# The Link Between Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation and Domestic Extremism

## A Comparative Analysis of the United States and Germany

Scott H. Vlachos

Council for Emerging National Security Affairs

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Scott Vlachos is a Fellow at the Council for Emerging National Security Affairs specializing in disinformation, extremism, cybersecurity theory, U.S. foreign policy, and politics of the Middle East. He has published works analyzing U.S. cyber infrastructure vulnerabilities, the efficacy of drone warfare and the disposition matrix used for target selection, and the rising threat of domestic and foreign-origin information warfare. Mr. Vlachos holds an M.A. in International Relations from New York University and a B.A. in Political Science from Rider University.

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# Executive Summary

In August 2020, a protest outside the Reichstag in Germany turned violent, and demonstrators almost breached the building before facing strong retaliation from police. Just five months later, the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riot in Washington, D.C., shocked the world. In both cases, extremist groups[1] congregated outside these houses of legislation invigorated by a litany of mis-, dis-, and malinformation (MDM).[2] For years, extremists have leveraged MDM within the United States (US) and Germany to advance their platforms, attract more members, and lead to increasingly violent public disturbances. Both countries have shown susceptibility to tactics used by extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys in the US or the Querdenker Movement in Germany. These groups primarily recruited online and organized mass protests that erupted into large-scale violence against the government.

Research has shown that the radicalization process used by these extremist groups is largely enhanced by social media. Hate speech and misogyny are key factors underscoring many of these extremists and their counter-government narratives are often incorporated into conspiracy theories that are reinforced online through memes, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media. Unfortunately, today's social media algorithms amplify the power of these groups by promoting this type of controversial content due to the financial benefit that the increased user engagement creates. These algorithms encourage the creation of echo chambers, environments in which a person

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1        The Anti-Defamation League defines "extremism" as "A concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., 'mainstream' beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society. Extremism can also be used to refer to the radical wings of broader movements, such as the anti-abortion movement or the environmental movement. Not every extremist movement is 'bad' – the abolitionist movement is one example of an extreme movement that had admirable goals – but most extremist movements exist outside of the mainstream because many of their views or tactics are objectionable."
"Extremism." *Anti-Defamation League.* https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/extremism.

2        The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency defines the terms as follows: Misinformation is false, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm; Disinformation is deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country; Malinformation is based on fact, used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate. MDM is also sometimes referred to as political warfare or active measures.

encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own. Inside an echo chamber, existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered. Algorithms can promote echo chambers by drawing social media users to feeds with increasingly violent, hateful, and radicalizing content that pushes users further towards extremist groups while isolating them from opposing views.

The methods that the US and Germany use to combat these groups vary dramatically. US law poses a large barrier to social media regulation because the First Amendment safeguards free speech, including hate speech. On the other hand, Germany's contemporary laws were shaped by the aftermath of World War II (WWII) and strictly punish both hate speech and Nazi-glorification. In its efforts to increase the scope of its policing power on the Internet, Germany has enacted laws that censor online content and force social media companies to comply or face hefty financial penalties. The European Union's Digital Services Act also further regulates social media companies by opening them up to independent review. As a result, unlike the US, extremist groups and MDM have been proactively removed from German platforms. In the US, companies only remove groups long after they organize to promote violence.

While First Amendment laws do have the unintended consequence of protecting extremist groups, the observations from this report's comparative study highlight several ways that US policymakers can still reduce the influence and impact that extremist groups have on social media without infringing on free speech or other American values.

**Recommendations**

1. **Limit the amplifying effect of social media algorithms.** Studies have demonstrated that social media algorithms are chiefly responsible for shepherding a user down the path towards extremist content. In order to reduce the impact of these algorithms, Congress should pass the following legislation: the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, which would provide a pathway for independent researchers to analyze social media data; the Social Media NUDGE Act, which directs the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering

and Medicine to study social media algorithms and develop circuit breakers for slowing down the spread of MDM; and the Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2022, which requires Internet companies to conduct impact assessments of their automatic decision-making systems and provide an explanation of methodology used when collecting user data and other input information.

2. **Adopt digital literacy as a pillar of the US education system.** Experts believe that it is possible to train individuals how to identify MDM. Studies have also shown that improving digital literacy is instrumental in dampening the efficacy of MDM through education programs that focus on teaching comprehensive and critical reading skills. As an important first step, Congress should consider reintroducing and passing the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act. The bill mandates that the Department of Education will award grants for the development of media literacy guidelines and curriculum and that it will create a media literacy advisory council, tasked with providing recommendations for overcoming barriers and implementing best practices when developing media literacy programs. Congress should also consider passing the Digital Literacy and Equity Commission Act. The bill requires a report to Congress regarding the state of digital literacy in the US and a proposal for strategies to improve digital literacy through the analysis of programs in other countries.

3. **Improve behavioral health services and training programs to prevent radicalization or facilitate disengagement.** Counseling services in other countries like Germany have been effective in guiding radicalized individuals away from extremist groups and reintegrating them into society. Congress should authorize an increase to the budget for the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3), which uses a community-based approach to tackle radicalization. In addition, the Department of Defense (DOD) should augment its new extremist-related training programs to better incorporate information about MDM and provide digital literacy education for Service members in order to prevent radicalization or augment disengagement efforts.

## Acknowledgements

## Background

MDM is immemorial. It plagued political elections and vaccination efforts long before the twenty-first century. In the US, the 1799 claims that President John Adams planned to crown himself king[3] and the 1796 outcry that smallpox vaccines would cause stillbirths[4] were no less explosive or effective than the 2020 conspiracy theory that President Joseph Biden "stole" the election[5] or that Covid vaccines contain microchips.[6] The difference today lies with the transmission of information and its increased speed, production scale, and geographical coverage. Social media allows a person to make any unverified claim and within seconds expose it to a worldwide audience of millions of people. Whereas in 1799 James Callender would need to besmirch President Adams' reputation by writing lengthy essays and pitching them to local and national newspapers, in today's world, a purveyor of controversy cuts through the traditional modes of publishing.

Social media provides a unique vehicle for sending messages across the globe in a way that exponentially increases their exposure. A single post made by one account can be forwarded and shared by millions of others, amplifying its coverage within minutes. These processes can also be automated through the use of bots to increase the rate, speed, frequency, and popularity of content.[7] Frequency and popularity, in particular, are important because they will determine how quickly a post, video, or image will spread.

3    "Biography: James Callender." WGBH Educational Foundation. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/american-experience/features/adams-james-callender/.

