THE RISE OF ANTISEMITISM ONLINE DURING THE PANDEMIC

A study of French and German content

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When the Black Death swept across Western Europe in the 14TH century, leaving 25 million dead, Jewish communities were blamed for the spread of the disease. Conspiracy theories about Jews poisoning wells proliferated, leading to unprecedented waves of violence against the community. Seven hundred years later, the Coronavirus pandemic has ushered in a new wave of antisemitic conspiracy theories and hate in Europe, with much of this playing out across a range of digital platforms.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic uncertainties and anxieties around the virus have been weaponised by a broad range of extremists, conspiracy theorists and disinformation actors, who have sought to propagandise, radicalise and mobilise captive online audiences during global lockdowns.[1] Antisemitic hate speech is often a common feature of these diverse threats, with dangerous implications for public safety, social cohesion and democracy.

But the Covid-19 crisis has only served to exacerbate a worrying trend in terms of online antisemitism. A 2018 Fundamental Rights Agency survey on Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism among Jews in the EU found nearly nine in ten respondents considered online antisemitism a problem. Eight in ten encountered antisemitic abuse online.

This report, conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), presents a data-driven snapshot of the proliferation of Covid-19 related online antisemitic content in French and German on Twitter, Facebook and Telegram. The study provides insight into the nature and volume of antisemitic content across selected accounts in France and Germany, analysing the platforms where such content is found, as well as the most prominent antisemitic narratives – comparing key similarities and differences between these different language contexts.

The findings of this report draw on data analysis using social listening tools and natural language processing software, combined with qualitative analysis. Covering the period from January 2020 until March 2021 to build insights around the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online antisemitism, the

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism was used to identify channels containing antisemitic content, before developing keyword lists to identify antisemitic expressions widely used on these channels.

Key Findings

- The research identified **272 French language and 276 German language accounts and channels** spreading antisemitic messages related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Telegram was the most significant platform for the proliferation of antisemitism in German, with 200 channels, whilst in French Twitter was most prominent, with 167 accounts identified. Facebook was the second most popular platform for antisemitism in both languages.

- Within a dataset of over **four million posts collected** from these accounts, over **180,000 posts** (around one in forty) were flagged as containing antisemitic references by the keyword annotators. This comprised over 17,000 Facebook posts, over 38,000 tweets and over 124,000 Telegram posts either containing antisemitic keywords or keywords associated with Jews in channels dominated by antisemitic references.

- There was a **considerable growth** in the use of antisemitic keywords during the pandemic. Comparing the first two months of 2020 (pre-pandemic) and 2021 (during the pandemic), a **seven-fold increase** in antisemitic posting could be observed on the **French language accounts**, and over a **thirteen-fold increase** in antisemitic comments within the **German channels** studied.

- The data shows **considerable audience engagement** with antisemitic content across platforms. French

1 ISD & Institut Montaigne, "Information Manipulations Around COVID-19: France Under Attack", July 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/information-manipulations-around-covid-19-france-under-attack/

antisemitic content on Facebook was engaged with through likes, comments and shares **over half a million times** during 2020 and 2021, and **received over three million retweets and likes** on Twitter. In Germany, antisemitic content on Telegram has been viewed over two billion times in total. German and French accounts had a combined followership of almost 4.5 million (while the number of unique followers is likely to be much lower).

- The study found that a small number of the noisiest accounts create an **outsized share of antisemitic content**. The top ten most active German language channels (less than 5% of the total list of accounts) were responsible for over 50% of antisemitic posting. The three most prolific Telegram accounts were all chat groups **associated with the QAnon movement**.

- Qualitative analysis revealed the proliferation of several **significant antisemitic narratives** related to the Covid-19 pandemic. These ranged from **conspiracy theories presenting vaccines as a Jewish plot** to sterilise or control populations, to representations of Jews as unhygienic or as a "virus" themselves.

- Meanwhile, a number of **'classical' anti-Jewish tropes have proliferated** online during the pandemic. The most **dominant antisemitic narratives** were conspiracy theories about **Jews ruling international financial, political and media** institutions, which comprised **89% of German** antisemitic content and **55% of French**, according to a manually coded sample of posts. Examples of **overt Holocaust denial** can still be found in French and German channels despite it being a criminal offence in both countries.

- However, most antisemitic content that we analysed that crossed the threshold of the non-legally binding IHRA working definition was non-violent and not obviously illegal under German and French law. Addressing the **proliferation of such 'legal but harmful' antisemitic content** provides a considerable challenge for tech companies and governments alike.

Key Recommendations

This report comes at a critical juncture in the European policy debate around countering online hate speech. EU Member States, including Germany and France, have been at the forefront of devising legislative responses to compel social media companies to remove illegal hate speech from their platforms, through initiatives such as the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) in Germany and laws that have been proposed in parallel in France, while, at the EU level, initiatives such as the Digital Services Act, the Code of Conduct and the European Democracy Action Plan present important opportunities for more systematic approaches to regulation and oversight of platforms.

Based on the findings, the report lays out a range of recommendations (outlined in full on page 33). They include calls to:

- Address online antisemitism as part of a **comprehensive framework for digital regulation** at a European level, aligning diverse EU efforts from tackling conspiracy theories and disinformation to promoting platform transparency on enforcement of terms of service.

- Promote **better understanding among users and platform moderators alike on the diverse manifestations of antisemitism** contained within the IHRA working definition, to help recognise and address more insidious antisemitic content.

- Beyond removing illegal hate speech, consider proactive measures to address the proliferation of **'grey zone' legal but harmful antisemitic content** and behaviours prevalent across platforms, including moving beyond solely 'content-based' approaches towards broader 'systems-based' digital regulation which guarantees the safety of users while preserving rights of expression.

- Support **further research into antisemitism** online aimed at better understanding the networks, behaviours and audiences that comprise the ecosystem of online antisemitism in order to inform effective responses. Approaches that consider image-based antisemitic content and incorporate an intersectional perspective on online hate speech are especially required.

Introduction

Introduction

It has been widely documented that the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 was accompanied by a plethora of conspiracy theories, disinformation and hate speech, often targeting already marginalised groups[2]. Jewish communities in particular have frequently served as scapegoats for social ills throughout European history and, with the arrival of the novel Coronavirus, Jewish people have been accused of spreading or inventing the virus or even orchestrating the whole pandemic to create a new social and economic order.

Anti-Jewish agitation during major health crises is nothing new. Many commentators have pointed towards pogroms during the Black Death, when Jewish people were killed after they were falsely accused of poisoning drinking water. This old trope has resurfaced in 2020.[3] For example, a caricature of France's former health minister Agnes Buzyn, who is Jewish, poisoning a well, was circulated on French social media.[4]

While digital research has begun to map the online dynamics of antisemitism during the pandemic, this has so far focused largely on English language content in the European context. There have been some efforts to understand the German and French language landscape.[5] The World Jewish Congress outlined a number of antisemitic narratives in French and German related to the pandemic linked to the increasingly popular QAnon conspiracy theory.[6] A German monitoring institute for

antisemitism, RIAS Bayern, also listed a comprehensive set of antisemitic conspiracy theories that gained traction during the Covid-19 pandemic and additionally recorded Covid-related antisemitic incidents.[7] ISD research found German language content on Facebook perpetuating Holocaust denial during the pandemic.[8] The offline implications of this are clear, but require further research. In the UK, the Community Security Trust (CST) reported that, while the number of reported antisemitic incidents slightly declined in 2020, which is likely to be partly due to the lockdown, the 2020 number of 1,668 reported incidents still represented high levels of antisemitism. Also, the CST pointed out that antisemitic rhetoric would be likely to be an ongoing phenomenon as long as Covid-19 remained a global health issue.[9]

But antisemitism has not been the only form of prejudice that has flourished during the pandemic. A June 2020 study commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) on online hate speech pointed to a multitude of hatreds that have emerged from the pandemic. The report argues that Covid-19 fuelled conspiracy theories about Jewish, American and Chinese "elites"

[2] *Cécile Guerin, Zoé Fourel and Cooper Gatewood, "La pandémie de COVID-19: terreau fertile de la haine en ligne", ISD, February 2021, https:// www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/la-pandemie-de-covid-19-terreau-fertile-de-la-haine-en-ligne/*

[3] *ISD, "Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing", April 2020, https://www.isdglobal. org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/*

[4] *Cnaan Liphiz, "An unwanted symptom of the coronavirus crisis in France: Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories", Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 2 April 2020, https://www.jta.org/2020/04/02/global/an-unwanted-symptom-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-in-france-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theories, last accessed: 31.03.2021.*

[5] *Julien Bellaiche, "Online Antisemitism in Times of COVID-19", GNET Research, 21 April 2020, https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/21/online-antisemitism-in-times-of-covid-19/*

[6] *World Jewish Congress, Antisemitic Conspiracy Myth, November 2020, https://wjc-org-website.s3.amazonaws.com/horizon/assets/3yqx8bza/myths-r6-final.pdf*

