynamics (including overall mood/sentiments²³), as well as their users. Meanwhile, electoral content posted by political parties and their candidates is highly subject to their own thematic focuses and/or topics for which they are publicly perceived as having the

most expertise or competence ('issue ownership').²⁴ Whereas in 2017, the online playing field was strongly dominated by the AfD, and its preferred topics highly shaped the general political agenda and electoral discourse,²⁵ this time around, other political parties seem to have caught up. Not one single political party significantly dominated online with its political agenda. Findings on the activities of political parties and their candidates on social media platforms²⁶ differ and are dependent on what is being measured: the platform in question; the number of contributions; the number of followers and likes; or online activity and potential reach.²⁷ For example, parties and candidates with fewer followers and/or likes, but high activity, can appeal to a large audience or very specific target groups through paid advertisements or active liking and sharing behaviour.²⁸ This is relevant within the context of negative discourse. For posts on the Bundestagswahl in general, Twitter achieved the highest figure.²⁹ However, solely monitoring the amount of (positive and negative) posts about a specific topic, party or candidate presents an incomplete image. It is equally important to look into the engagement of and the traction gained by contributions (measured in likes, shares, comments or retweets³⁰) in addition to reach. Several studies have (partially) undertaken this effort as well.³¹

Which social media platforms are most used to spread hate and disinformation remains contested and differs according to the political party and candidate in question. DRI found remarks about and sentiments towards candidates on Twitter to be the most negative.³² ISD and CeMAS found that Telegram, originally established as a messaging platform, but currently gaining traction as a broader communications platform, harbours large radicalisation potential. The platform has gained in popularity since the outset of the pandemic, with high-reach posts averaging around 275,000 daily views in September 2021.³³ German political magazine Der Spiegel referred to both WhatsApp and Telegram as disinformation breeding grounds.³⁴ Both platforms, however, remain under-researched as they are encrypted messenger applications and therefore more closed-off networks.

Kübler et al. (2021) found that nearly 7% of all election-related Facebook posts contain potentially illegal content or disinformation, or infringe electoral rights in the German federal elections.³⁵ Of these posts, 4% were likely prohibited under German law, 35% violated Facebook's community standards or Terms of Service (ToS), 47% violated electoral rights, and an astounding 93% could be considered disinformation.³⁶ On Twitter, about 6% of election-related content was found to be problematic, with 100% thereof considered disinformation, 15% in violation of platform rules, and 52% infringing on electoral rights (no posts found were considered likely illegal under German law).³⁷ Note: The research time frame was short and took place in the second half of May 2020, a relatively early stage of the election campaign covering a relatively short window of time. This indicates that the proportion of problematic content had not yet reached its peak. Unfortunately, the research does not further specify which political parties, candidates and/or narratives were subject to such content.

Foreign influence

Fear of foreign interference has been a central pillar of the public debate in Germany. Although Kübler et al. describe foreign interference as a major electoral risk, *'it is less important than disinformation spread by real people in a coordinated fashion.'*³⁸

Among untrustworthy media outlets, RT DE (previously RT Deutsch), a currently banned,³⁹ German-language Russian state-backed news outlet, was one of the most active with by far the largest reach.⁴⁰ More shockingly,

GMF⁴¹ found RT DE's online social media reach to outperform that of established German news outlets, such as Bild and Der Spiegel, despite lower (yet rapidly growing) follower numbers.

RT DE generated the most interactions and the second-largest interaction rate,⁴² becoming one of the most prominent news accounts on Facebook in a very short period and actively engaging in election discourse.

This result was supported by the findings of Avaaz, which further elaborated that RT DE's reporting focused heavily on COVID-19 vaccination policies; it was highly active on Facebook during the first large-scale 'Querdenker'(anti-vax)-protests.⁴³ Its content was mainly shared inside of anti-government and anti-vaccination groups.⁴⁴ The platform disproportionately targeted the Green Party's first-ever candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock, with negative narratives, portraying her alleged political errors in more (provocative) detail compared to those of her two (male) competitors. Furthermore, it was generally found that Russian state-backed sources paid more attention to female candidates.⁴⁵

Der Spiegel confirms: The Greens were subject to more rhetorically aggravated reporting by RT DE and are generally more prone to targeted disinformation tactics by foreign actors.⁴⁶ Avaaz even claims that a third of all posts sharing RT DE articles came from AfD-affiliated pages and contain false and misleading content, although the fact-checking methodology of this study remains slightly unclear.⁴⁷

2. Who was targeted?

First and foremost: no politician or political party is immune to negative sentiments and toxicity online. They regularly become targets of online hate, threats and/or insults. Also, levels of negative sentiment and toxic content towards each party and candidate differ per platform, and all platforms encompass a different reach and audience.⁴⁸ As the analysed studies found, not all politicians and parties are susceptible to disinformation narratives - it is in fact platform- and target group-dependent. It must be noted that these findings could be incomplete due to the particularly strong focus placed on the top-three candidates for chancellor and their respective parties, although other politicians also had a strong presence online. Another aspect is negative campaigning, which can include hate speech and/or disinformation narratives. Potentially, all forms described above can lead to severe reputational damage, the withdrawal of politicians from the campaign, the cherry-picking of political subjects, and ultimately an influence on voter dynamics that steers the success of political campaigns as a whole.