4    Elizabeth Dohms-Harter. "History Shows Anti-Vaccination, Misinformation Campaigns Are Nothing New." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, 30 Mar. 2021. https://www.wpr.org/history-shows-anti-vaccination-mis-information-campaigns-are-nothing-new.

5    "Most Republicans Still Believe 2020 Election Was Stolen from Trump – Poll." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 24 May 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/24/republicans-2020-election-poll-trump-biden.

6    Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael. "Coronavirus: Bill Gates 'Microchip' Conspiracy Theory and Other Vaccine Claims Fact-Checked." *BBC News*, BBC, 29 May 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/52847648.

7    Joshua A. Tucker et al. "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature." *William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*. March 2018. https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Liter-ature-Review.pdf. pp. 25-6.

On YouTube, for example, a content creator that posts frequently and has user feedback in the form of long watch times, comments, and likes/dislikes will have their videos rated higher by the algorithm, which in turn will recommend it to more viewers.[8] Although YouTube removed the dislike count, the interaction still registers. A controversial subject that receives many dislikes will be promoted by the algorithm in equal measure to a video with many likes. What matters most to YouTube's algorithm is user engagement, not positive or negative connotations. Disliked videos are not currently penalized, whereas on platforms like Reddit, downvoted content is made hidden past a certain threshold (this is by default, but there is a preference option available to display downvoted content, and the content is not removed from the platform).

This type of rapid sharing encourages the growth of echo chambers and invites the eyes of aggressive recruiters. According to a report by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, "violent non-state actors, in particular right-wing groups, have taken advantage of these algorithms during the pandemic to contact 'suggested friends' and recruit new members."[9] MDM is not a passive manipulative tool. Predators scan forums and groups on different platforms looking for vulnerable users. MDM acts as a primer, establishing a narrative that recruiters can then use in conversation to gain the target's trust and begin the recruitment process.

MDM has been on the rise in the US since 2016. At the time, there were concerns of foreign interference in the presidential election process, and many attempts to slander Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton were traced to suspected state-sponsored Russian hackers and troll farms. Sowing the seeds of dissent by exploiting preexisting societal vulnerabilities and prejudices has been a popular tactic by the Kremlin and has proven successful on many occasions. For example, one infamous conspiracy theory was known

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8       Matt Southern. "YouTube Reveals New Details About Its Algorithm." *Search Engine Journal*, Search Engine Journal, 10 Nov. 2020. https://www.searchenginejournal.com/youtube-recommendation-algorithm/387030.

9       "Stop the Virus of Disinformation: The Risk of Malicious Use of Social Media During COVID-19 and the Technology Options to Fight It." *United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute*. November 2020. https://http://www.unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/SM%20misuse.pdf. p. 16.

as the "Pizzagate scandal," which involved Russian hackers leaking e-mails sent by Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta. The Russians spun a story in which Podesta supposedly utilized pizza toppings as code words for placing orders to a child sex ring operated in the basement of a popular pizzeria in Washington, D.C. Social media users exploded with rage, and the restaurant was soon flooded with threats. The Pizzagate lie saw its biggest success when a man from North Carolina stormed into the pizzeria with a rifle, fired it at least once, and demanded the children's freedom.[10] Of course, there were no children hostages, and the shooter was arrested. This example demonstrates how MDM has the power to translate into violent action.

While there have been several studies and reports alerting governments to the damage caused by expansive MDM, some governments have been slower to act than others. The US and European Union (EU) have demonstrated varying degrees of response and recognition towards the societal threats posed by MDM. The Trump administration, for example, did little to discourage, condemn, or counter foreign disinformation campaigns and homegrown MDM sources. To the contrary, in many instances, both President Trump and various members within his administration promoted MDM as fact using both social and traditional media platforms.[11]

The EU, by contrast, has made several important first steps towards confronting MDM and the damage stemming from it. For example, in 2021 the European Commission introduced a framework for guidance as part of its Code of Practice on Disinformation.[12] It proposes many of the same procedures that social media companies have already

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10      Eric Lipton. "Man Motivated by 'Pizzagate' Conspiracy Theory Arrested in Washington Gunfire." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Dec. 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/us/pizza-gate-comet-ping-pong-edgar-maddison-welch.html.

11      Glenn Kessler. "Trump Made 30,573 False or Misleading Claims as President. Nearly Half Came in His Final Year." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 24 Jan. 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-fact-checker-tracked-trump-claims/2021/01/23/ad04b69a-5c1d-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html.

12      "Commission Presents Guidance to Strengthen the Code of Practice on Disinformation." *European Commission*, 26 May 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2585.

taken, such as demonetization,[13] informing users of potential disinformation, allowing users to flag misleading content, implementing a monitoring network "based on key performance indicators," and the development of a Transparency Center where platforms can openly discuss how they plan to engage with disinformation. These guidelines require that social media platforms work closer with the European Commission to address the issue; however, they stop short of outright regulating the industry with financial or legal penalties.

In order to address gaps in their policy, the EU gave the initial approval for its Digital Services Act (DSA) in January 2022 before agreeing to a final version in April. DSA is expected to become enforceable in 2024. The new law seeks to regulate social media by forcing transparency to facilitate algorithm accountability, implementing new safeguards for users, and imposing penalties and fines on companies that fail to comply with the rules.[14] Companies must release annual risk assessments detailing intentional manipulation of their services and must open their risk assessment systems to independent review. EU member states will each appoint a Digital Services Coordinator that will oversee rule compliance. Coordinators have the authority to request immediate action from companies "when necessary to address serious harms."[15] In serious cases, companies that fail to comply with DSA regulations can be fined up to 6% of their global turnover or be issued a ban from operating in the EU in the case of systematic non-compliance.

Social media companies are not keen on the DSA, and a series of leaks have exposed their lobbying efforts to kill the law. Google is one of the largest contributors towards influencing the EU's decision. Out of all the big tech companies, it managed to secure the most meetings with the European Commission and Parliament. These were the main aspects of Google's lobbying strategy: lobby at Parliament, Commission,

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13      Demonetization occurs when an account is stripped of its ability to generate revenue due to a violation of the social media platform's policies.

14      "Digital Services Act – Questions and Answers." *European Commission*, 15 Dec. 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348.