[7] *RIAS Bayern, ‚Das muss man auch mal ganz klar bennen dürfen' Verschwörungsdenken und Antisemitismus im Kotext von Corona, 2021, https://www.report-antisemitism.de/documents/RIAS_Bayern_Monitoring_Verschwoerungsdenken_und_Antisemitismus_im_Kontext_von_Corona.pdf*

[8] *Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, Hosting the 'Holohoax': A Snapshot of Holocaust Denial Across Social Media, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 10 August 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Hosting-the-Holohoax.pdf*

[9] *Community Security Trust, Antisemitic Incidents Report 2020, 11 February 2021, https://cst.org.uk/data/file/7/2/Incidents%20Report%202020.1612785103.pdf*

and turned elderly and sick people into targets of abuse. The report further found that Roma people were presented as a public health threat and subjected to physical abuse.[10]

At the level of EU Member States, there have been repeated reports of abuse and discrimination against groups who were blamed for either spreading the virus or undermining public efforts to combat the pandemic. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) highlighted an increase in harassment and physical attacks as well as online and offline hate speech against people of Asian descent across the EU in their first bulletin on the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. The FRA reported that Chinese people, or those perceived to be Chinese, were denied access to goods and services in some European countries. A Dutch survey of 300 people of Chinese descent in February 2020 found that almost half had experienced racist discrimination since the outbreak of the pandemic, with politicians and media outlets using xenophobic language against Asian people around Covid-19.[11]

As the number of cases of Covid-19 began to rise in January 2020, people of Asian descent in France started to increasingly share testimonies of rejection in everyday life and racist jokes posted online. In response, the Association of Young Chinese in France launched the online campaign #jenesuispasunvirus (#iamnotavirus).[12] In the early stages of the pandemic, French media outlets reported that people of Asian descent were most affected by discrimination in public spaces, including vandalism, bullying and being removed from public transport. Several French news outlets also reported on the pandemic by referring to a

"yellow peril".[13] Meanwhile, in Germany, the official equality body reported, in February 2020, that an increasing number of Asian people issued complaints about discrimination. It was reported that people of Chinese heritage were refused medical treatment, entry to shops or apartments to rent.[14]

Migrants and refugees have also been blamed for bringing the virus into Europe. As with anti-Asian discrimination, narratives about refugees allegedly spreading the disease were also used by politicians and media outlets.[15] The FRA's fourth bulletin on the Coronavirus from June 2020 quoted research from an Austrian NGO stating that 43% of reported Covid-related racist incidents since mid-March were directed against refugees. Belgium's equality body found the majority of hate crimes were targeted at people of Asian heritage, but that many social media posts had accused migrants of further spreading the virus. A Hungarian study found that, of 22,000 social media posts related to Covid-19, about half blamed a specific ethnic group, such as Chinese people, Arabs, Jews or Roma.[16]

In this broad context, this report focuses on the specific challenge presented by online antisemitism in French and German. While the main focus lies on content originating from users in France and Germany, some of these groups and channels may also include posts from residents of other EU Member States such as Belgium or Austria. As social media platforms facilitate exchanges across national barriers, even making them almost irrelevant in some cases, online hate speech has a

[10] Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs (Directorate-General for Internal Policies), Hate speech and hate crime in the EU and the evaluation of online content regulation approaches, July 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655135/IPOL_STU(2020)655135_EN.pdf

[11] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU – Fundamental Rights Implications, Bulletin #1, April 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin-1_en.pdf

[12] Margaux d'Adhémar, "'Rentre chez toi, garde ta maladie!': quand le coronavirus sert d'excuse au racisme anti-asiatique", Le Figaro, 30 January 2020, https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/rentre-chez-toi-garde-ta-maladie-quand-le-coronavirus-sert-d-excuse-au-racisme-antiasiatique-20200130, last accessed: 31 March 2021.

[13] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak in the EU Fundamental Rights Implications: France, 23 March 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/france-report-covid-19-april-2020_en.pdf

[14] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak in the EU Fundamental Rights Implications in Germany, April 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/germany-report-covid-19-april-2020_en.pdf

[15] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU – Fundamental Rights Implications, Bulletin #1, April 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin-1_en.pdf

[16] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU – Fundamental Rights Implications, Bulletin #4, July 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-bulletin-july_en.pdf

cross-border element and may reach anyone speaking the respective language. Both Germany and France have laws that criminalise certain hate speech against Jewish people, based on a general criminalisation of incitement of hate and violence against people based on their ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality, as well as Holocaust denial and trivialisation. Under the German criminal code, incitement (Volksverhetzung) to hatred of a group based on national, ethnic, religious or racial characteristics in a manner that can disturb public peace is a criminal offence. This includes the denial, trivialisation or condoning of crimes against humanity committed under National Socialism, as well as the use of propaganda and insignia of unconstitutional organisations.[17] In France, meanwhile, the provocation of hatred or violence against a group on grounds of their origin or (non-)membership of an ethnic or religious group as well as the condoning of crimes against humanity are punishable offences.[18]

The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) is one of the first regulatory regimes that seeks to implement these laws, which were originally designed for an offline threat, in an online environment, as social media networks with more than two million registered users in Germany are required to remove content that is illegal in Germany.[19] Laws have been proposed in France seeking to introduce explicit enforcement around online hate speech, following the model of the German approach, but have been held up on freedom of speech grounds.[20]

To help inform and provide evidence for effective policy responses to online antisemitic hate speech, this report looks to map the proliferation of antisemitism across a range of online platforms in French and German. The first part of the report presents a qualitative analysis of the evolving narrative landscape of antisemitism that emerged in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, considering antisemitic speech through both the lens of the IHRA working definition, as well as national legislation regulating online hate speech.

This is followed by a quantitative snapshot of the volume and trajectory of antisemitic content over the course of the pandemic in the French and German online sphere, exploring notable differences in the volume across platforms and languages. The report concludes by laying out some of the policy implications of the research findings, as well as avenues for future research. A methodological annex is included at the end of the report.

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[17] Strafgesetzbuch (StGB) § 130 Volksverhetzung https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb/__130.html; Strafgesetzbuch (StGB) § 86a Verwenden von Kennzeichen verfassungswidriger Organisationen https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb/__86a.html

[18] Loi du 29 juillet 1881 sur la liberté de la presse, Article 24, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000877119/; Loi du 29 juillet 1881 sur la liberté de la presse, Article 24 bis, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/LEGIARTI000033975356/; Code penal, Article R645-1, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000022375941/

[19] Network Enforcement Act (Netzdurchsetzunggesetz, NetzDG) https://germanlawarchive.iuscomp.org/?p=1245

[20] 'We need to go a step further': French MP Laetitia Avia says more action is needed on online hate", Euronews, 24 October 2020, https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/23/we-need-to-go-a-step-further-french-mp-laetitia-avia-says-more-action-is-needed-on-online-, last accessed: 31 October 2021.

The nature of antisemitic online content

The nature of **antisemitic online content**

This section outlines the notable antisemitic narratives that have emerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as "classical" antisemitic tropes that have been adopted during the pandemic. This section utilises the IHRA working definition of antisemitism as a guideline to classify antisemitic content, but also considers potentially antisemitic expression that might not be fully covered by the definition, such as trivialised comparisons of Covid-19 vaccinations to the Holocaust. It also highlights the types of content that are illegal under French or German law that continue to be shared online and where legal grey areas around antisemitic hate speech have emerged around the pandemic. Alongside the platforms analysed quantitatively in the following section (Facebook, Twitter and Telegram), this section also contains qualitative analysis of Instagram.

Justification of violence

At its most severe, the research found content that falls under the IHRA's definition of "calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion", a definition which largely corresponds with the EU's 2008 Framework Decision banning incitement to violence based on expressions of racism and xenophobia. This content often manifests itself in support of groups, individuals or ideologies who engage in the targeted killing of Jewish people. For example, a post shared on a French Telegram channel referred to the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter Robert Bowers as "Saint Bowers" and shared his quote "S***w your optics" that he posted on Gab before the attack. Another French Telegram channel posted an edited image of a person in a skull mask and Black Sun positioned behind his head like a halo. The background featured historic figures such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels and Muammar Gaddafi. This image had over 2,000 views on Telegram.

Fantasies of violence are sometimes targeted against specific Jewish individuals, Israel or Jews as a whole. As one user in a German Telegram chat wrote: "Down with Israel! The Jews are responsible for the evil of the world! Behind every war and misery is the dirty Jew! It won't be long before these Jews are destroyed!" There have even been attempts to weaponise Covid-19 against Jewish people. Back in March 2020, a French Telegram channel shared an image stating in English: "If you have

the bug, give a hug. Spread the Flu to every Jew. Holocough." The justification of violence against Jewish people can also take the form of pseudo-history. On Telegram, far-right extremists and even conspiracy theorists shared misleading "documentaries" that attempt to present Jews as a threat to early 20th century Germany and Hitler as the man who rightly tried to stop them. While support or justifications for fascist violence against Jews very likely constitutes a criminal offence in both Germany and France, the case is less clear with support or justification of attacks carried out by Hezbollah, which was found in the dataset. While Germany banned the full organisation in April 2020,[21] France and the EU have so far only declared its military wing to be a terrorist group.