Negative sentiments and hate speech

Between June 1 and September 26, measuring the overall mood of discourse (sentiment) as well as negative, aggressive content (toxic or hate speech), DRI found that on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, general sentiments were very negative and predominantly about both Baerbock and conservative candidate for chancellor Armin Laschet. Across all researched platforms (unfortunately excluding platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp), hate speech predominantly focused on Baerbock, followed by Laschet and Alice Weidel (AfD), as well as their parties.

In both cases and on all platforms, Olaf Scholz and his Social Democrats (SPD) seemed to be significantly less affected by negative sentiments and hate speech.⁴⁹ Potentially, this could be explained by the fact that Scholz was long seen as a candidate with little chance to win the chancellorship, making him less of a focus. In general, his political profile was also less polarising than that of Baerbock and, to a lesser extent, Laschet.

Several other studies complement these findings (e.g., a one-week Twitter analysis by HateAid also found Laschet received the most potentially hateful Twitter comments⁵⁰), although the focus herein is on disinformation narratives surrounding candidates rather than hate speech or negative sentiments.⁵¹

From a sample of the 191 most-shared Tweets about 60 political candidates containing potentially hateful and offensive speech and identity attacks, HateAid and ISD found about 7% to contain conspiracy myths (especially those related to COVID-19), whereas nearly 12% of Tweets potentially contained xenophobia, racism, sexism or anti-LGBTQI narratives.⁵²

The exact content of insulting or hateful comments also differs: Baerbock received the most disrespectful comments (with highly sexualised, gender-specific attacks, such as those questioning her competence and knowledge⁵³); whereas comments targeting Laschet were more aggressive.⁵⁴ This was identified on several platforms, mainly Telegram, Facebook and, predominantly, Twitter.⁵⁵

Overall, studies agree Baerbock was affected most by hate speech and on a different level than her male opponents.⁵⁶

Her party, the Greens, also received the most hateful comments as compared to others.⁵⁷ According to DRI, other female candidates received fewer identity-based and toxic attacks;⁵⁸ however, ISD and HateAid did identify several other female politicians highly affected by Tweets containing digital violence during the last month of the election campaign (most notably the SPD's Saskia Esken, but also the Left Party's Sahra Wagenknecht and Katrin Göring-Eckardt from the Greens).⁵⁹ One analysis shows that much of the negative content and comments directed against Baerbock came from AfD supporters.⁶⁰ HateAid research found that Scholz (42%), followed by Baerbock (32%), received hate predominantly from right-wing or extreme-right-wing milieus (as compared to only 10% for Laschet).⁶¹

Personal and party-specific disinformation narratives

When looking into disinformation narratives, study results also vary. A troubling aspect is the spread of continuous, exaggerated half-truths on candidates (and parties), occasionally overlapping with hate speech and negative sentiments.⁶² This form of (rather covert) information manipulation is particularly nefarious, as it closely aligns with more legitimate forms of (negative) political campaigning, reaching a wider audience than more overt disinformation narratives. However, there is consensus that the Greens and Baerbock were disproportionately more frequent targets of conspiracy myths and disinformation narratives on several platforms with a large reach.⁶³ One study even goes so far as to claim that 56% of German adults have seen at least one fake news item on Baerbock.⁶⁴ Disinformation narratives on Baerbock especially took

flight after her candidacy was announced. Prior to this, former Chancellor Angela Merkel was the predominant target of disinformation.⁶⁵ Narratives mentioned by several studies include partially factual occurrences (e.g., plagiarism, embellished CV, supplementary income), as well as completely fabricated accusations such as affiliations with George Soros, the spread of fake nudes or obtaining a fake degree.⁶⁶ Again, it must be mentioned that this study only includes disinformation narratives from non-trustworthy media outlets and not from individual users.

Avaaz found that both party- and candidate-specific disinformation particularly targeted parties and politicians from the political centre: Greens, CDU/CSU and SPD.⁶⁷ This leaves room for interpretation, as the study does not make clear whether this is due to their political profile or because these were the three parties with realistic chances of winning the chancellorship. pressrelations identified 48 disinformation narratives directly relating to parties or politicians⁶⁸ (comprising a total of 2% of all election coverage from online media outlets). Of these 48 narratives: 20 sought to discredit the Greens (of which eight targeted Baerbock directly); 13 to discredit the CDU/CSU (of which four targeted Laschet); six SPD (of which none directly targeted Scholz); and nine non-party or candidate-specific disinformation narratives.⁶⁹ DRI found the dominant narrative for Laschet centred on corruption and, within smaller bubbles, accused him of siphoning financial funds for flood victims into his election campaign.⁷⁰ The same study found that attempts to rehash Scholz’s own scandals did not find great resonance. Contrary to pressrelations and Avaaz⁷¹, DRI did not find disinformation narratives on any of the other candidates.

Dominant disinformation narratives of top candidates

Armin Laschet (CDU):

corruption; siphoning financial funds for flood victims into the election campaign.

Annalena Baerbock (Greens):

plagiarism, embellished CV and supplementary income; affiliation with George Soros; fake nudes; fake degree.

Olaf Scholz (SPD):

flip-flopping; the hypocrisy of political views.