15      *Ibid.,* Section: What penalties will businesses face if they do not comply with the new rules?

and member state levels; create "pushback" against EU's digital chief Thierry Breton (who was seen as supporting potential breakups); reframe the political narrative around costs to the economy and consumers; mobilize third parties (such as think tanks and academics) to echo Google's message; mobilize the US government; and create conflict between Commission departments.[16] The same day this strategy was leaked, Reuters reported that the European Centre for International Political Economy was to publish a study that estimated the economic cost of the proposals (ones that had not yet been announced, published, or finalized) at about €85 billion ($100.5 billion) to the European economy.[17] Google and other companies like Apple, Amazon, and Facebook also lobbied hard during secret trilogues[18] in which their strategy called for the following: becoming more technical and offering amendments to the text; using meetings to gain access to information that was not available to the public; going high-level by bringing in the CEOs to meet Commissioners and inviting them to off-the-record dinners.[19]

Big tech companies have many resources at their disposal and continue fighting regulation. Aside from the EU, other countries have also been hit with underhanded tactics. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) introduced the Online Safety Bill in March 2022[20] and followed up by giving the Digital Markets Unit, its tech watchdog, the power to impose fines of up to 10% of a company's annual global turnover or 5% of daily global turnover for each day that an offense continues. Tech companies will also be required to report any new changes to algorithms, particularly ones aimed at steering away traffic

16      "Big Tech Brings out the Big Guns in Fight for Future of EU Tech Regulation." *Corporate Europe Observatory.* 11 Dec. 2020. https://corporateeurope.org/en/2020/12/big-tech-brings-out-big-guns-fight-future-eu-tech-regulation.

17      Foo Yun Chee. "Economic Cost of New EU Tech Rules Could Top $100.5 Billion, Study Says." *Reuters.* Thomson Reuters. 28 Oct. 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN27D2SP.

18      Trilogues are informal meetings on legislative proposals between representatives of the European Parliament, Council and Commission. Their purpose is to reach a provisional agreement on a text acceptable to both the Council and the Parliament. They may be organized at any stage of the legislative procedure and can lead to what are known as "first reading," "early second reading" or "second reading" agreements, or to a "joint text" during conciliation.

19      "Big Tech's Last Minute Attempt to Tame EU Tech Rules." *Corporate Europe Observatory.* 23 Apr. 2022. https://corporateeurope.org/en/2022/04/big-techs-last-minute-attempt-tame-eu-tech-rules.

20      "World-First Online Safety Laws Introduced in Parliament." *GOV.UK.* 17 Mar. 2022. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-first-online-safety-laws-introduced-in-parliament.

from businesses.[21] In response to the UK's push for regulation, Facebook has scrambled to hire an army of lobbyists to combat the Online Safety Bill.[22]

Another example of big tech companies flexing their muscles is illustrated by Australia. The country moved to regulate tech companies with a new law forcing them to pay news publishers for displaying their content. Facebook protested the law by intentionally blocking hundreds of Australian emergency services and government pages.[23] Regardless of the type of legislation, big tech companies have demonstrated that they are willing to play dirty to avoid strong regulatory policies. Americans should do well to remember this whenever a tech regulation bill is introduced in Congress.

Due to the parallels in the spread of MDM throughout the US and Europe, this paper will examine how the US and Germany have struggled with combatting MDM that empowers domestic extremists. Groups like the Proud Boys and Querdenker relied on MDM to justify their acts of violence, garner attention, and draw new followers to their causes. The US was chosen for analysis to inform policymakers on gaps in current approaches to MDM and extremism. Germany was included for research due to its historic relationship with fascism, Nazi propaganda, and the modern-day influence of Covid-related MDM on its domestic extremists.

While researching this paper, the expectation was to learn the key to Germany's success in birthing a strong democracy out of the ashes of fascism. Although extremist activity has risen during the Covid pandemic, the country's present-day resilience to right-wing extremism serves as a beacon of hope. However, the US cannot become Germany's facsimile. American and German laws and philosophies diverge in several

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21      Dan Milmo. "UK Watchdog Will Have Power to Impose Huge Fines on Big Tech Firms." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media. 5 May 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/may/05/uk-watchdog-will-have-power-to-impose-huge-fines-on-big-tech-firms.

22      Eleni Courea. "Facebook Ramps up UK Lobbying Hires as Privacy Battles Loom." *POLITICO*. POLITICO. 4 Mar. 2022. https://www.politico.eu/article/meta-facebook-ramps-up-uk-eu-lobbying-hires-privacy-battles/.

23      Josh Taylor. "Facebook Whistleblowers Allege Government and Emergency Services Hit by Australia News Ban Was a Deliberate Tactic." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media. 6 May 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/may/06/facebook-whistleblowers-allege-government-and-emergency-services-hit-by-australia-news-ban-was-a-deliberate-tactic.

important ways, particularly when it comes to the freedom of speech. Despite the differences, there are still many lessons Americans can learn from the Germans, and this paper will sort those lessons into three main policy recommendations to address (1) social media algorithms, (2) immunization to MDM, and (3) extremist-related counseling services and training programs.

## Analysis of Online Radicalization Through MDM

Multiple factors come together to enable the online radicalization process. This section will examine how free speech laws, conspiracy theories, and social media algorithms can catalyze to form echo chambers that provide the groundwork for extremist groups and their related MDM to flourish.

To understand why extremist groups thrive on the Internet, it is first important to review the uniquely American laws protecting free speech. Unlike other democratic entities such as the EU, the US safeguards all manner of speech, including hate speech. In the 1969 case *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, the Supreme Court decided that speech advocating illegal conduct is protected under the First Amendment.[24] This ruling led to a two-question test to determine whether inflammatory speech should be restricted. In order for speech to lose its protection, it must demonstrate the following: (1) the speech is "directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action," and (2) the speech is "likely to incite or produce such action."[25] The *Brandenburg* decision is what allows Neo-Nazis to parade through American streets with swastikas and popular media personalities to disseminate racist and misogynistic commentary. It also allows for protests such as the 2017 Unite the Right rally, which brought together a wide collection of white supremacists.

Hate speech again encountered deliberation in 1977 when the US signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which is also referred to as the International Bill of Rights. Under Article 20 of the Covenant, "Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law."[26] When the US ratified the treaty in 1992, it did so with several reservations, including the following: "Article 20 does not authorize or require legislation or other action by the United States that would restrict the right of free speech and

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24      Clarence BRANDENBURG, Appellant, v. State of OHIO. https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/395/444.

25      Brandenburg test. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/brandenburg_test.

26      International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. https://www.state.gov/92-908/, p. 11.

association protected by the Constitution and laws of the United States."[27] The US would continue to preserve the expansive speech protections afforded by the First Amendment, foregoing restrictions placed by the Covenant.