The pandemic as a Jewish plot

As the Covid-19 pandemic triggered major societal changes, extremist and conspiracy theorists have employed antisemitic tropes to either explain or deny the existence of the novel Coronavirus. As news of the outbreak in Wuhan became public, some channels attempted to link laboratories in China to Jews, presenting Sars-CoV-2 as a "zionist bioweapon" or claiming

[21] *Florian Flade and Georg Mascolo, „Hisbollah in Deutschland ganz verboten", Tagesschau, 30 April 2020,* https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/hisbollah-verbot-101.html, *last accessed: 31 April 2021.*

the virus was designed to only affect non-Jewish people. One German language Telegram channel with more than 34,000 followers, which presents itself as an information source on Covid-19, posted a video of two Jewish men claiming that the virus was "for non-Jews […] not for the Jews". The channel owner added in text: "Corona is not for the Jews! Only for the goyim! That's what they call us! Try to find out what it means!" The user defended their repeated antisemitic postings in another message, saying: "I have never had anything against Jews but many Jews have something against all other people and especially against whites and Christians!" Another German Telegram user claimed that "Virology was invented by the Eternal Jew" and posted an image with words "Fake Sciences" and a blue Star of David. This message accrued nearly 10,000 views on Telegram.

As many online conspiracy theory movements started to argue that the virus was either not real or far more harmless than suggested by public health authorities, the narrative of a "New World Order" (NWO) became prominent. While "NWO" conspiracy theories are not exclusively antisemitic, there is a considerable overlap with anti-Jewish stereotypes, such as elites in control of financial institutions, and they establish a natural narrative environment prone to antisemitism. It is also notable that many alleged perpetrators have, according to this conspiracy theory, a Jewish background. For example, a French Instagram user posted an image of alleged members of the Bilderberg Group. These include George Soros, Jacob Rothschild, Jaques Attali and other Jewish individuals alongside some non-Jews like the Clintons and Bill Gates. Adapting this old trope to fit current affairs, conspiracy theorists claimed that the world's "elites" (often framed in terms of prominent Jewish individuals) faked a pandemic to curb civil liberties through lockdown measures, introduce communism through economic support programmes or undermine data protection with vaccine passports and tracking apps. This conspiracy theory was frequently promoted on channels affiliated with the QAnon movement, which in Germany in particular gained a substantial number of followers in 2020.[22]

Antisemitic "NWO" conspiracy theories mostly fall under what the IHRA describes as "mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions". Antisemitic actors have claimed that media outlets reporting on the pandemic were under Jewish control and suggested that their respective national governments are either in cahoots with or controlled by a secretive "cabal". Sometimes, the Coronavirus is referred to with triple parentheses as "(((virus)))" to insinuate that it has a Jewish origin; either because it was perceived to be artificially fabricated or completely invented to oppress non-Jewish people.

In France, well-known Jewish figures such as politicians, government advisors and well known intellectuals as well as President Emmanuel Macron, who previously worked for the Rothschild bank, are targeted with accusations that they are part of a malicious secret organisation. In Germany, such accusations seem to be frequently targeted against Jewish individuals living in the US or the UK. However, many German politicians, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, have been described as Jewish or "Zionist" to imply that they are part of a wider conspiracy theory. While conspiracy theories that explicitly accuse Jews of being behind this "New World Order" may constitute illegal hate speech in France and Germany, it is unlikely that material dealing in more subtle antisemitic tropes breaks the law. Conspiracy theories about blood-drinking elites and powerful bankers holding people in "debt slavery" allow those propagating them to deny that these narratives are directly targeted against Jewish people. Furthermore, non-Jewish individuals such as Bill Gates and the Clintons are frequently targeted using tropes with antisemitic origins. This could be an example of "harmful but legal" antisemitic content.

Vaccine-related antisemitism

As Covid-19 vaccination programmes began to be rolled out in late 2020, extremists and conspiracy theorists started to link the vaccination programmes with an alleged Jewish plot to either control, sterilise or kill the non-Jewish population. They point to Jewish individuals involved in the production of the vaccines, including Pfizer CEO Alfred Bourla. A German Telegram channel posted an image with Spanish text (indicating a re-post) and pictures of AstraZeneca Chairman Leif Johansson, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla, and Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel, all with a yellow star saying "Jude" (Jew). Johansson and Bancel were tied to antisemitic conspiracy theories through Jewish investors in their companies. This shows that often even non-Jewish individuals who hold critical positions in pharmaceutical companies or national governments can be described as "Jewish" or "Zionist" to insinuate that they are part of a wider conspiracy. The German channels also include antisemitic conspiracy theories about the medical regulatory body and vaccine research centre Paul Ehrlich Institute, which was named after its founding director, a Jewish immunologist.

[22] Katrin Bennhold, "QAnon Is Thriving in Germany. The Extreme Right Is Delighted", The New York Times, 11 October 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/europe/qanon-is-thriving-in-germany-the-extreme-right-is-delighted.html, last accessed: 31 March 2021.

When looking for motivations for this alleged plot, some antisemitic actors cite religious scriptures. One French Christian fundamentalist Facebook page posted an article about Bourla celebrating Hanukkah and added extracts from the Talmud claiming that non-Jewish people are animals. The post then states: "Having read this, you will accept their vaccines full of deadly poisons and all kinds of impurities." Another French anti-vaccination page claimed that a doctor of the "Synagogue of Satan" had used aborted non-Jewish foetuses as guinea pigs to develop the vaccines. The post further implies that cutting up "our" (French, Christian) children is authorised by the Talmud. This resembles a Covid-19 variant of the classical blood libel antisemitic trope. Others have claimed that the alleged genocide through vaccines is motivated by a Jewish desire to take vengeance for historic oppression or to make Jews the globally dominating group. German far-right influencer Attila Hildmann has repeatedly claimed on Telegram that the Covid-19 vaccination programme is the implementation of the Kaufman plan, a wartime pamphlet by an American businessman which called for the mass sterilisation of the German people, which was co-opted in Nazi propaganda.[23]

The fast pace of Israel's vaccination programme has also attracted attention from conspiracy theorists. Some content combines anti-vaccination disinformation material with antisemitic narratives and Holocaust trivialisation. For example, one French neo-Nazi Telegram channel shared an article from a website called "Christians for Truth", claiming that Israel is using placebo vaccines, adding the text: "A placebo vaccine for the chosen people?". In another instance, a Facebook user shared a post by a convicted Belgian Holocaust denier in a French language conspiracy theory group, which claimed that Israel is a "laboratory for the world after" and asks whether we will soon see "the seat of the world government in Jerusalem".

On the other hand, opponents of lockdown measures and Covid-19 vaccinations have been comparing the treatment of Jewish people under fascist regimes to public health measures. This arguably represents a trivialisation of the suffering of Jewish people under the Nazi regime. The insignia and rhetoric of historic French and German fascist regimes have been used to describe the respective governments' responses to the pandemic, with some conspiracy theorists even claiming that the contemporary situation is worse than Vichy France or the Third Reich. For example, French actors repeatedly shared an image where Emmanuel Macron's face was merged with a portrait of Philippe Pétain, the Chief of State of Vichy France (although the original image appears to predate the pandemic). In another case, a French Instagram user posted a cartoon of Macron in a Nazi uniform with a red banner on which two syringes form a symbol similar to a swastika.

In Germany, Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder has been called "Södolf" for his Covid-19 policies in a reference to Adolf Hitler. Opponents of vaccination programmes have likened themselves to victims of the Holocaust by wearing yellow Stars of David or posted edited pictures of the gates of Auschwitz where the slogan "Arbeit macht frei" (work sets you free) has been changed to "Impfen macht frei" (vaccination sets you free). Such slogans and imagery have even been commercialised. In the process of the research, researchers discovered adverts on the otherwise defunct neo-Nazi video hosting platform "Donnersender.ru" for the online shop of a German far-right activist, selling masks and buttons featuring yellow stars and the words "unvaccinated". The owner himself repeatedly uses the word "impfocaust" (transl. "vaccinocaust") on his Telegram channel. The announcement that IBM would develop the vaccination passports for Germany also led to further comparisons of non-vaccinated people to Jewish victims, as the company has been accused of helping to facilitate the Holocaust through its punched card technology.