Negative campaigning

Negative campaigning focuses on laying bare factual or alleged weaknesses of political opponents for personal or political benefit.⁷² Historically, negative campaigning has been looked down upon in Germany; it is therefore rarely deployed.⁷³

During this election, however, negative campaigning played a more significant role, with political parties and their candidates directly and strategically disseminating negative campaign strategies through their party or individual candidate profiles. Research results from the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich⁷⁴ (note: relatively small sample and timeframe, adding data over time) show that the proportion of negative campaign posts targeting other parties from the CSU, FDP, Left Party and AfD even outweighed the number of own appraisal posts.

Combined, the CSU/CDU engaged in the most negative campaign attacks (which is highly remarkable for a governing party), followed by the Left Party and the AfD.⁷⁵

Whereas the SPD was the party least prone to employing negative campaign tactics, it was the most frequently targeted party by its political opponents (statistics relate to September 2020).⁷⁶ It must be noted that this trend seems to have changed over time, as the SPD and Scholz were initially not seen as a threat, and little negative campaigning against him and his party was found.⁷⁷

Targets of attacks were predominantly parties of opposing political ideology as a whole or their respective top candidates. The CDU/CSU, Left Party and especially the AfD also attacked numerous other, lower-ticket candidates from opposing parties. Especially the two parties at opposite poles of the political spectrum, the AfD and the Left Party, employed negative campaigning towards the government.⁷⁸

When looking further into the exact scope and focus of attacks beyond a ‘general’ perspective – differentiated by a specific focus on the opponent’s political goals, past performance, professional competence, credibility and moral integrity – the AfD shows the highest numbers, employing all tactics except credibility and moral integrity. The AfD was also found to be the most prone to deploying populist communication strategies.⁷⁹ When looking into disinformation narratives of half-truths in AfD-posts, LMU Munich’s research shows that these types of provocations do not play a significant role in the election campaign and barely gain traction among a broader audience.⁸⁰ In general, the study found that despite visible populist tendencies, all parties and leading candidates refrained from spreading full-fledged populist messages and so-called “fake news” on their central social media channels.⁸¹

All three of the most prominent political parties and their candidates were also targeted by other (political) actors, both online and offline.⁸² Of those studies reviewed, one negative online campaign stood out: that of lobbying organisation Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (New Social Free Market Initiative, INSM), which spread negative messaging on its social media account by way of paid advertisements (see Figure 1) on Facebook and Instagram (as well as in mainstream newspapers).



Figure 1. Annalena Baerbock as the target of the INSM campaign. The ad reads "Annalena [Baerbock] and the 10 Commandments: Green bans will not lead us to the promised land".



Figure 2. Olaf Scholz as the target of INSM campaign. The ad reads "Dear Olaf Scholz, Good politics works differently".

These campaigns mainly targeted the Greens and, more specifically, were directly aimed at Baerbock. This extensive negative campaign was one of the first of its kind in Germany.⁸³ pressrelations states that the INSM campaign amplifying a prohibition narrative about the Greens generated an extremely large reach: a maximum of 1.7 billion potential contacts. It is important to keep in mind that this figure does not represent the actual amount of users reached. The narrative garnering the most contributions concerned Annalena Baerbock's university degree (16.208 contributions).⁸⁴ Possible echo bubbles on other social media platforms like Telegram were not considered by pressrelations. To a lesser extent, INSM also targeted Scholz (see Figure 2).⁸⁵

Note: Potential contacts might give a distorted image, as, once again, there is a spill-over effect due to cross-platform spreading. Hate speech and disinformation were also spread under the hashtag #GrünerMist, another negative campaign by private entities targeting the Greens (see Figure 3).⁸⁶



Figure 3. An example of the #GrünerMist campaign, targeting the Greens.

Although the main focus of the campaign was large billboards, the campaign also set up a YouTube channel in addition to Facebook and Instagram accounts, where disinformation on the Green party and their political programme was spread, and where paid advertisements boosted views.⁸⁷ The AfD-affiliated Civil Alliance/Zivile Allianz,⁸⁸ as well as Unionwatch and Greenwatch, also engaged in efforts to discredit several political parties and their programmes.

The effects or influences of negative campaigning are still debated.⁸⁹ Questions even arise about whether negative campaigning had the desired effect, or rather generated attention or a so-called backlash effect in favour of the aggrieved party - in this case, the Greens. It does, however, seem clear that negative campaigning contributes to disinformation, fueling agitation and subjective online debates.⁹⁰ It raises the question of whether, and if so, how fair and just elections can remain in the future.

3. Which content?

The question of which specific topic dominated the election is still somewhat up for debate and depends on the research method. When looking only at social media coverage, DRI concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic and related subtopics were the most discussed⁹¹ pressrelations found climate politics to be the subject with the most overall contributions from both online media outlets and politicians.⁹² Another study also indicated that both COVID-19

and climate politics were regarded as the most important topics among eligible voters and therefore dominated the online sphere.⁹³ When looking at the vulnerability of these topics to disinformation narratives and digital violence, however, it is clear that both top the list. This might indicate that those topics attracting the most public attention are especially prone to be harnessed for disinformation narratives. Another frequent lightning rod for disinformation was the broad narrative of election fraud and declining democracy.⁹⁴

COVID-19

Whereas the AfD and their support groups initially engaged with this topic, when looking at specific posts from individual members of parliament, the CDU/CSU and the SPD most actively discussed the subject.⁹⁵ Generally speaking, discussions about the pandemic gained increasingly more traction throughout the entire political spectrum. This is partially explained by the breadth of the topic: everyone has something to say on current COVID-19 measures, future (preventative) measures and financial consequences, allowing for a flood of discussion.