Free speech is the cornerstone of the Internet's success. First developed as the ARPANET through the US's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in 1969, what eventually evolved into the Internet was imbued with American democratic principles. The public marketplace of ideas that we recognize today as the Internet was made possible due to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA). Entitled "Protection for private blocking and screening of offensive material," Section 230 states, "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."[28] In other words, online services publishing third-party content are not legally responsible for their users' actions. Framed in the context of social media, companies are not responsible for the hate speech, conspiracy theories, and MDM published on their platforms.

Although there have been many successes and benefits owed to the lax policing of Internet content, a dark pool of controversial communities also sprouted in the shadows. Once relegated to the deepest bowels of the Internet, the contemporary social media landscape has propelled controversial extremist content to the forefront in recent years, extending its reach and bolstering its radicalizing power. Extremist communities rely on hate speech, misogyny, and conspiracies as glue to cement their members' support and participation. These online portals are gateways into what is known as the manosphere, which is "a loose collection of blogs and forums devoted to men's rights, sexual strategy, and misogyny."[29]

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27      International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Senate Consideration of Treaty Document 95-20. https://www.congress.gov/treaty-document/95th-congress/20.

28      47 U.S. Code § 230. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230.

29      Becca Lewis and Alice E. Marwick. "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online." *Data & Society*, Data & Society Research Institute, 15 May 2017, https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.

Misogyny is a vital facet of many white supremacy groups. According to a report by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "There is a robust symbiosis between misogyny and white supremacy; the two ideologies are powerfully intertwined. [...] a deep-seated loathing of women acts as a connective tissue between many white supremacists, especially those in the alt right."[30] Due to this reliance on misogynistic content, it is no surprise that many internet memes, podcasts, videos, blogs, and posts created by white supremacy groups incorporate anti-feminist and misogynistic themes. Images proclaiming "Your worst enemy is not Jews, White Man, but your own females"[31] and "Feminists Deserve the Rope"[32] are but a few examples of what someone browsing the manosphere might discover. While perceptions vary among groups, commonly held beliefs about women depicted in the manosphere assert that a woman's "place" is to bear children and be a dutiful wife,[33] they are "too emotional to make decisions," and they are "incapable of controlling their own behavior."[34] More extreme anti-feminist positions advocate against higher education, professional careers, reproductive rights, and women's suffrage.[35]

These perceptions about women and feminism feed into an assortment of conspiratorial content that works hand-in-hand with MDM. The European Commission uses six characteristics to test if a particular belief is a conspiracy theory:

> "(1) An alleged, secret plot; (2) A group of conspirators; (3) Evidence that seems to support the conspiracy theory; (4) They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is at it appears; (5) They divide the world into good or bad; (6) They scapegoat people and groups."[36]

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30      "When Women Are the Enemy: The Intersection of Misogyny and White Supremacy." *Anti-Defamation League*, 2018, https://www.adl.org/media/11707/download.

31      *Ibid.*, 6.

32      *Ibid.*, 9.

33      *Ibid.*, 10.

34      *Ibid.*, 8.

35      Nancy S. Love. "Shield Maidens, Fashy Femmes, and TradWives: Feminism, Patriarchy, and Right-Wing Populism." Frontiers in Sociology, 23 Dec. 2020. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.619572.

36      "Identifying Conspiracy Theories." *European Commission*, 5 May 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en.

While modern extremist groups have adopted Covid-era beliefs such as anti-vax and QAnon conspiracies, many have also rooted themselves within an old and pervasive conspiracy that belies most white supremacist groups. Known as the Great Replacement Theory, the narrative holds that white men are in danger of extinction. Marriages between white women and other races, high minority birth rates, and immigration are often attributed as causes for Great Replacement.[37] Facts such as well-researched statistics, narrowly defined terminology, and credible source citation are typically nonexistent within any bombastic claims made by extremists appealing to the theory.

The misogynistic aspect of Great Replacement touches upon recurring anti-feminist themes, most notably how it is the duty of the white woman to bear white children in order to preserve the white race. In the words of a video posted on a private channel affiliated with the Proud Boys, "White women of child baring [sic] age are only 2% of the world population but they are encouraged to race mix, told they have White privilege and blamed for everything."[38] This statement appeals to believers of Great Replacement by combining both racist and sexist MDM. It incorporates a fake statistic and then implies that societal norms "encourage" interracial relationships that threaten the white race. The video also goes on to make several unattributed general claims about the frequency that white women face rape by nonwhite men. This included an anti-Semitic anecdote about an undisclosed number of white women allegedly being held captive in Israel where they are being raped "day and night with no hope of escape," thus preventing them from engaging in their duty to bear white children. With assertions like these, this video, along with many other MDM used by extremists, is designed to pull viewers deeper into the manosphere.

MDM is shared by extremists to both harness the curiosity it causes as well as to reinforce their core beliefs. New initiates stumbling onto memes, videos, or other

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37 "Misogyny is a Powerful Undercurrent of the 'Great Replacement' Conspiracy Theory." Anti-Defamation League, 23 July 2021, https://www.adl.org/blog/misogyny-is-a-powerful-undercurrent-of-the-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-0.

38 Houstonproudboys. Telegram. https://t.me/Houstonproudboys/347.

media for the first time get drawn into the proverbial rabbit hole through their natural curiosity to learn.[39] Along the way, they are exposed to increasingly violent and polarizing content, which brings their worldview into alignment with extremist ideals. Once down the rabbit hole, the user's social media feeds become inundated with extremist content, forming an echo chamber aided by social media algorithms. Echo chambers, which are polarized groups formed around a shared narrative, often serve as hotbeds of MDM. According to a 2016 study conducted by Italian data scientists, "Users tend to aggregate in communities of interest, which causes reinforcement and fosters confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization. This comes at the expense of the quality of the information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumors, mistrust, and paranoia."[40] Some users are unable to break away from deeply held beliefs that are based on and reinforced by MDM, and the echo chambers facilitate these biases. However, the user alone is not to blame for the quality of information or recurrence of similarly themed content.

Social media algorithms encourage the formation of echo chambers, meaning it is beyond the user's scope of power to control how and when this isolation occurs. Although the coding for these algorithms is primarily a black box,[41] analysts and industry experts have shed some light into their inner workings. According to retired Harvard professor and author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* Shoshana Zuboff, "Algorithms are engineered to amplify the most extreme, angry, toxic content, drawing people in to maximize data extraction."[42] In other words, for the social media companies, the goal is to

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39    "How Memes Became Weapons in the Culture Wars." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 Aug. 2021, https://www.wired.com/story/gadget-lab-podcast-515/.

40    Michela Del Vicario et al. "The spreading of misinformation online." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 113(3):554–559, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113.