While such posts definitely trivialise the Holocaust, they are likely to present a legal grey area. It is difficult to establish whether such comparisons are driven by conscious malice against Jewish people or historical ignorance. While much discussion about Holocaust trivialisation focuses on attempts to defame Jews or sanitise the Nazi regime, these opponents of lockdown measures play down the suffering of Holocaust victims by trivially likening them to themselves. While the IHRA definition includes accusations of exaggerating the Holocaust as well as the distortion of mechanisms or intentionality of the Holocaust to be antisemitic, it says little about downplaying the genocide through false equivalents and appropriating victimhood. Both German and French law declare the minimisation or trivialisation of the Holocaust a punishable offence, but there has not been systematic prosecution of these offences. However, the city of Munich has banned the use of yellow stars by vaccine opponents, declaring that their use at anti-lockdown rallies will be fined.[24]

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[23] "Kaufman Plan" is the name given by the Nazis to an idea proposed in the book "Germany must perish!" by US publisher Theodore Kaufman. This book from 1941 called for the sterilisation of all Germans and the dissolution of the German nation state and has been used by the Nazi regime as well as subsequent far-right groups to prove an alleged hostile Jewish plan against the German people.

[24] "NS-Vergleiche auf Corona-Demos: München verbietet gelben Stern", BR24, 30 March 2020, https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/ns-vergleiche-auf-corona-demos-muenchen-verbietet-gelben-stern,S0TdKpG, last accessed: 31 March 2021.

While opponents of vaccinations have been appropriating Jewish stars already before the pandemic,[25] this report's analysis appears to show that the use of false Nazi analogies have only increased during the course of the pandemic.

Other Covid-related antisemitism

While much of the antisemitic activity observed occurs in channels where the existence of the Covid-19 pandemic is denied or trivialised, many point to breaches of lockdown measures within Jewish communities to present Jews as a public health threat or as receiving special treatment from authorities. A German far-right Telegram user posted a video of a Jewish wedding during the lockdown in France and added the description: "Nothing new from the sixmillionowitz." A French far-right activist shared a Bitchute-link to a video clip of a Quebecois show, where the presenter claims that there is a double standard in enforcement of the lockdown, after a Hassidic community broke the law reportedly without repercussions. While these stories seem to refer to real events, their framing can still be considered antisemitic under the IHRA definition's point of "Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group [...]". The sharing of such lockdown breaches is intended to portray Jews as inherently unhygienic or disobedient.

Another phenomenon that emerged in 2020 is the discussion of Jews, Israel or the Holocaust with language adopted from debates around Covid-19. A French-language Islamist channel posted, on Instagram, a caricature of the Israeli flag where the Star of David was replaced with the drawing of a virus and added: "Zionism and Israel are the real virus of our history", receiving 62 likes. Furthermore, a German Telegram post linked to an article on a Holocaust denial website comparing those doubting the dangers of Covid-19 with those trivialising the Shoah. The article argues: "No one denies the coronavirus, but many dispute the exaggerated account of its alleged dangerousness; yet the contesting person is defamed as 'corona denier'. [...] Thus, the knockout term 'Holocaust denier' was now joined by the no less pejorative word 'Corona denier'." Early on in the pandemic, a French fascist Telegram channel shared an image of the Tricolour with the words "télétravail, famille, pâtes riz" in reference to the Vichy regime's slogan "Travail, Famille, Patrie". These examples show antisemitic actors using the Covid-19 crisis to attempt to keep their existing narratives relevant.

General conspiracy theories about Jewish dominance

While Covid-19 has influenced and even fuelled antisemitic conspiracy theories, more general, long-standing anti-Jewish stereotypes also continued to persist across social media during the pandemic. While it is difficult to establish definitively within this limited research project, it might be possible that the increasing prevalence of these stereotypes might be a by-product of the pandemic and more widespread conspiratorial thinking and receptiveness to disinformation about a variety of issues.

Many of these conspiracy theories fall under the IHRA's example of "making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews [...]". One especially common trope remains the alleged control of a vague "system" enslaving mankind, by the whole of Jewry or certain "elite" Jewish individuals like the Rothschild family or George Soros. Many events covered in French or German news, including the protests following George Floyd's murder, Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 US presidential elections and the military coup in Myanmar, are presented as the result of Jewish plotting or interference. Common conspiracy theories include Jews controlling the media, provoking social divisions, ruling the finance system, hiding scientific truths and subverting other populations. A French Telegram channel posted an edited image featuring a caricature from a movie poster for "The Eternal Jew" and the text "MEDIA KONTROL" with the last "O" replaced by a Star of David. This image had around 3,000 views on Telegram. These conspiracy theories do not have to be spelled out if they are taken for granted within online communities. For example, one French Twitter user simply posted "Jew + Rest of the World = Problem."

Sometimes Jews themselves are accused of spreading pandemic-related conspiracy theories, especially those associated with the QAnon movement. ISD identified a channel with more than 2,600 followers aimed at people leaving QAnon, promoting the narrative that the conspiracy was a "zionist" plot to undermine society. Attila Hildmann, who in the past has uncritically shared Telegram posts from QAnon channels and said that he would "very much appreciate the commitment of the QAnons", has meanwhile claimed that the conspiracy theory movement was a 'Mossad psy-op'.

Well-known material promoting such antisemitic tropes about Jewish subversion continues to be shared or recommended across our monitored channels as "information" about Jewish people. French Twitter users encouraged others to read the infamous forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" to learn about a supposed Jewish plan for world domination. A German

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[25] ADL, *Anti-Vaccine Protesters Misappropriate Holocaust-Era Symbol to Promote Their Cause*, 5 April 2019, https://www.adl.org/blog/anti-vaccine-protesters-misappropriate-holocaust-era-symbol-to-promote-their-cause

far-right Telegram channel posted a download link for the Nazi propaganda film "The Eternal Jew". Music from neo-Nazi bands can be found for download as audio files on Telegram.

Such dehumanising and demonising allegations about Jews can also take the form of antisemitic caricatures. Far-right actors redistribute Nazi-era propaganda featuring stereotypical depictions of Jewish people and sometimes edit it, either for 'aesthetic' purposes or to adapt them to contemporary conspiracy theories. For example, one German Telegram channel posted an edited version of a WWII propaganda poster, which originally said "Behind the enemy powers: The Jew" and featured a caricature of a Jewish man standing behind British, American and Soviet flags. In this new version, the flags of the Allies had been replaced by BLM, Antifa and Pride flags. This post accumulated almost 15,000 views.

The "Happy Merchant" meme remains in use among both French and German channels. This image depicting a Jewish merchant with exaggerated facial features and sinister expressions is used to depict Jewish individuals, the state of Israel, or Jewish people as a whole. On Telegram, multiple user-created sticker packs that use the "Happy Merchant" as a template, which users can download and use in conversations, were identified. The stickers frequently represent conspiracy theories about Jews controlling certain countries, groups or movements.

Holocaust denial

Previous ISD research in 2020 (before Facebook changed its policies around Holocaust denial) analysing the online landscape of Holocaust denial in English, also found a Facebook page publishing and promoting German language Holocaust denial literature. From clicking through to such Holocaust denial pages, Facebook's recommendation algorithm led users to further Holocaust denial pages.[26]

Holocaust denial also remains a persistent feature on the fascist scene in both Germany and France, where many posts clearly break the law in their respective countries. Prominent Holocaust deniers who were convicted for incitement such as Ursula Haverbeck and Robert Faurisson are frequently glorified. They are presented as people who have uncovered the truth and have been unjustly convicted. For example, a French Twitter user posted an image of Haverbeck in court and wrote: "Nothing

can be done about the truth, the simple truth. The one that is obvious when you analyse the facts objectively." Holocaust denial is frequently presented in jokes and memes suggesting that the killing of six million Jews or the operation of gas chambers would have been impossible. Such posts fall clearly under IHRA definition's points of "Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms […] or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany […]" and "accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust".

However, Holocaust denial or minimisation can take more subtle forms, potentially because the perpetrators are aware of potential repercussions for their actions. Holocaust trivialisation can include the questioning of the purpose of legislation against it. One frequent argument asks why Holocaust denial would be a punishable offence if it was actually real. Following the murder of French schoolteacher Samuel Paty in October 2020, a French language Islamist channel on Instagram questioned why Holocaust denial was criminalised in France while blasphemy was protected speech.