The subject has also been highly prone to disinformation narratives and was subject to conspiracy theories.⁹⁶ This was partially induced by political parties courting certain groups, or channels engaged in false claims about the virus.⁹⁷ It was the dominating topic in the most-shared alternative media outlets within the conspiracy-ideological milieu.⁹⁸ CeMAS states that frustrated opponents of current COVID-19 measures are very prone to further entanglement with conspiracy theories and so-called 'alternative truths'.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the study found that populist and non-scientific narratives change attitudes. CeMAS found, for example, that the amount of vaccination opponents has increased since the outset of the pandemic.

The topic was also partially employed within the context of the 'Great Reset' conspiracy narrative, an online conspiracy claiming that global elites orchestrated the pandemic.¹⁰⁰ This narrative was especially popular in relation to Baerbock, who was frequently disproportionately mentioned compared to her counterparts, although Laschet and Scholz were also linked.¹⁰¹

Climate & flood catastrophe

The climate served as another important and polarising political topic during the 2021 election, a theme most political parties actively pursued and about which online users contributed.¹⁰² Several studies found most political contributions on this topic to come, perhaps unsurprisingly, from the Greens.¹⁰³ ISD found every third post published by the Greens on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram between 09 August 2021 to 26 September 2021 referring to climate, followed by the SPD (12%).¹⁰⁴ Focus on this topic was also induced in part by the flood catastrophe that took place in July 2021, two months prior to election day. ISD found these events not to be of lasting influence on the online debate, whereas CeMAS deemed the topic as having a longer-lasting influence within the conspiracy-affiliated milieu.

Despite a relatively low amount of contributions on this topic (7% of all posts), the right-wing, populist AfD benefited most from the debate on climate change. Its posts were shared significantly more often compared to those climate-related posts of other political parties.¹⁰⁵

The same can be said when compared to those non-climate related posts from the AfD, indicating that its climate-related content enjoys significant attention from its target audience. CeMAS supported this finding, reporting that the topic of climate change is much discussed in conspiracy-ideological and right-wing extremist Telegram channels.¹⁰⁶

Disinformation narratives on the climate spread significantly following an IPCC report and in the wake of the climate strike,¹⁰⁷ and mainly focused on the Greens and their political programme, as well as climate activists, creating an enemy image and sowing fear of 'climate hysterics'. ISD also found disinformation narratives against Scholz and Laschet – both those deploying personal critiques against both candidates, as well as those targeting their respective parties' energy policies – to be among the most frequently shared contributions.¹⁰⁸

Several studies found the complete denial of climate change to be a less prominent issue than expected.¹⁰⁹ Opponents of climate protection measures, however, would often take information out of context, distorting or mitigating facts, or misleadingly representing them, thus entrenching general scepticism towards climate protection measures.¹¹⁰ These included widely spread, speculative disinformation narratives on rising fuel prices, carbon trading, traffic and mobility (including speed limits), fossil fuels and renewable energy.

In general, the topic was prone to stylisation, which was then employed by right-wing supporters to feed into a (leftist) enemy image.¹¹¹ This could potentially trigger nationalistic or anti-democratic narratives that harness the climate debate as a political tool.¹¹² The ISD report also found that positive messaging on climate change measures was mainly shared on Twitter, whereas negative contributions were predominantly found on Facebook. This is interesting, as it somewhat contradicts the finding that comments on Twitter were predominantly negative.

To a significantly lesser extent, disinformation narratives were also triggered by and focused on the flood catastrophe that took place in July 2021. CeMAS concluded that these events triggered the spread of conspiracy narratives.¹¹³ ISD found allegations made against both Laschet and Scholz of them using the catastrophe for their own political or financial gain, or even that they unleashed the floods themselves to bolster their own self-interests;¹¹⁴ pressrelations only found such contributions regarding Laschet, identifying that two out of a total of 13 disinformation narratives of the CDU spread by online media revolved around Laschet and the flood; none were found to pertain to the SPD or the Greens.¹¹⁵ In general, the flood led to the spread of false information surrounding the specific extent of the catastrophe and more general narratives of it

having been orchestrated for political gain; however, this selection of disinformation narratives must be interpreted with caution, as narratives from individual users (and their influence in echo chambers or filter bubbles) were not considered. This, again, highlights the need for more all-encompassing media research.

Electoral fraud, jeopardising democratic processes

This narrative is greatly influenced by examples from the United States (vocalised after the ‘stolen election’) and is also mentioned here due to its potentially dangerous effects. In general, several studies have identified the spread of disinformation surrounding freedom of speech in Germany and the functioning of democratic processes as a whole.¹¹⁶

The German QAnon movement aimed to spread the narrative of electoral fraud, and the AfD actively took part in campaigning against mail-in voting.¹¹⁷

The Greens and Baerbock were especially subject to the narrative of posing a threat or danger to German democracy.¹¹⁸ This was done in part by communicating a distorted representation of the Greens’ electoral positions and their political influence, stating that “state propaganda” was deployed to ensure a Green victory. Results from Kübler et al. also found narratives on Facebook and Twitter violating electoral rights vis-a-vis attempts to manipulate public opinion or influence voting behaviour, raising doubts about electoral integrity, processes and/or results.¹¹⁹ In total, these narratives comprised a large amount of the overall problematic content or disinformation identified.¹²⁰ Somewhat attenuating these findings and risk portrayals, Kübler et al. also state that no scientific evidence has hitherto proved disinformation narratives about electoral issues or fraud have impacted human behaviour, nor that political parties’ social media use has impacted elections.¹²¹

Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned findings, which may portray a somewhat dystopian image, it is equally important to mention that there are still many uncertainties regarding the true influence of these topics on elections and democratic processes as a whole. Whereas laying bare overarching patterns indicative of (trends for) potential future risks and threats is of great importance, findings on the real-time influence of information manipulation partially lag behind. More in-depth and extensive research on the matter is needed that measures the impacts of disinformation, negative campaigning and hate speech on electoral dynamics in a detailed, longitudinal and all-encompassing way. This research area, however, remains rather tricky.

In general, spreading disinformation narratives against the democratic system within the public sphere can erode trust in electoral processes and potentially influence electoral decisions; however, this calls for very systematic spreading which goes beyond smaller, tight-knit networks (in ‘bubbles’, ‘echo chambers’ or ‘pocket communities’) disseminating disinformation and hate speech. Attempts thereto were identified, particularly within AfD-affiliated networks.¹²² DRI states that no systematic, widespread, anti-democratic disinformation was able to gain significant footing.¹²³ Though not quite as explicitly mentioned in other reports, none of those studies analysed seems to have established the realisation of a democratic threat of such magnitude. Nevertheless, disinformation narratives, especially about COVID-19, have become a societal issue, and were found to impact political decision-making.¹²⁴ Overall, because many threats and alarming developments were identified, reports suggest a more robust legal framework and stricter guidelines for counteracting further online threats and strengthening online digital participation.

The aforementioned situation could rapidly change, however, if non-trustworthy media outlets or social media platforms extend the reach and popularity of disinformation narratives. More so, half-truths and disinformation narratives are particularly hard to entangle and are disseminated in more and more savvy ways.

Recommendations for future analyses

As many threats and alarming developments were identified online, research suggest a more robust legal framework and stricter guidelines for counteracting further online threats and strengthening digital participation:

1. Encrypted messenger applications and other smaller platforms (“dark social media”) should not only be subjects of analyses, but also be held accountable for facilitating the spread of disinformation and conspiracy narratives. Easier access for research purposes is further required to standardise data scraping and collection approaches.
2. Platforms should be obliged to increase data access rates for organisations conducting social media monitoring while access to data must remain blocked for untrustworthy actors in order to prevent information misuse.
3. The large reach of non-trustworthy online media outlets can function as a digital megaphone for disinformation narratives, allowing them to transcend their initial bubbles into mainstream social networks. Research indicates that the influence of non-trustworthy (including foreign) media will most likely increase over time and must therefore be closely monitored.
4. Gendered disinformation is an under-researched phenomenon and is to take centre stage in future election research. The perpetuation of toxic false narratives can result in a distorted public perception of female politicians, potentially also leading to a lesser number of women speaking out online.

5. Efforts should be taken to facilitate sustained comparable data collaboration. As seen in this paper, many CSOs, academic researchers and media organisations have published individual research with similar goals. Synergies - as joint analyses have illustrated - can be used to enable data sharing and a wider outreach, eventually serving as an information gateway for more citizens.
6. Research methods, platform choices, time frames and thematic focus of the outputs analysed highly differ. We call for efforts to produce more systematic, longitudinal media research on all platforms that is similar in scale, scope and search criteria for the sake of internal validity.
7. Quality standards or good practice rules for social media monitoring need to be developed to ensure comparability of research designs, methodologies and analyses.

Overview of main sources

Source	Timeframe	Sample
DRI & Tagesspiegel: What's #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online	01 May 2021 - 26 September 2021	Facebook (392,635 posts), Youtube (1,121,198 comments), Instagram (69,117 posts), Twitter (1,534,931 tweets)
DRI & Tagesspiegel: So macht die rechte YouTube-Community Wahlkampf gegen Baerbock	June - September 2021	YouTube (404,167 comments under 2,570 YouTube videos)
CeMAS: Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen	17 May 2020 - end of September 2021	Telegram channels (2,858 original channels, 42.6 million messages)
GMF/ASD/ISD: 2021 German Elections Project (and subsequent publications)	March 2021 - December 2021 (end of reporting period: early November 2021)	Twitter (approximately 800 Twitter accounts producing 1 million tweets, thereof around 760 of domestic German media or politicians), Facebook (300 pages), YouTube (RT Deutsch) and 10 state-backed websites in German (state-sponsored websites connected to Russian, Iranian, Chinese and Turkish government officials, state media targeting audiences in Germany and German media outlets)
ISD: Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021	01 February 2021 - 01 July 2021 and 01 February 2021 - 31 July 2021	Facebook (100 most-read posts), Telegram (279 channels and groups)
ISD: Kalter Wind von Rechts: Wie rechte Parteien und Akteur:innen die Klimakrise zu ihren Gunsten missbrauchen	08 July 2021 - 26 September 2021 and 08 August 2021 - 03 October 2021	Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (181,203 contributions)
Avaaz: Deutschland Desinformations-Dilemma 2021	01 January 2021 - 30 June 2021	900 fact-checks
HateAid: Facebook versagt beim Schutz der Bundestagswahl	n/a	Facebook (100 posts & 1,000,000 comments)