41    Social media algorithms are a black box in two ways. First, companies closely guard how they have configured their algorithms and have resisted calls for making their code transparent for independent review. Second, algorithms utilize machine learning to evolve beyond their initial programing and therefore obscuring their decision-making processes. However, it is possible for engineers to deconstruct and reprogram them should companies adequately invest in such measures.

42    Billy Perrigo. "Shoshana Zuboff on Building an Internet That Lets Democracy Flourish." *Time*, Time, 22 Jan. 2021, https://time.com/5930790/shoshana-zuboff-interview/.

generate profit by extracting user data and selling it. Controversial content proved to be a lucrative source of engagement, and so algorithms were programmed to push and prey upon its proliferation.

In 2021, *MIT Technology Review* published an investigation that examined Facebook's proclivity for spreading hate speech and MDM. According to the report, "The algorithms that underpin Facebook's business weren't created to filter out what was false or inflammatory; they were designed to make people share and engage with as much content as possible by showing them things they were most likely to be outraged or titillated by."[43] Hany Farid, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley who spoke with MIT investigators, further added, "When you're in the business of maximizing engagement, you're not interested in truth. You're not interested in harm, divisiveness, conspiracy. In fact, those are your friends."[44] The algorithms are a powerful force in promoting MDM and conspiracies by design. The user engagement generated by pushing extremist-friendly content benefits both social media platforms and extremist groups, linking them in a symbiotic relationship.

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[43]    Karen Hao. "How Facebook Got Addicted to Spreading Misinformation." *MIT Technology Review*, MIT Technology Review, 11 March 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/11/1020600/facebook-responsible-ai-misinformation/.

[44]    *Ibid.*

# Combating MDM

Any approach tackling MDM will also complement strategies in preventing and combating violent extremism (P/CVE). P/CVE usually involves programs that aim for one or more of the following outcomes depending on the type of program and the group targeted: preventing an individual from radicalizing, deradicalization (which is an ideological shift), and/or disengagement (which is a behavioral change). Where radicalizing MDM is concerned, scholars have identified several pathways for future P/CVE efforts. Karen Greenberg, Director of the Center on National Security at Fordham University School of Law, identifies several key components for an online counter-terrorism strategy. She emphasizes that young minds exploring the Internet are "manipulable"[45] and recommends using former extremists to spread the message of ideological disillusionment as well as providing troubled youths with alternative causes to join.[46] In addition, she states, "Online counter-radicalization activities should be understood as part of a larger integrated counter-radicalization effort. They do not and should not exist in a void."[47] In other words, any P/CVE programs with an online component should be complemented by offline activities.

In addition to Greenberg, Omar Ashour, the Director of the Middle East Studies Program in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at University of Exeter, mirrors her recommendations. He argues that countering violent extremist narratives online requires three components: (1) an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative, namely the theological, political, historical, instrumental, and socio- psychological dimensions; (2) former extremists to speak against the behavior of current extremist ideology, behavior, and motivations; and (3) a digital media approach to propagating counter-narrative

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45    Karen J. Greenberg. "Counter-Radicalization via the Internet." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 668 (2016): 165–79. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26361943. p. 165

46    *Ibid.*, 76-7.

47    *Ibid.*, 175.

messages.[48] No matter the approach, there needs to be a two-pronged solution that incorporates complimentary online and offline strategies.

There is no "one size fits all" approach to P/CVE. There are approximately seven different types of programs that vary in structure, strengths, and targeted groups.[49] According to Daniel Koehler, director of the German Institute on Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies, "[T]hese programs need to have the goal of achieving a defined effect directed at reintegrating their target group into their surrounding societies on a long-term basis."[50] The most effective approach to P/CVE combines governmental, non-governmental, and partnership-based programs. It is also important to offer a P/CVE strategy that incorporates the friends and family of potential extremist converts. In their study "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert discovered that the people intimately familiar with radicalized individuals usually notice behavioral and ideological changes prior to acts of violence. According to the paper, "In 63.9% of the cases, family and friends were aware of the individual's intent to engage in terrorism-related activities because the offender verbally told them."[51] For something like this, a community-based approach to P/CVE will establish a network that can potentially identify problem individuals and intervene before the violence initiates.

Some scholars argue social media companies need to be directly included in counter-radicalization efforts. Peter Neumann, Professor of Security Studies at King's College, suggests that the government can reduce the demand for radicalizing messages:

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48     Omar Ashour. "Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 6 (2010): 15–19. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298491.

49     Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (Routledge: 2017). Chapter 5.

50     *Ibid.*, 112.

51     Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert. "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists." J Forensic Sci, (2014), 59: 425-435. https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.12312. p. 429.

"by encouraging civic challenges to extremist narratives and by promoting awareness and education of young people. In the short term, the most promising way for dealing with the presence of violent extremists and their propaganda on the Internet is to exploit their online communications to gain intelligence and gather evidence in the most comprehensive and systematic fashion possible."[52]

For Neumann, an aspect of counter-radicalization efforts involves the creation of social media company "takedown teams" trained in national security affairs. These teams will be able to quickly identify and remove radicalizing content.[53] In their paper "Algorithmic Regulation in Media and Cultural Policy: A Framework to Evaluate Barriers to Accountability," Robert Hunt and Fenwick McKelvey outline the need for algorithmic accountability. According to them, "Algorithmic accountability seeks to explain automated decision-making, ultimately locating responsibility and improving the overall system. Algorithmic accountability ultimately seeks to reveal the systems that code algorithms and create institutions of public, democratic governance for these technical forms of regulation."[54] In other words, algorithms must be made transparent and available for independent review.

Finally, scholars emphasize the need for digital literacy.[55] Sarah McNicol, a research associate at the Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, observed that many approaches to protecting youths online often involve Internet filtering software, which students could easily bypass. She instead argues that the best way to safeguard children from the effects of MDM is to promote more robust digital literacy programs. According to McNicol, "Critical digital literacy might

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52      Peter R. Neumann. "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States." Studies in Conflict & Terrorism. 36:6, (2013): 431–459. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2013.784568. p. 453.

53      *Ibid.*, 443.

54      Robert Hunt and Fenwick McKelvey. "Algorithmic Regulation in Media and Cultural Policy: A Framework to Evaluate Barriers to Accountability." *Journal of Information Policy* 9 (2019): 307–35. https://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.9.2019.0307.