Another more subliminal form of Holocaust denial involves the highlighting of real and alleged war crimes against Germans during WWII. German far-right Telegram channels shared videos about the Rheinwiesenlager Prisoner of War camps as well as commemorative posts around the 75th anniversaries of the Dresden Bombings and the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff. While such tactics probably do not constitute Holocaust denial on their own, they are often used by convicted Holocaust deniers. In 2010, NPD politician Udo Pastörs boycotted the Holocaust Memorial Day event held in the Parliament of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, but held a speech the following day to commemorate the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, during which he claimed that the "so-called Holocaust is being used for political and commercial purposes". Pastörs was later convicted for Holocaust denial and tried to complain to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which rejected his appeal in 2019.[27]

Even when certain French and German figures have been convicted of antisemitic hate speech and Holocaust denial, their social media channels – where the offending material was likely published – are often still accessible. In September 2020, French far-right writer Hervé Lalin, better known as Hervé Ryssen, was imprisoned for voicing antisemitic and denialist

[26] Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, Hosting the 'Holohoax': A Snapshot of Holocaust Denial Across Social Media, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 10 August 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Hosting-the-Holohoax.pdf

[27] European Court of Human Rights, CASE OF PASTÖRS v. GERMANY, (Application no. 55225/14), Judgement, Strasbourg, 3 October 2019, https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/spa#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-196148%22]}

views,[28] sparking an online campaign with the hashtag #LiberezRyssen. Although his Twitter account has been suspended, his Telegram account containing antisemitic content is still accessible. As mainstream platforms such as YouTube started removing Holocaust denial and glorifications of fascism, extremist users began to upload their content to alternative video hosting sites such as Bitchute, Odysee and WTUBE, sharing links to these services within large Telegram chats. Sometimes these alternative video hosting sites are explicitly created to keep content that violates the terms of service of bigger platforms online, but often they present themselves as mere alternatives to larger sites that also attract users who do not promote extremist or conspiracy ideologies. This platform migration by antisemitic users is often accompanied by complaints of censorship, which themselves yield conspiracy theories about alleged Jewish control over big tech. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this report, it would be worthwhile for future research to map the migration of French and German language antisemitism across platforms, as major platforms continue to clamp down on hate speech.

Israel-related antisemitism

The data also includes examples of "new antisemitism" that emerged following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The IHRA definition lists the trope of "dual-loyalty" as "accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel […]". This form of antisemitism is employed either to harass Jewish personalities directly on social media or to make sweeping statements about Jewish citizens. For example, one French Twitter user posted: "One cannot be 'French' and 'Zionist'. The true Zionist goes back to live in Israel […]". Another trope of this "new antisemitism" is what the IHRA names as "drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis". Such comparisons can be represented in images where a swastika is edited into a Star of David or Israelis are depicted as operators at Auschwitz. This form of antisemitism may appear in text posts where online actors attempt to find the word Nazi in various terms for Jewish groups such as "NAtional ZIonist" or "AshkeNAZI". While such comparisons are not explicitly illegal in either France or Germany, this arguably constitutes trivialisation of the Holocaust. However, as described above, this faces a similar ambiguity as in the case of comparisons between unvaccinated people and Holocaust victims, where historical ignorance can be argued to be at play.

Antisemitism targeted against Jewish sub-groups

Some social media users spreading antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories deflect criticism by claiming that they have no negative feelings towards "everyday" Jewish people. They are supposedly only trying to expose certain real or perceived Jewish subgroups such as "Zionists", "Khazars", "Jewish elites" and "Ashkenazi" as actors in a world conspiracy. Sometimes such users, especially those coming from a religious fundamentalist background, will claim that these groups are "fake Jews". They try to declare solidarity with, or at least claim they are not talking about, those they believe to be "real Jews". While these statements definitely reveal antisemitic attitudes and attempt to strip some sub-groups of their Jewish identity, they fall into a grey area both with regard to the IHRA working definition and national legislation as they at least nominally do not target Jews as a collective.

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[28] Le négationniste Hervé Ryssen incarcéré après plusieurs condamnations pour des propos antisémites, franceinfo, 20 September 2020, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/antisemitisme/le-negationniste-herve-ryssen-incarcere-apres-plusieurs-condamnations-pour-des-propos-antisemites_4112455.html, last accessed: 31 March 2020.

The dissemination of antisemitic content
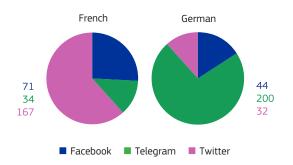
The dissemination of **antisemitic** content

To produce a snapshot of the proliferation of antisemitic content between 1 January 2020 and 8 March 2021 – dates chosen to maximise insights on the pandemic's online effects – data was collected from channels across Facebook, Telegram and Twitter that were identified through ethnographic analysis as having posted content that falls either under the IHRA working definition of antisemitism or constitutes illegal hate speech in France or Germany respectively.[29]

Researchers then used lists of keywords to filter for 'high certainty' antisemitic content, to estimate the proportion of antisemitic posts within these channels. These keyword lists included antisemitic slurs and words referencing tropes common in antisemitic conspiracy theories. Furthermore, a wider set of keywords related to Jews and Judaism was applied to channels that routinely posted overt antisemitic content and almost exclusively negative messages about Jews, in order to capture relevant discussion that did not use explicitly antisemitic language.
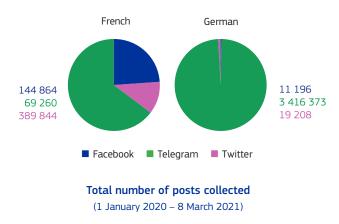
While such keyword-based approaches can be a blunt tool for analysing hate speech, particularly when analysing conversations generated by the general population, in this case accounts, channels and groups identified had been manually vetted for relevance in an attempt to minimise false positives, whilst researchers also carried out spot-checks on samples of posts derived from each keyword category to ensure accuracy and precision.

In total, data was collected from 272 French and 276 German accounts, constituting an unfiltered dataset of over four million posts from 2020 and 2021. The analysis focused on over 180,000 posts (one in forty posts from the overall dataset) which were flagged through the keyword list relating to antisemitic content.

French

German

71
34
167

44
200
32

■ Facebook   ■ Telegram   ■ Twitter

Number of accounts containing antisemitic content

French

German

144 864
69 260
389 844

11 196
3 416 373
19 208

■ Facebook   ■ Telegram   ■ Twitter

Total number of posts collected
(1 January 2020 – 8 March 2021)

[29] *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Working Definition of Antisemitism, https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism*
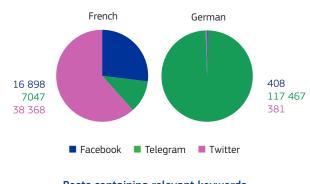
This section presents data findings on the volume and trajectory of antisemitic messages across various social media platforms, seeking to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic may have influenced the proliferation of online antisemitism. It explores which platforms are particularly prone to antisemitic messaging in French and German. The final section outlines the level of engagement and reach of this content, to help approximate its potential impact.

Proportion of antisemitic content within channels

French

German

16 898
7047
38 368

408
117 467
381

■ Facebook ■ Telegram ■ Twitter

Posts containing relevant keywords
(1 January 2020 – 8 March 2021)

The keyword-based methodology established that 62,313 of all 616,329 French posts collected across all platforms (10.1%), matched antisemitic keywords. A lower proportion of German messages within antisemitic channels, 118,256 posts of 3,446,777 in total (3.4%), matched antisemitic keywords.

This difference in percentage could hypothetically be in large part due to the high level of significance of Telegram to German extremists and conspiracy theorists. The German-speaking set of accounts not only includes channels posting updates from specific individuals or groups, but also chats with thousands of active participants who create a large volume of data, of which a lower proportion appears to be explicitly antisemitic. German Telegram channels form a notably cohesive ecosystem – a recent ISD study found that up to 40% of messages in far-right and conspiracy theory Telegram channels were forwarded from other groups.[30]

30 Jakob Guhl and Lea Gerster, *Crisis and Loss of Control: German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 14 December 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ISD-Mercator-Report-English.pdf

By contrast, French Telegram channels tended to only feature posts from the channel owners, reducing their daily rate of posting, but also – as almost all of the French channels monitored were on the far-right spectrum – making them more likely in relative terms to post antisemitic content. Accordingly, 8.6% of French language Telegram data collected was explicitly antisemitic compared to roughly 3% of the German language data.

On Twitter, French language antisemitism is more visible. 9.8% of collected French language Tweets matched antisemitism-relevant keywords. By contrast, antisemitic content could be discovered in less than 2% of the German Twitter data despite the fact that many Twitter accounts in this list belonged to German neo-Nazi organisations. One possible explanation is that such groups are aware that their activities are being monitored by authorities and therefore are more careful to avoid illegal hate speech. Another hypothesis would be that antisemitic language is more commonly used in French anti-government discussions on Twitter, such as the online harassment of Jewish government officials, references to the French republic as a "Zionist dictatorship", and antisemitic allusions to Emmanuel Macron's past employment at the Rothschild bank.