Source	Timeframe	Sample
European New School of Digital Studies, Weizenbaum Institute, NRW School of Governance and the Leibniz Institute: Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021	Varying	Twitter, Google Trends, Facebook
Der Spiegel: Im Visier der Hetzer: Rechte Desinformationsattacken gegen die Grünen	accessed 12 June 2021 - 13 June 2021	Facebook (1 million posts in 341 channels)
Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich: Ergebnisse der Social-Media-Wahlanalyse #SoMeWa21 (#DigiDemo)	30 August 2021 - 26 September 2021 (varying analysis points)	Instagram and Facebook (2,297 posts)
Pressrelations/Newsguard/Fraunhofer: Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf 2021: Analyse zur BTW21	01 March 2021 - 31 August 2021	Online media (502,651), Facebook pages (29,593), Twitter (640,005) YouTube, Blogs (12,522), Fora (617)
Kübler, J., Sekwenz, M.-T., Rachinger, F., König, A., Gsenger, R., Pírková, E., Wagner, B., Kettemann, M. C., Krennerich, M., & Ferro, C. (2021): The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act.	Second half of May 2021	Facebook (1,100), Twitter (1,100) - drawn from a larger sample

Endnotes

- ¹ Zahlen zur Wahl – Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, “Die Kanzlerkandidat:innen im Twitter-Feed: Wann und wie wird über sie gepostet?”, 01 June - 01 September 2021. 60% of tweets (1.2 million) mentioned Laschet, Baerbock and/or Scholz.
- ² Democracy Reporting International (DRI), “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, December 2021, p. 9.
- ³ Johanne Kübler et al., “The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act”, Sustainable Computing Lab and Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, August 2021, pp. 10 and 21. They mention the 2016 US presidential campaign and UK’s Brexit referendum.
- ⁴ Ibid, pp. 11 and 22.
- ⁵ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”, 16 September 2021, p. 3.
- ⁶ This consideration brought about the [German Campaign Watch Initiative](#), an alliance of 19 CSOs calling on democratic parties to agree on a code of conduct for the digital federal election campaign 2021.
- ⁷ See the [general definition](#) by HateAid.
- ⁸ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 18.
- ⁹ See the definition by DRI.
- ¹⁰ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”, p. 2.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² For a thorough analysis of the legal framework in relation to the German federal elections, online election campaigns and subsequent legal obligations, developments and regulations, please see: Vincent Hofmann & Matthias C. Kettmann (eds.), “Plattformregulierung im Superwahljahr 2021: Ergebnisse rechtswissenschaftlicher, sozialwissenschaftlicher und datenwissenschaftlicher Studien zu Parteien und Plattformen im Bundestagswahlkampf” (Arbeitspapiere des Hans-Bredow-Instituts, 61), Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI).
- ¹³ Monitoring initiatives include ZDF Politbarometer Sonntagsfrage and ARD DeutschlandTrend.
- ¹⁴ Posts mentioning one or more of the top-6 German political parties.
- ¹⁵ Traditional online news outlets entail newspapers or TV channels that use online presence through a website or social media pages.
- ¹⁶ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, 01 March - 31 August, p. 9. This research focuses on posts mentioning one or more of the top-6 German political parties.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 13..
- ¹⁸ This was measured by a NewsGuardScore, see the NewsGuard [website](#) for methodology.
- ¹⁹ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 13.
- ²⁰ ISD, “Kalter Wind von Rechts: Wie rechte Parteien und Akteur:innen die Klimakrise zu ihren Gunsten missbrauchen”, 1 December 2021, pp. 14 and 18. This was found for both climate-related as pandemic-related content.
- ²¹ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 14, offers a brief explanation for this.
- ²² Johanne Kübler et al., “The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act”, p. 43.
- ²³ See Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021 - Week 2”. Platforms are oftentimes assumed to differ in ground tendency as to positivity/negativity. This research shows both negative sentiments on FB and Instagram contributions were of equally high proportions, although positive statements were spread more often on Instagram. This research shows both negative sentiments on FB and Instagram contributions were of equally high proportions, although positive statements were spread more often on Instagram.
- ²⁴ See DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 14 and Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021 - Week 1”.
- ²⁵ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 14.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 9, and Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021 - Week 1”.
- ²⁷ For example, DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, pp. 9-10 looks at the number of contributions and finds the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and their candidate Weidel to be dominant on FB, whereas Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich points at the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) to have made most contributions between 30 August 2021 - 24 September 2021 (206 FB posts of total 2,297 party and top-candidate posts on FB and Instagram). When looking at overall activity, DRI finds the CDU to be most dominant on Instagram, whereas LMU Munich compares this to the number of followers of Baerbock and Lindner, which are much higher, as well as their respective parties’ profiles. For example, on 30 August 2021, Baerbock had 265,653 followers on Instagram, and her party 189,397. The CDU had 97,952 followers and Laschet’s personal account made for 75,046 followers.
- ²⁸ See Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021 - Week 1 and 4”.
- ²⁹ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”. 640,005 contributions on Twitter in comparison to, for example, 502,651 contributions in online media outlets, 29,593 contributions on Facebook pages and 2,124 on YouTube. ‘Contributions’ refer to posts containing terms or combinations of terms that are clearly linked to the federal election (e.g., ‘Federal Election’ or ‘Federal Election’ in connection to political parties, the names of politicians and/or chancellor candidates).
- ³⁰ The quality of specific engagement forms and potentials for automatization of certain types of engagement can also be debated on. See DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 11.
- ³¹ See Zahlen zur Wahl – Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, “Das Social Media Leaderboard 1 Tage vor der Wahl”, 01 June - 01 September 2021.
- ³² DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 20.
- ³³ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”.
- ³⁴ Der Spiegel, “Im Visier der Hetzer: Rechte Desinformationsattacken gegen die Grünen”, 23 July 2021.
- ³⁵ Johanne Kübler et al., “The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act”. Random representative sample of 1101 Facebook and 1101 Twitter entries (from larger data set). Time frame: 15 to 31 May 2021.
- ³⁶ Ibid, p. 38.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid, p. 44.
- ³⁹ Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok imposed bans on RT.DE. Currently, RT DE remains to broadcast live-TV through its website, despite financial sanctions.
- ⁴⁰ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, pp. 5-6. RT.DE posted 392 contributions relating to (one of) the top 6 parties and generated 775.5 million potential media contacts per contribution. Freiewelt.net was identified as the most active medium touching upon disinformation narratives (25 contributions).
- ⁴¹ German Marshall Fund, “Russia’s Media Reach and Coverage of Candidates in Advance of the German Federal Election”, 25 September 2021. Between September 23, 2020 and September 23, 2021, RT Deutsch’s follower rate grew with 19.36%. Between April 1 and September 22 2021, RT DE’s ten most watched YouTube videos generated over 2.5 million views.
- ⁴² Interaction rate is defined by the number of users commenting on or sharing a post.
- ⁴³ Avaaz, “Deutschlands Desinformations-Dilemma 2021”, 6 September 2021, p. 10, found a significant rise in RT DE Facebook interactions in August 2020, simultaneous to the first large protests.
- ⁴⁴ German Marshall Fund, “Russia’s Media Reach and Coverage of Candidates in Advance of the German Federal Election”.
- ⁴⁵ German Marshall Fund, “Targeting Baerbock: Gendered Disinformation in Germany’s 2021 Federal Election”, 30 August 2021; German Marshall Fund, “Russia’s Media Reach and Coverage of Candidates in Advance of the German Federal Election”, 25 September 2021.
- ⁴⁶ Der Spiegel, “Wie Russische Hacker und Rechtsextreme die Bundestagswahl manipulieren wollen”, 9 April 2021; Der Spiegel, “Im Visier der Hetzer: Rechte Desinformationsattacken gegen die Grünen”, 23 July 2021.
- ⁴⁷ See Avaaz, “Deutschlands Desinformations-Dilemma 2021”. Note: RT DE corrected posts two out of three times after fact-checks were published.