55      For the purposes of this paper, digital literacy—also sometimes known as digital media literacy—refers to the critical comprehension of journalism, opinions, advertisements, and other forms of literary content found on the Internet. It also includes understanding of how social media platforms decide which news stories or other content they show the user. Experts may also sometimes refer to the analytical evaluation of all media forms, both digital and traditional, as simply media literacy, though the term is most often used specifically for traditional media.

be viewed as a possible approach to teaching safeguarding that does not attempt to simplistically block access to the Internet in schools, but instead recognizes and values the experiences of young people themselves and allows for the sophisticated understandings displayed in the reported focus groups."[56] In their article "Social Media Texts and Critical Inquiry in a Post-Factual Era," Colin Harrison and Donna Alvermann further emphasize the need for digital literacy. They state, "Without the ability to question, analyze, and authenticate information found online, in print, or any media format, Millennials are open to manipulation and misinformation. They need supportive comprehension strategies to help them compare, contrast, critique, and analyze such texts."[57] Harrison and Alvermann go on to outline the "T.A.P. model" (Text, Audience, Production within "the Media Triangle"), which asks students to critically apply these three facets to online media.[58]

Addressing extremist groups' use of MDM requires a multi-pronged approach aimed at improving counseling options for potential or current extremists, reducing the spread of MDM across social media by addressing algorithms, and promoting MDM immunization through digital literacy education programs. The current academic landscape illustrates the necessity of each strategy and provides a roadmap for what the US government should prioritize. At present, the US's approach to prevention, deradicalization, and disengagement for domestic extremism is lacking in depth, expansion, and funding compared to its German counterpart. There is also a distinct absence of US regulation for social media companies when compared to the EU, and there is currently no universal definition for "digital literacy" or laws stipulating its inclusion within education programs.

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56     Sarah McNicol. "Responding to Concerns About Online Radicalization in U.K. Schools Through a Radicalization Critical Digital Literacy Approach." Computers in the Schools, 33:4, (2016): 227-238, DOI: 10.1080/07380569.2016.1246883. p. 233.

57     Colin Harrison and Donna E. Alvermann. "Social Media Texts and Critical Inquiry in a Post-Factual Era." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 61, no. 3 (2017): 335–38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26631136.

58     *Ibid.*, 476.

## Case Study #1: The United States and the Proud Boys

MDM has become crucial to fueling unrest within the US since 2016. Many extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, Three Percenters,[59] Oath Keepers,[60] and Boogaloo Bois[61] have since incorporated popular MDM into their repertoire, which ultimately culminated in the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riot. This paper will focus on the Proud Boys, a group that was founded in 2016 to support white supremacist goals and oppose liberal politically correct culture.[62] Over time, the group grew to participate in violent protests and eventually absorbed Covid- and election-related MDM into its repertoire.

The Proud Boys were created by Gavin McInnes, co-founder of Vice Media, who desired a fraternal group of "Western chauvinists" that "long for the days when girls were girls and men were men."[63] McInnes stated that his group was alt-right "without the racism."[64] However, he often made claims to the contrary, such as when he wrote, "[White men] brought roads and infrastructure to India and they are still using them as toilets. Our criminals built nice roads in Australia but aboriginals keep using them as a bed."[65] Regardless of McInnes's assertions of non-racism, US law enforcement agencies placed the Proud Boys under surveillance and labeled them as "extremists" and "white

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59 Followers of the Three Percenter ideology claim that only 3% of American colonists fought against the British, which implies that a small group of rebels can overthrow a tyrannical government. Three Percenters draw comparisons between the 18th century British government and the modern American government. They engage in paramilitary training and have expressed the desire to overthrow the US government.

60 The Oath Keepers are an extremist group comprised mostly of current and former military and law enforcement personnel. They have participated in numerous anti-lockdown protests and provided vigilante-style security enforcement during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

61 The Boogaloo Movement is an anti-police movement formed in response to the killing of George Floyd. The Boogaloo Bois are known for wearing Hawaiian shirts and for their use of internet memes depicting and encouraging violence.

62 Gavin McInnes. "Introducing: The Proud Boys." *Taki's Magazine*, 15 Sept. 2016, https://www.takimag.com/article/introducing_the_proud_boys_gavin_mcinnes/.

63 *Ibid.*

64 "White Haze." This American Life. https://www.thisamericanlife.org/626/transcript

65 Gavin McInnes. "10 Things I like about White Guys." *Taki's Magazine*, 2 Mar. 2017, https://www.takimag.com/article/10_things_i_like_about_white_guys_gavin_mcinnes/#axzz4itJnHwDg.

supremacists" that were a menace to minorities.[66] After the Proud Boys traveled to the African American Muslim community of Islamberg, NY to protest against a "terrorist training camp"[67] – which was a product of misinformation and did not exist – The New York Times reported that McInnes eventually admitted that he might be Islamaphobic.[68]

Aside from their overt racism, the Proud Boys also espouse misogynistic rhetoric. They claim to "venerate the housewife," though McInnes says this is not misogynistic because "women who chose to be housewives and mothers should be celebrated for that choice."[69] However, according to the ADL, the Proud Boys share anti-feminist views similar to those of white supremacists, which see women as: "undeserving of the same status as men, worthy of ridicule for deviating from traditional gender norms, objectifiable in some instances to serve men, and worthy of protection in others – as long as they fulfill deeply antiquated gender roles in the service of preserving 'western' society."[70]

In further evidence of the group's racist and misogynistic underpinnings, Proud Boys recruitment involves "taking the red pill." In an analysis by Proud Boys expert Samantha Kutner, the act of taking the red pill "refers to men awakening to the reality of male subjugation by women under feminism. The red pill dovetails with the fear that white men will lose their standing in a world they cannot dominate and lose their women to

66      Jason Wilson. "Proud Boys Are a Dangerous 'White Supremacist' Group Say US Agencies." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 1 Oct. 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/01/proud-boys-white-supremacist-group-law-enforcement-agencies.

67      Dean Obeidallah. "Trump-Supporting Bigots to Target Upstate New York Muslims." *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 14 July 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-supporting-bigots-to-target-upstate-new-york-muslims.

68      Alan Feuer. "Proud Boys Founder: How He Went from Brooklyn Hipster to Far-Right Provocateur." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Oct. 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/nyregion/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnes.html.

69      Gavin McInnes. Telegram, 25 March 2020, https://t.me/RealGavinMcInnes/1321.

70      "'Venerating the Housewife:' A Primer on Proud Boys' Misogyny." *Anti-Defamation League*, 12 Aug. 2021, https://www.adl.org/blog/venerating-the-housewife-a-primer-on-proud-boys-misogyny.

Black or brown men."[71] She also explains the importance of memes, videos, and podcasts that are used to desensitize new converts to targeted violence. Chronic exposure to this type of content normalizes it.