On Facebook, 11.7% of the captured French language content was detectably antisemitic. By contrast, only around 3.6% of collected German messages contained explicitly antisemitic content. As with the Twitter data, this might be due to neo-Nazi groups being careful to avoid repercussions. At the same time, German language antisemitic actors might be more reluctant to post hate speech on Facebook where the NetzDG law applies. ISD observed one German conspiracy theory group who posted relatively veiled antisemitic content on their Facebook page, but shared an explicitly antisemitic video of an anti-Jewish influencer on Telegram, which is not governed by the NetzDG. Furthermore, French language public Facebook groups sharing antisemitic content are seemingly easier to discover. German language antisemitic content can still be discovered on individual profiles, which cannot be scraped with the available digital analysis tools.
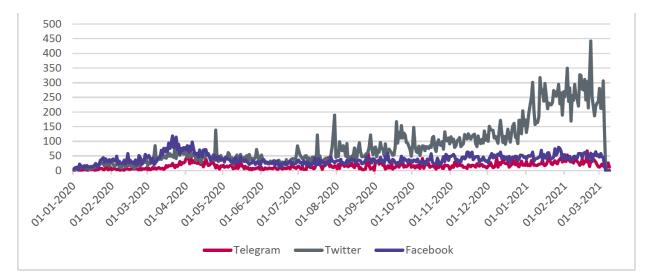
Volume of antisemitism over time

Analysing the data from over the past year shows that, in both French and German, there has been a considerable increase in antisemitic activity throughout 2020 and 2021. Comparing the first two months of 2020 (pre-pandemic) and 2021 (during the pandemic), one can observe a seven-fold increase in antisemitic

posting from the French language account lists and over a thirteen-fold growth in antisemitic comments within the German channels studied.

While there is an inherent 'growth bias' in conducting retrospective social media research (groups and channels tend generally to increase rather than decrease in size), this likely reflects increased activity of conspiracy theorist and extremist actors trying to exploit the pandemic, as well as the creation of new antisemitic channels, pages and accounts perpetuating antisemitic narratives around Covid-19.
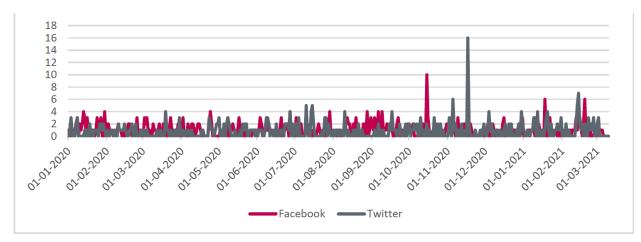
French language posts containing antisemitic terms

Volume over Time of French-language antisemitic content on Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter. ISD have filtered out an anomaly, which distorts the Telegram data on 20 March 2020, whereby one channel migrated all its historic data at once.

Analysing French language messages with antisemitic content shows an initial increase in activity across platforms around the first lockdown in France in March 2020. Notably, the data shows antisemitism echoing infection rates, as activity across platforms slowed down in early summer before increasing from August 2020 onwards, when France experienced a sharp rise in cases.[31]

During the early days of the pandemic, Facebook was the most common platform used to spread antisemitic messaging.

However, after the surge of cases from August 2020, the majority of antisemitic content was almost consistently posted on Twitter, where antisemitic expressions rose dramatically. This antisemitic activity on Twitter became even more prevalent from the beginning of 2021 onwards with the rollout of vaccines. One explanation for this increase is the wider availability of vaccines creating new conspiracy theories including Holocaust trivialisation, discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

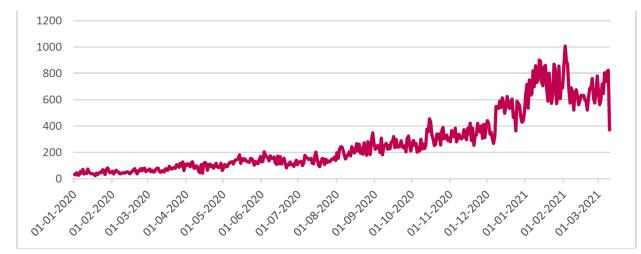[31] *"Coronavirus: Cases surge as France goes 'wrong way'"*, BBC, 11 August 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53745481

German language posts containing antisemitic keywords (Facebook & Twitter)

Antisemitic messages captured on German language Facebook and Twitter

By contrast with France, the German language antisemitic activity on Twitter has been fairly consistent over the past year, with occasional spikes in activity. A spike in Facebook activity on 15 October 2020 seems to be related to a protest against a ban of the flag of the German Empire in multiple federal states.

The increase in Twitter activity on 17 November 2020 was at least in part driven by a court case involving Holocaust denier Ursula Haverbeck, showing the connection between online hateful discourse and real-world events.

German language posts containing antisemitic keywords (Telegram)

German language Telegram messages with antisemitic content

On German Telegram channels, a significant increase in activity over the past year can be observed, which may in part be linked to new members on the channels throughout the year. In fact, German language Telegram users are the most active antisemitic community observed across platforms and languages. Whereas, at the beginning of 2020, there were rarely more than 60 antisemitic messages per day, since January 2021 we detected between 600 to 1,000 daily antisemitic messages. While the increase in volume is slow but steady until December 2020, it starts to accelerate rapidly from that point, coinciding with the rollout of the German vaccine programme.
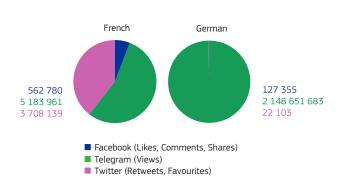
Prevalence of different antisemitic narratives

To gain a better understanding of the relative frequency of different antisemitic narratives, researchers manually coded a random sample of a hundred posts from across platforms in each language. Coding was based on the IHRA definition and supplemented with other categories where necessary. While this limited sample of posts might not be fully representative of the entire dataset, it does deliver insights into which antisemitic narratives are particularly frequent among the content studied. Notably, the analysis found that conspiracy theories rooted around Jewish control of institutions dominate in both the French and German data, particularly the latter.

In the German dataset, the vast majority of posts (89%) fell under the IHRA's example of "making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions". This reflected the prevalence of conspiracy theories about elites secretly controlling world events, especially among QAnon followers. A smaller number of posts (4%) contained material "calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion", as well as Holocaust denial or distortion (3%).

The majority of French posts (56%) also fell under the IHRA's point of "making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective". Much more prevalent in the French data than in the German set, however, were expressions of support for individuals accused of antisemitism, which made up over a third (35%) of antisemitic posts. Figures that received frequent praise include Alain Soral, Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala and Hervé Ryssen, the latter imprisoned for antisemitic hate speech during

part of the timeframe of data collection. Also present in the French set of data is the antisemitic trope of accusing Jews of being more loyal to Israel than their home countries (3% of posts), a trope not present in the German posts coded. Content that fell under the IHRA's example of "accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews" comprised 3% of the French data, while messages denying Jewish people self-determination made up 2% of posts.
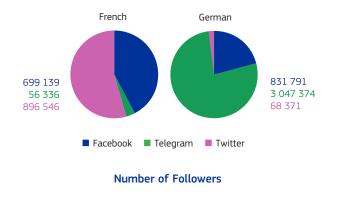
Engagement with antisemitic posts

French
German

562 780
5 183 961
3 708 139

127 355
2 148 651 683
22 103

■ Facebook (Likes, Comments, Shares)
■ Telegram (Views)
■ Twitter (Retweets, Favourites)

Engagement (1 January 2020 – 8 March 2021)

The data provides insights on the level of audience engagement with antisemitic content across platforms. French antisemitic content on Facebook was engaged with over half a million times on Facebook during 2020 and 2021, received over five million views on Telegram, and nearly four million engagements (retweets and likes) on Twitter. In Germany meanwhile, reflecting the platform landscape outlined in detail above, Telegram received the lion's share of engagement with antisemitic content, receiving over two billion views. But German antisemitic Facebook posts received only around a quarter of those of France, and less than 10% of the total amount of retweets and favourites of antisemitic content on French Twitter. It is important to note that these are cumulative engagement counts, and most likely encompass multiple engagements by any given unique user, but nonetheless provide a useful insight about the level of engagement with antisemitic content across platforms.

The data shows that French and German antisemitic accounts had a combined following of almost 5.6 million followers. It is important to note, however, that this does not represent unique followers and almost certainly includes counting people following multiple channels across multiple platforms. Mirroring the level

of activity and engagement outlined above, French channels had a total of over 1.65 million followers, whilst German channels had more than double this number, with almost four million followers.

French   German

699 139
56 336
896 546

831 791
3 047 374
68 371

■ Facebook   ■ Telegram   ■ Twitter

Number of Followers

Influencers and amplifiers of antisemitic content

By exploring how prolific posting is, it becomes evident that a small number of the noisiest accounts create an outsized share of antisemitic content. The top ten most active German-language channels (4.3% of the actor list) monitored for this report were responsible for 58.2% of all collected antisemitic posts. All of these are Telegram channels and six of them are open chats, where all members can post their content. The top three accounts all belong to the QAnon movement.

Conversely, antisemitic content is more evenly distributed among French-speaking users. The top ten accounts (3.9% of the actor list) produced 23.2% of the captured antisemitic content. Among these top ten, we find Facebook groups and pages, Telegram channels and Twitter accounts. Notably, half of these very active channels are Facebook groups. In both French and German, the vast majority of these top channels were anonymous, making it challenging to discern demographic information on the key disseminators and creators of antisemitic content – a valuable enquiry for future research.

