



German Proposals for Increased Control of Online Media after the U.S. Presidential Election

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The 2016 U.S. presidential election showed that the fight for voters on social media may have resulted in the spread of false information, propaganda and disinformation. In Germany's upcoming election campaign, a similar scenario may unfold. To prevent it, the German government intends to take preventive measures, but against new forms of online threats they may prove insufficient.

The recent U.S. election campaign may have been strongly influenced by internet trolls and social bots using such platforms as Facebook and Twitter. The bots, which are special computer programs that masquerade as real users, disseminated fake news and propaganda and pushed it out to more users through the platforms' "likes" systems. During the campaign, media sites with radical content were very active, for example The Blaze, Drudge Report, Newsmax and the "alt-right" Breitbart News, especially known for its harsh rhetoric. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks published documents that sought to embarrass Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and which were stolen from her party's computer systems by hackers.

The trajectory of the U.S. campaign and the methods used have been examined by other countries where elections will be held soon, especially Germany. In autumn 2017, members of the Bundestag will be elected. The German government does not want a repeat of the controversial U.S. campaign methods and plans to implement stricter control of social media to counter them.

Barriers to Propaganda on Social Media. In Germany, the use of social media is much less than in the United States. There, 21% of users are on Twitter and nearly 60% on Facebook while in Germany less than 15% of citizens are on Twitter and less than 30% are on Facebook (Statista.de). However, social networks see high activity among extremist movements and radical parties in Germany, according to the organization Jugendschutz, which deals with and monitors online political extremism and criminal content, especially among youth.

The impact of anti-system parties in Germany, such as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), is much smaller than in other European countries. However, with its anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic, anti-EU and anti-NATO slogans, AfD has won seats in 10 local parliaments in regional elections and, according to national surveys, has about 12% of the electorate, which puts it in fourth place in the polls. However, this is lower than support of the Dutch Party for Freedom or France's National Front, for example, both of which lead in the polls in their respective countries. Another bulwark against aggressive propaganda are the legal restrictions on freedom of expression in Germany, which are much stricter than in the US. Paragraph 130 of the German criminal code outlines punishment from 3 months to 5 years for anyone inciting hatred against another person or group of people on the grounds of nationality, origin, ethnicity, religion or calls for violence against them, including in internet activity. In July 2016, criminal police in 14 federal states entered the homes of more than 60 people suspected of posting racist comments, threats or calls for hatred against foreigners. About 40 of these cases involved allegations of posting racist slogans or promoting Nazism on Facebook. German internet users can be punished for these activities. The code, however, does not deal with disinformation, fake news or use of social bots.

Control over the Internet. The German government intends to counter these internet-based threats and has called on its legal and security services to present concrete proposals for action in this regard. The Federal Ministry of the Interior's response to the threat of hacker attacks has been a new cybersecurity strategy. In addition to improvements

to existing cyberdefence techniques, it wants to establish mobile rapid-reaction forces within the Federal Office for Security in Information Technologies (BSI), federal police, intelligence and counterintelligence agencies. A special unit composed of IT experts will be formed to be able to carry out a counterattack on foreign servers if needed.

When it comes to social media, among the first anticipated tools is quick removal of criminal content. At the end of 2015, following cases involving hate speech and propaganda on social media during the mass-migration crisis, the German government reached agreement with social media platforms on control of content. Under the deal, punishable postings are to be removed within 24 hours. In August 2016 alone, Facebook removed about 100,000 posts containing hate speech. In practice, it turns out that the removal of content is not always as quick as agreed, as in the case of the Green Party's Renate Künast. Despite nearly instant intervention on a post concerning an Afghan suspected of the murder of a student in Freiburg, the false entry with the politician's photo circled on Facebook for a few days. The head of the SPD, Thomas Oppermann, suggested introducing financial penalties on the owners of social media platforms of up to €500,000 for failing to remove false information or comments inciting hate within 24 hours.

Another tool is an exchange of information between social media platforms and giving them greater responsibility for cleaning up the information. Germany has demanded the owners of these sites take initiatives to fight fake news, such as those that began in early December 2016. At that time, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Microsoft signed an agreement to exchange information about violent, extremist photos and videos. Thanks to their cooperation, finding and removing content containing terrorism propaganda is faster and more effective. The third tool involves the fight against disinformation. Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere announced a plan to set up a centre under the Federal Press Office to fight misinformation and combat false information on the internet. CDU politicians also proposed legislation allowing for the prosecution of disinformation that aims to "destabilise the country."

Politicians have not escaped responsibility. Representatives of all parties in the Bundestag declared that during the campaign they would not use fake news and manipulated information in their campaigns. Some SPD politicians even suggested that political parties should sign the commitment. The CDU, however, said it intends to create a rapid-response team to counter false information online.

A Difficult Campaign. Germany plans for legal solutions and increased activity among its security and other services to counteract distortion in the upcoming election campaign will certainly help but some things remain out of their control, especially activities from the "outside," particularly from Russia. The 2015 hack of the Bundestag's computer network has many expecting the stolen, confidential information to be made public during the campaign. A harbinger of this was the recent disclosure by WikiLeaks of the minutes of a Bundestag committee investigating the eavesdropping case involving the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA).

If Germany has another terrorist attack, it would immediately be used as propaganda by anti-system elements. This was confirmed by the reactions of AfD politicians after the December attack on a Christmas market in Berlin. Only an hour after the attack, party politicians, without knowing the facts, published entries on Twitter and Facebook that blamed refugees and Chancellor Angela Merkel's immigration policy. Later, the party's governing board adopted a strategy for the next campaign in which it says the party is obligated to "correct" issues for the German public which the current ruling coalition may find "inconvenient." The German government's actions and barriers it erects on social media cannot prevent tampering in the next campaign but may reduce them. Attempts at manipulation, propaganda, and computer system hacks should be expected, so Germany must be prepared for a campaign unlike any before it and probably among its most difficult since reunification.