Perhaps the most publicly recognizable example of Proud Boys violence prior to January 6th is the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The rally's chief organizer was Jason Kessler, a member of the Proud Boys. Violence erupted as protesters and counter-protesters clashed, which eventually led to the death of Heather Heyer, who was run over by James Alex Fields when he rammed his car into the crowd.[72] McInnes condemned the violence and removed Kessler from the Proud Boys, though he did so indirectly. McInnes tried to shift blame away from the Proud Boys by claiming the group had been "infiltrated" by the alt-right with the agenda of "doing terrible things while wearing our shirts in an effort to discredit us."[73] He then stated, "If you know of anyone who is presently a member and who is Alt-Right, they are cut from the club as of right now,"[74] which effectively cut loose Kessler.

Eventually, Enrique Tarrio became the so-called "chairman" of the group when McInnes resigned[75] due to pressure from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Under his leadership, the Proud Boys grew in visibility by associating with other known fringe groups and adopting fresh conspiracy theories. They participated in numerous anti-lockdown, anti-vax, and anti-mask protests. It was during this time when the Proud Boys began disseminating MDM about Covid-19, particularly to push back against quarantine

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71    Samantha Kutner. "Take the Redpill: Understanding the Allure of Conspiratorial Thinking among Proud Boys." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 24 Nov. 2021, https://gjia.george-town.edu/2020/09/07/take-the-redpill-understanding-the-allure-of-conspiratorial-think-ing-among-proud-boys/.

72    Marianna Sotomayor and Corky Siemaszko. *Charlottesville Suspect James Alex Fields Jr.. Denied Bond at First Court Appearance*. NBCUniversal News Group, 15 Aug. 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/charlottesville-suspect-james-alex-fields-jr-denied-bond-first-court-n792381.

73    Luke Barnes. "Proud Boys Founder Disavows Violence at Charlottesville but One of Its Members Orga-nized the Event." *ThinkProgress*, 24 Aug. 2017, https://archive.thinkprogress.org/proud-boys-founder-tries-and-fails-to-distance-itself-from-charlottesville-6862fb8b3ae9/.

74    *Ibid.*

75    Jason Wilson. "Proud Boys Founder Gavin McInnes Quits 'Extremist' Far-Right Group." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 22 Nov. 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/22/proud-boys-founder-gavin-mcinnes-quits-far-right-group.

mandates and to cast doubt on the safety of vaccines.[76] They also adopted QAnon conspiratorial beliefs and started marching side by side with QAnon followers to protest against human trafficking and pedophilia.[77]

One of the most popular pieces of anti-vax MDM spread by the Proud Boys dealt with the alleged death of the UK's first vaccine trial volunteer. On Telegram, they spread the following message: "She died two days after the vaccine was administered, authorities have said and added that an investigation into the cause of death has been initiated. A statement by the researchers said Elisa had complications a few hours after taking the vaccine and died while on admission."[78] In truth, Elisa Granato, the volunteer, was alive and well.[79]

Like QAnon, the Proud Boys took to spreading MDM regarding Bill Gates and his connection to the Covid pandemic. QAnon conspiracists spread the rumor that Gates created the virus,[80] and the Proud Boys latched onto the myth. On social media, they posted things like, "So why is [Gates] the authority? It's HIS #Plandemic DARPA funded," and "Bill Gates says mass public gatherings will not come back 'at all' until every human being in the world is vaccinated!!!"[81] The "Plandemic" refers to the conspiracy theory that the Covid pandemic was an orchestrated event. Regarding the latter post, Bill Gates never made that claim. In actuality, he gave an interview to *CBS This Morning* in which

76      Alex Newhouse Adel Arlett, and Leela McClintock. "Proud Boys Amplify Anti-Vax and Coronavirus Disinformation Following Support for Anti-Quarantine Protests." *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, 1 May 2020, https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/sites/www.middlebury.edu.institute/files/2020-05/proudboys.pdf?fv=wqIIbCMZ.

77      Michael Futch. "'No Issues' Reported during Saturday March in Fayetteville Held to Protest Human Sex Trade." *The Fayetteville Observer*, 30 Aug. 2020, https://www.fayobserver.com/story/news/2020/08/29/no-issues-reported-during-saturday-march-fayetteville/5670732002/.

78      Newhouse, Arlett, and McClintock, "Proud Boys," 7.

79      "False Claim: The First Volunteer in a UK Coronavirus Vaccine Trial Has Died." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 26 Apr. 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-elisa-granato-vaccine/false-claim-the-first-volunteer-in-a-uk-coronavirus-vaccine-trial-has-died-idUSKCN2280MK.

80      Ryan Broderick. "Qanon Supporters and Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading a Hoax That Bill Gates Created the Coronavirus." *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed News, 27 Feb. 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/qanon-supporters-and-anti-vaxxers-are-spreading-a-hoax-that.

81      Newhouse, Arlett, and McClintock, "Proud Boys," 3.

he stated that it was possible large gathering limitations would be needed until a Covid vaccine was made available.[82]

QAnon is an important facet of the Proud Boys influence. Proud Boys social media and private messaging posts are saturated with a variety of conspiratorial content and MDM that appeals to QAnon followers, as well as to the uninitiated who have been exposed to MDM by social media algorithms. The Proud Boys adoption of QAnon MDM culminated in their combined forces at the January 6th Stop the Steal rally.[83] By latching onto popular misinformation-oriented groups like QAnon, the Proud Boys were able to elevate their presence and maintain their relevance.

Another important facet to the Proud Boys' identity is their admiration for President Donald Trump. Although they have since soured in opinion for the former president after he failed to deliver on his promise to pardon them for January 6th, during his term they were his staunch advocates and supporters. They often wore red Make America Great Again caps, carried Trump flags, and were present at pro-Trump rallies. When asked during the first 2020 presidential debate whether President Trump condemned white supremacist and military groups – specifically the Proud Boys – he replied, "Proud Boys – stand back and stand by."[84] In response, the Proud Boys later indicated on the private messaging application (app) Telegram that they viewed the president's comments as an endorsement of their violence and ideals, and they claimed that their recruitment numbers had increased as a result.[85]

Their devotion to Trump is what drew the Proud Boys into the Stop the Steal movement. In essence, Stop the Steal is a hotbed of MDM. The core of the conspiracy

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82    "False Claim: Bill Gates Advocates for Church Gatherings to 'Never Return.'" *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 15 May 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-gates-church-gatherings/false-claim-bill-gates-advocates-for-church-gatherings-to-never-return-idUSKBN22R2EW.

83    Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis. "Pride & Prejudice: The Violent Evolution of the Proud Boys." *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2021, pp. 26–38.