Limitations of data collection

The data above only represents content that could be captured through keyword-based collections. Active measures were taken to reduce false positives, but a small margin of error must be acknowledged. Videos or images, where antisemitic content

could be present, could not be gathered through this collection method. For example, we found that around 18% of French and German language Telegram data was likely solely image-based. In addition, antisemitism can be very context dependent and only becomes evident by combining text and images, which is outside the scope of the digital analysis tools used for this study. It must therefore be assumed that this collected data only represents the "tip of the iceberg" of antisemitic content in the observed channels.

While this report only looks at a few, very popular tech platforms, it should be noted that antisemitic content is also very prominent on sites with more limited moderation. An ISD report on the ecosystem on the German far-right, which was published before the pandemic arrived in Europe, found that more than half of German mentions of Jewish people on 4chan contained antisemitic tropes. The same study found that, in a survey on an alt-right Discord channel, three quarters of respondents indicated that they did not trust the number of Holocaust victims presented by the government.[32] It is likely that such antisemitic activity has further flourished since the beginning of the pandemic on platforms outside the scope of this report.

[32] Jakob Guhl, Julia Ebner and Jan Rau, The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, February 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISD-The-Online-Ecosystem-of-the-German-Far-Right-English-Draft-11.pdf

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion and recommendations

The research findings outlined above show that online antisemitic content in French and German has echoed a global trend, which has seen the Covid-19 pandemic accompanied by a "virus of hate" directed against vulnerable communities.

This report starts by outlining the specific manifestations of online antisemitism during the pandemic, showing how longstanding antisemitic tropes were adapted to the context of Covid-19. During the early months of the pandemic, there was a fast-evolving narrative landscape of antisemitic conspiracies, with Jewish communities first being blamed for the creation of the virus, then blamed for its spread. With the roll-out of vaccine programmes in Europe, antisemitism began to shift and expand, with a proliferation of online antisemitic narratives presenting vaccines as an instrument of Jewish control of populations or the presenting of trivialised comparisons between the Holocaust and vaccine programmes. But antisemitism unrelated to Covid-19 was also visibly present in the data collected during the pandemic period, including more general accusations of Jews controlling various institutions as well as Holocaust denial, Nazi propaganda and tropes of "dual loyalty". Throughout this period, the research revealed more explicit extremist manifestations of antisemitism calling for the targeting of Jewish communities with the virus, or directing weaponised hate speech towards communities.

Quantitative data findings charting the overall trajectory of antisemitism during Covid-19 showed that antisemitic content proliferated across a range of social media platforms during this period. Across a set of over four million messages sent by over 500 antisemitic accounts and channels in French and German, over 180,000 contained either explicitly antisemitic keywords, or discussed Jews in a highly antisemitic context. Looking at volume over time, the research showed antisemitic rhetoric increasing over the course of the pandemic in both German and French, accelerating particularly in the early months of 2021. Comparing the first two months of 2020 and 2021, researchers saw a **seven-fold increase** in antisemitic posting across French language accounts, and over a **thirteen-fold increase** in antisemitic comments within German channels.

Almost two thirds of the messages matching antisemitic keywords were detected on Telegram, with the research showing it to be the platform most prone to antisemitic messaging by a large margin, when compared to Facebook and Twitter. The majority of this content was created by German users who were active across a range of channels. The most active German channels, many affiliated with the QAnon movement, also created a disproportionate amount of content, with less than 5% of accounts analysed producing almost 60% of flagged messages. While this study also found antisemitic content distributed via French Telegram channels, the majority of relevant French language content was found on Twitter.

Notably, the collected messages generated significant interactions from other users. The flagged German Telegram content received over two billion "views", the French one over five million "views". The French language content on Twitter received collectively more than 3.7 million retweets and favourites, while posts on Facebook generated more than half a million interactions. The followership of the channels posting this type of content remains significant. The examined French Twitter accounts had a total of almost 900,000 followers while Facebook sites and groups had nearly 700,000, although it must be taken into account that these are not unique user numbers, with many users likely following multiple accounts. German Telegram channels had collectively more than three million followers, while Facebook pages had more than 830,000 followers.

One major trend in the analysis was the proliferation of 'grey area' content, which likely did not contravene legal thresholds around hate speech or Holocaust denial in France or Germany, but which nonetheless has the potential to be harmful and often contravenes platform terms of service. Such 'legal but harmful' content represents a major challenge to tech companies and governments alike, not least as our research showed French and German language antisemitism online to be often characterised by coded language and subtle insidious tropes that are both challenging to detect and to categorise neatly.

Finally, this research demonstrates the need for an improved understanding of the relationship between online and offline antisemitism. Hate crimes have surged during the pandemic, and while causal links between online hate and offline attacks are difficult to establish, it is important for future research to map correlations around the real-world consequences of digital hate, as well as how offline activity can precipitate online harms.[33] To effectively prioritise both digital and 'real-world' strategies to counter antisemitism, a joined-up strategy is required that is sensitive to the ambivalent relationship between online hateful content and offline hate crimes or incidents.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of our findings, we make the following recommendations :

Robust enforcement by social media platforms

• Research has shown that improvements to platform terms of service can be effective at limiting the spread of antisemitic Holocaust denial content. For example, ISD analysis of the use of the term 'holohoax' across platforms found that the spread of Holocaust denial content dropped significantly on YouTube following changes to their terms of service in 2019, whilst it remained constant on other platforms. The implementation of similar policies specifically targeted at antisemitic content

– and the provision of adequate resources to enforce them appropriately – would likely limit the spread of such material across the online ecosystem.

• However, changes to policies must be backed up by diligent enforcement. Our research suggests little noticeable impact on the overall scale of antisemitic content in French and German on Facebook, following on from the platform's changes in 2020 to its terms of service, which banned Holocaust denial content. Greater transparency is required around efforts to target specific forms of hate and further evaluation is needed to better understand the efficacy of application of such content moderation efforts.

Stopping antisemitism falling between the gaps

• The research above shows international exchange between antisemitic actors facilitated by digital platforms. This includes the import of antisemitic content from the United States, where first amendment protections entail different thresholds for freedom of speech to European contexts. Such issues show the profound challenge global platforms face in navigating international jurisdictions when designing and enforcing terms of service. It is crucial that governments coordinate effectively to ensure that harmful antisemitic content does not fall between the cracks across jurisdictions, and that companies consistently enforce their terms of service across all contexts in which they apply.

• National level policy initiatives to tackle illegal content online tend to focus on mainstream social media platforms, with Germany's NetzDG law targeting platforms with over two million users. However, it is essential that policy approaches also focus on addressing antisemitism across smaller platforms, including those in the 'alt-tech' domain, such as Gab, Parler and Telegram, where extremists and conspiracy actors are increasingly migrating as they face increasing pressure on major platforms. Regulatory structures tiered to platform size, such as the EU Commission's Digital Services Act and UK Online Safety Bill, are examples of approaches that might help to address the 'long tail' of platforms hosting antisemitic content, beyond the tech giants.

Educate users and moderators around the varied manifestations of antisemitism

• Education will be central to preventative approaches to tackling antisemitism online and offline. The research findings around

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[33] Research from the University of Warwick, for example, has found an association between support for the xenophobic Alternative for Deutschland party and anti-refugee sentiment on Facebook and violent crimes against refugees in Germany, whilst research from the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media has demonstrated strong correlations between online hate speech and hate crime in London. Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime, 30 November 2018, https:// warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/ staff/crschwarz/fanning-flames-hate.pdf

the prevalence of antisemitic material, which goes beyond explicit incitement against Jews, implies a fundamental lack of understanding about the complex manifestations of antisemitism online. This was evident both from users, who failed to recognise that trivialising comparisons between the Holocaust and Covid-19 lockdowns could be antisemitic. But also from moderators, who largely focus efforts on only a small proportion of the most explicit antisemitism on platforms. It is important that internet users and moderators alike understand the features of coded antisemitism, including utilising the IHRA working definition of antisemitism to ensure that moderation moves beyond removing just the most egregious examples of antisemitism online, but rather addresses the full spectrum of hate against Jewish communities.

- Beyond literacy in the diverse manifestations of antisemitism, we also need to elevate digital citizenship from a 'nice to have' to essential learning in schools. The European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan should incorporate a digital citizenship education component to raise young people's awareness of online safety, as well as media and information literacy, active participation, and rights and responsibilities online.

A European framework for digital regulation

- Our research points to the urgent need to address online antisemitism as part of a comprehensive digital regulatory regime at a European level. Antisemitism is related to a wide spectrum of threats, some legal and some illegal – from disinformation to conspiracy theories, illegal hate speech to terrorist content – showing the importance of a joined-up cross-harms approach to this challenge.

- The European Commission listing illegal hate speech as a "euro-crime", entailing a designation as a particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension for which minimum rules on the definition of criminal offences and sanctions may be established (TFEU Art. 83.1), would help to establish clear legal baselines and coordination across EU Member States.