⁴⁸ For example, DRI found that YouTube showcased predominantly negative sentiments towards all candidates except Lindner and Weidel and Facebook was predominantly negatively conceived on FB.

⁴⁹ Differences exist per platform. See DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ Hate Aid & ISD, “Hass als Berufsrisiko: Digitale Gewalt und Sexismus im Bundestagswahlkampf”, 9 March 2022, p. 1. Time frame: 19 - 26 August 2021.

⁵¹ See pressrelations, DRI, ISD „Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl“, Zahlen zur Wahl.

⁵² HateAid & ISD, “Hass als Berufsrisiko: Digitale Gewalt und Sexismus im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 3.

⁵³ See ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”, DRI, and Zahlen zur Wahl – Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, “Mehr als eine Plakatkampagne - Wie sich #GrünerMist bei Facebook und YouTube ausbreitet”, 01 June - 01 September 2021.

⁵⁴ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁵ See HateAid & ISD, “Hass als Berufsrisiko: Digitale Gewalt und Sexismus im Bundestagswahlkampf”.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 19, 21. Also identified by Der Spiegel (of 50,000 filtered comments potentially containing legally punishable hatred, 174 relate to the SPD, 265 to the CDU and 1,535 to the Greens), ISD Digital Violence, Avaaz, HateAid.

⁵⁷ HateAid, “Facebook versagt beim Schutz der Bundestagswahl”, September 2021.

⁵⁸ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 21.

⁵⁹ HateAid & ISD, “Hass als Berufsrisiko: Digitale Gewalt und Sexismus im Bundestagswahlkampf”, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 21.

⁶¹ HateAid & ISD, “Hass als Berufsrisiko: Digitale Gewalt und Sexismus im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 1.

⁶² DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 23.

⁶³ pressrelations found that over 90% of all contributions containing party-related disinformation narratives are targeted towards the Greens and had the largest reach, pp. 5 and 39. Note: pressrelations study focuses only on non-trustworthy media outlets.

⁶⁴ Avaaz, “Deutschlands Desinformations-Dilemma 2021”.

⁶⁵ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, pp. 5 and 39.

⁶⁶ The latter narrative was found to be most prominent one, especially on Twitter.

⁶⁷ Avaaz found disinformation narratives about the Greens (44 %), CDU/CSU (36 %), SPD (17%) and 1% of disinformation narratives about the Left Party, FDP or AfD.

⁶⁸ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 33 and onwards, derived from 25,880 contributions containing disinformation (n= 1,187,712).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 23. ISD and HateAid found that this narrative was viewed over 60,000 on Telegram.

⁷¹ pressrelations also found disinformation narratives aimed at other politicians from CDU/CSU, SPD and the Greens.

⁷² Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, “Ist das noch Wahlkampf, oder muss das weg? - Negativkampagnen gegen die Grünen im Vergleich”, 01 June – 01 September 2021.

⁷³ Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021”.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Timeframes: 30 August – 10 September 2021 (939 Instagram and Facebook posts) and 30 August – 24 September 2021 (2,297 total Instagram and Facebook posts).

⁷⁵ Ibid. Timeframe: 30 August -10 September 2021 (939 Instagram and Facebook posts), when CDU/CSU posted 120 contributions attacking their political opponents, thereof 52 on SPD, 32 on the Left Party and 30 on the Greens, and 30 August - 24 September 2021 (2,297 total Instagram and Facebook posts), when CDU/CSU posted

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ DRI, “Election monitor Germany 2021 - Research Brief #3”, 08 September 2021. The research brief is based on DRI’s Social Media Dashboard, monitoring Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter posts and comments between 1 June and 26 September 2021.

⁷⁸ Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, “DigiDeMo/Social Media Electoral Analysis 2021”. Week 2,

Diagram 7.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Ist das noch Wahlkampf, oder muss das weg? - Negativkampagnen gegen die Grünen im Vergleich”.

⁸³ Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Eine Negativkampagne kommt selten allein - die Anti-Grünen-Kampagne der INSM“, 01 June – 01 September 2021.

⁸⁴ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Ist das noch Wahlkampf, oder muss das weg? - Negativkampagnen gegen die Grünen im Vergleich”.

⁸⁶ According to <https://gruener-mist.de/>, Hamburg agency Conservare Communications and its CEO David Bendels are behind the campaign. Bendels is also editor-in-chief of the right-wing online medium “Deutschland-Kurier”.

⁸⁷ Zahlen zur Wahl - Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Mehr als eine Plakatkampagne - Wie sich #GrünerMist bei Facebook und YouTube ausbreitet”. Within 2 weeks, one video gained over 31,500 clicks. On average, the videos were clicked on 10,474 times and gained more positive than negative resonance.

⁸⁸ *Der Spiegel*, “Im Visier der Hetzer: Rechte Desinformationsattacken gegen die Grünen”.

⁸⁹ This [academic paper](#) nuances the influence of negative campaigning.

⁹⁰ Zahlen zur Wahl – Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Ist das noch Wahlkampf, oder muss das weg? - Negativkampagnen gegen die Grünen im Vergleich”.

⁹¹ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, pp. 4 and 15.

⁹² pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 17.

⁹³ See Zahlen zur Wahl – Kurzanalysen zum Superwahljahr 2021, „Kinder, Impfen, Migration: Darüber spricht die AfD kurz vor der Wahl auf Twitter und Facebook“, 01 June - 01 September 2021.

⁹⁴ See pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”.

⁹⁵ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 16.

⁹⁶ Avaaz, Democracy Reporting International, p. 6.

⁹⁷ DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 6.

⁹⁸ CeMAS, “Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen”, 27 October 2021.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² DRI, p. 6 and 17; ISD, “Kalter Wind von Rechts: Wie rechte Parteien und Akteur:innen die Klimakrise zu ihren Gunsten missbrauchen”.

¹⁰³ pressrelations, “Desinformation im Bundestagswahlkampf”, p. 18: 52,263 posts; DRI: ½ of all reviewed posts.

¹⁰⁴ ISD, “Kalter Wind von Rechts: Wie rechte Parteien und Akteur:innen die Klimakrise zu ihren Gunsten missbrauchen”.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 18. In comparison with AfD posts on other topics, the party generated between 40 and 237% more shares with climate-related posts.

¹⁰⁶ CeMAS, “Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen”, p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ Respectively on 09 August 21 and 24 September 2021, see ISD, “Kalter Wind von Rechts: Wie rechte Parteien und Akteur:innen die Klimakrise zu ihren Gunsten missbrauchen”.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 4-5 and 18.

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp.4-6, 17 and 18.

¹¹² As already identified by ISD in the UK, USA, and Poland.

- ¹¹³ CeMAS, “Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen”, p. 85.
- ¹¹⁴ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021” pressrelations, p. 46.
- ¹¹⁶ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021” and pressrelations.
- ¹¹⁷ CeMAS, “[Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen](#)”, 27 October 2021, p. 36.
- ¹¹⁸ ISD, “Digitale Gewalt und Desinformation gegen Spitzenkandidat:innen vor der Bundestagswahl 2021”.
- ¹¹⁹ Johanne Kübler et al., “The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act”; pp. 41-42. Of the problematic content found, 46,65% on Facebook and 51,61% on Twitter were violations of electoral rights. (Sample sizes for both Facebook and Twitter: 1,101 each, from larger data set). Time frame: 15 to 31 May 2021.
- ¹²⁰ 6.72% of all election-related Facebook posts (sample 1,101) to potentially contain illegal content, disinformation on the German federal elections or infringe electoral rights.
- ¹²¹ Johanne Kübler et al., “The 2021 German Federal Election on Social Media: An Analysis of Systemic Electoral Risks Created by Twitter and Facebook Based on the Proposed EU Digital Services Act”, p. 44. These findings are based on qualitative interviews with scholarly experts.
- ¹²² DRI, “What’s #BTW Got To Do With It? Taking Stock of the German Election Discourse Online”, p. 24.
- ¹²³ Ibid, p. 22.
- ¹²⁴ CeMAS, “Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen”, p. 90.