- Previous ISD research has shown the limitations of a self-regulatory approach, such as the 2018 EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, which was fundamentally challenged by a lack of enforcement for non-compliance.[34] ISD research

during the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections pointed to a clear lack of transparency around tech platform responses to antisemitism, including one case where Facebook failed to respond to requests to communicate on what action, if any, was taken on a Polish coordinated inauthentic account network of 60 Facebook pages discovered by ISD, spreading antisemitic content to its 194,675 followers.

- Previous initiatives such as the 2016 Code of Conduct, have established a 'self-regulatory' initiative to working with tech companies to counter illegal hate speech online. However, new European initiatives such as the Digital Services Act, which clarifies platforms' responsibilities to tackle illegal hate speech, and the European Democracy Action Plan – which sets out an EU strategy for combating digital democratic threats – are crucial mechanisms for holding tech companies to account for their role in hosting (and sometimes promoting) online antisemitism. It is crucial that, as these initiatives develop, they are guided by the overarching principle of transparency, including:

  - Auditing capabilities for regulators or independent experts to assess whether online platforms' policies are effectively and proportionately enforced.

  - Transparency provided through available data for researchers and civil society organisations to better understand the fast-changing nature of antisemitism online.

  - Effective means for regulators or independent researchers to understand the policies, processes and outcomes of algorithmic systems, to help shed light on the underlying architectural features of platforms that might drive users towards conspiratorial, hateful and extremist content.

- In order to ensure that all forms of hate speech and hate crime are effectively addressed, the European Commission has currently set up an initiative to include hate speech and hate crime on the list of EU crimes under Article 83(1) TFEU. Following a successful unanimous adoption of this initiative by the Council of the European Union, with the consent of the European Parliament, there would be an explicit legal basis for adopting additional measures to reinforce the existing EU legislation criminalising racist and xenophobic hate speech and hate crime, including illegal hate speech online.

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[34] *Chloe Colliver, Cracking the Code: An Evaluation of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, ISD, June 2016, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/isd_Cracking-the-Code.pdf*

Addressing legal but harmful content

- This research points to a considerable grey area of legal but harmful content and behaviours prevalent across platforms. While the Digital Services Act clarifies and strengthens the responsibilities of platforms around expressly illegal hate speech and incitement to violence, it will also likely help to address potentially legal but harmful antisemitic content (such as disinformation and conspiracy beliefs) via the exercise of encouraging transparency online and clarifying obligations of platforms. For example, the DSA's emphasis on proportional, risk mitigation approaches to regulating platform operators encourages a greater focus on user safety and obliges platforms to assess if they have negative effects on fundamental rights or whether services are vulnerable to manipulation.

- Beyond mandating the removal of expressly illegal content, it is therefore essential to ensure that policy approaches also factor in how platform design features might help amplify antisemitism, including algorithms intended to maximise attention and create dense networks of likeminded users. These can serve to amplify harmful content, must be considered in the scope of emerging legislative and policy efforts, while also preserving rights to speech and expression. Addressing a wider spectrum of legal but harmful content online will require a comprehensive approach involving a range of different European level policy initiatives, national governments, as well as the private sector and civil society.

- A systemic approach to digital regulation would place a proportionate responsibility on platform operators to ensure as far as possible the safety of their users and their protection against anticipated or potential risks. This could ensure, for example, that content or channel recommendations are not designed in such a way as to prioritise legal but harmful content, including extremist or conspiracy theory content. This type of regulatory regime would create incentives for companies to design their platforms and products with a greater focus on user safety and the reduction of online harms. The UK's Online Safety Bill sets out an approach to encourage safety by design and to counter both illegal and legal but harmful content on online services. However, the definition of 'legal but harmful' content or behaviour continues to challenge lawmakers who are (understandably) concerned about the protection of freedom of expression within the law.

An agenda for future research

- Further cross-platform research is required to understand the networks, behaviours and audiences that comprise the ecosystem of online antisemitism, to inform effective responses. In particular, there is a need to understand, in greater detail, demographic details of the audiences for antisemitic content, as well as the patterns of engagement and even offline impact of such online narratives.

- More work is required on the classification of antisemitic actors – recognising that antisemitism exists on a spectrum from overt to covert antisemitism, and that hate against Jewish communities is weaponised by a range of extremist and conspiracy actors, from Islamists to QAnon. It will be particularly important to understand the way different platforms are exploited by diverse malign actors – and understanding the differing roles played by different digital services in the trajectory of online antisemitism.

- One limitation of the research was the focus on keyword-based methodologies that restricted analysis of images to qualitative analysis. Given the amount of image-based antisemitic content contained within our dataset, future research should deploy robust image analysis to help understand the visual culture of antisemitism online, including the proliferation of antisemitic memes.

Methodological Annex

Methodological Annex

This report is based on a mixture of data-driven analysis and digital ethnographic research. For this project. ISD decided to use a primarily account-based approach for the data analysis. This means that messages were collected only from a number of predetermined accounts rather than across the entire social media platforms using keywords. The advantage for this project is that this method provides greater certainty that the collected data is actually antisemitic. Also, it allows the collection of more data than a keyword search based solely on explicitly antisemitic slurs, as users might be hesitant to use them to avoid repercussions.

This report aims to provide answers to the following questions:

• How did the volume of antisemitic content evolve over the course of the pandemic in the French and German online sphere?

• What are the notable differences in the volume of such content between platforms and linguistic communities?

• What are common anti-Jewish narratives that emerged in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic?

• Which other antisemitic speech as defined by the IHRA or national legislations is present online?

Data Collection

In a first step, ISD created two actor lists: one for German language accounts and one for French language accounts. These lists included Facebook pages, Facebook groups, Twitter accounts, Instagram accounts as well as Telegram channels. These lists were compiled based on actors previously known to ISD as well as ethnographic research. The condition for the inclusion of a channel is that they posted at least one antisemitic message that falls under the IHRA definition or constitutes illegal hate speech in either France or Germany. This antisemitic content could either be explicit or more subtle, using coded language.

The lists were created irrespective of ideological alignments. They include both channels specifically dedicated to anti-Jewish agitation as well as broader conspiracy theory channels where antisemitism seemed to be tolerated and not removed by

administrators. The phenomenon of these two sorts of spaces for antisemitism has been covered in ISD's report on Holocaust denial. The report found that channels that were not exclusively antisemitic but tolerated such content, had a greater number of followers and therefore potential to introduce a wider audience to these conspiracy theories.[35]

Keyword Selection

ISD created keyword lists of terms commonly used in antisemitic messages, drawing on EU Commission recommendations, ISD's existing research and expert consultation. To better capture the full extent of antisemitic messaging online, ISD decided to split both actor lists into the categories "veiled" and "explicit" according to corresponding keyword lists. The first category mostly includes conspiracy theory channels where antisemitism often appears in abstract form. The second category includes channels where there was open incitement against Jewish people.

The difference between these two categories is not always clear cut, especially in chats where a multitude of opinions is represented. Such channels were coded "explicit" if there was a significant presence of openly antisemitic content or there were notable instances of extreme antisemitism such as Holocaust denial or support for Hitler.

[35] *Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, Hosting the 'Holohoax': A Snapshot of Holocaust Denial Across Social Media, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 10 August 2020,* https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Hosting-the-Holohoax.pdf

A "high-certainty" keyword list was compiled of terms that very probably lead to antisemitic content. These included racist slurs, denialist terms like "Holohoax", and names of groups or individuals (for example "Rothschild", "Soros", and "Zionist lobby") who are frequently linked to antisemitic beliefs in these online subcultures. The second keyword list comprised "general" terms related to Jews, Judaism and Israel. The reasoning behind this process was that a common term like "Jew" may lead to irrelevant content in more implicit communities, but is very likely to lead to antisemitic content in neo-Nazi and other dedicated hate communities. While the keyword lists were almost exclusively in French and German respectively, some English language terms as well as alternative spellings and (potentially deliberate) misspellings were included, if they had been observed during the account collection.

Analysis

As a next step, ISD collected all messages sent or posted from these accounts and channels from 1 January 2020 to 8 March 2021 using the software Method52 developed by ISD's technology partners at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM). Keyword lists were then applied according to the categorisation of the actors to highlight messages containing antisemitic content. The accounts coded as "veiled" were only analysed using the "high-certainty" keyword list. Accounts that were deemed to be "explicit" were analysed using both the "high-certainty" and the "general" keyword list. The two resulting data sets were then combined to determine the overall amount of antisemitic content for each linguistic group.

Further analysis was conducted based on this extracted data, which was deemed highly likely to be antisemitic. In each linguistic community, the data was split by platform usage and was plotted over time. Based on this information, ISD could compare French language and German language antisemitic online messaging with regard to their volume over time and the most impacted platforms.

This data-driven approach was supported by ethnographic research to determine common narratives and instances of illegal material as well as image-based content, which cannot be captured by Method52. Representative examples of antisemitism as defined by the IHRA were collected during the process of selecting accounts as well as by searching the data set of collected material.

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