84    Sheera Frenkel and Annie Karni. "Proud Boys Celebrate Trump's 'Stand by' Remark about Them at the Debate." The New York Times, 30 Sept. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/trump-proud-boys-biden.html.

85    *Ibid.*

claim is predicated on the idea that voter fraud was committed during the 2020 US Presidential Election. That assumption has been proven false by election officials and journalists.[86] However, President Trump continued to assert that the election had been "rigged."[87] The Proud Boys latched onto the belief that Trump was the rightful winner in a stolen election. They took to social media and private messaging apps to spread the word and encourage others to join them in rallies and protests[88] that ultimately paved the road to January 6th; however, to distance themselves from association with the impending riot, they shared the following disinformation: "We at Proud Boys will not be taking part in any protests at any state capitols coming up. If you see anyone dressed as a Proud Boy out at one of them, they're either a fed or antifa."[89]

*The Social Media Echo Chamber*

The Internet has facilitated the growth and recruiting power of the Proud Boys. Through the manosphere, the group primed followers to fall down the proverbial rabbit hole of increasingly violent content. According to Kutner, "Members repeated exposure to un-sanitized hatred, misogyny, racism, and antisemitism is how many Proud Boys edge further into extremism."[90] In an online video that has circulated of McInnes, he has made numerous inciting comments such as these: "We will kill you. That's the Proud Boys in a nutshell."; "Can you call for violence generally? Cause I am."; and "We need

86    Nick Corasaniti, Reid J. Epstein, and Jim Rutenberg. "The Times Called Officials in Every State: No Evidence of Voter Fraud." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 11 Nov. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/us/politics/voting-fraud.html.

87    Hope Yen and David Klepper. "AP Fact Check: On Jan. 6 Anniversary, Trump Sticks to Election Falsehoods." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 6 Jan. 2022, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/ap-fact-check-on-jan-6-anniversary-trump-sticks-to-election-falsehoods.

88    Sheera Frenkel and Alan Feuer. "'A Total Failure': The Proud Boys Now Mock Trump." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Jan. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/technology/proud-boys-trump.html.

89    EJ Dickson. "Proud Boys Channels Are Exploding on Telegram." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 14 Feb. 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/proud-boys-telegram-far-right-extremists-1114201/.

90    Kutner, "Take the Redpill."

more violence from the Trump people. Trump supporters."[91] These calls for violence did not go unheeded. In one incident after McInnes gave a speech in 2018 at the New York Metropolitan Republican Club, Proud Boys left the venue and assaulted nearby protestors.[92] According to Southern Poverty Law Center, "One bragged that he had kicked his victim 'right in the f——— head.' 'He was a f——— foreigner,' he said. Then he and another Proud Boy congratulated each other with a brotherly embrace."[93] Hateful words have the power to inspire believers into committing violence against targeted groups. After the end of WWII, the United Nations recognized the threat this type of rhetoric poses, with its dehumanizing properties and incitement to harm.[94] Yet social media has been sluggish to respond to calls for a tougher crackdown on hate speech.

Although their posts and Internet communities had created a normalizing atmosphere for their hateful and violent content, the Proud Boys alone were not responsible for increased exposure and recruitment. It has been well-documented[95] that social media algorithms are responsible for pushing increasingly extremist content on users, leading them to groups like the Proud Boys. Social media has failed to recognize the relationship between the misogynistic content shared across their platforms and how it is used to bolster extremist groups.

A good illustration of this radicalizing feature comes from an experiment conducted by Marianna Spring, the BBC's disinformation specialist. To test social media companies' pledge to moderate hate on their platforms, she established a fake social

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91     David Beers. "Gavin McInnes Said His Proud Boys Were Built for Violence. Now Trump Is Sending Them Signals." *The Tyee*, The Tyee, 1 Oct. 2020, https://thetyee.ca/News/2020/10/01/Gavin-McInnes-Proud-Boys-Violence/.

92     Jake Offenhartz. "[Update] Second Proud Boy Arrested, McInnes Says More Will Turn Themselves In." *Gothamist*, 19 Oct. 2018, https://gothamist.com/news/update-second-proud-boy-arrested-mcinnes-says-more-will-turn-themselves-in.

93     Cassie Miller. "Why Are the Proud Boys so Violent? Ask Gavin McInnes." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 18 Oct. 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/18/why-are-proud-boys-so-violent-ask-gavin-mcinnes.

94     "What Is Hate Speech, Why Does It Matter and How Can We Tackle It?" *Stop Funding Hate*, 9 Feb. 2021, https://stopfundinghate.info/about-the-campaign/what-is-hate-speech/.

95     Karen Kornbluh. "Disinformation, Radicalization, and Algorithmic Amplification: What Steps Can Congress Take?" *Just Security*, 8 Feb. 2022, https://www.justsecurity.org/79995/disinformation-radicalization-and-algorithmic-amplification-what-steps-can-congress-take/.

media account on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter named "Barry" and had him engage with anti-vax content and conspiracy theories. He also posted abusive language towards women on his profile. In a surprising twist, instead of being driven deeper into the anti-vax community, the account was instead propelled further towards misogynistic content. According to Spring:

> "After just a week, the top recommended pages to follow on both Facebook and Instagram were almost all misogynistic. By the end of the experiment, Barry was pushed more and more anti-women content by these sites–a dramatic increase from when the account had been created. Some of this content involved sexual violence, sharing disturbing memes about sex acts, and content condoning rape, harassment and gendered violence."[96]

Spring's findings demonstrated that different companies had varying levels of misogynistic exposure. While TikTok and Twitter contained very little of that type of media, Facebook and Instagram gradually drove Barry's account towards anti-feminist extremist content, and YouTube promoted videos hostile to women. Groups like the Proud Boys benefit from this algorithmic push into the manosphere, which many experts and whistleblowers have testified contain radicalizing properties.

Spring was perhaps emulating a similar test conducted internally by a Facebook researcher in 2019. During the trial dubbed "Carol's Journey to QAnon," the researcher created an account of a fictitious middle-aged woman named "Carol" whose interests included parenting and civics.[97] Within a week, her recommended content was inundated with extremist, conspiratorial, and graphic content. By the end of three weeks, the account "became a constant flow of misleading, polarizing and low-quality content."[98]

While Carol was pushed more towards conspiracies and extremists, Barry left the anti-vax sphere, and his account was pulled deeper into the manosphere. Several factors could explain the differences, such as their stated genders, the geographical

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96     Marianna Spring. "I Get Abuse and Threats Online–Why Can't It Be Stopped?" *BBC News*, 17 Oct. 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58924168.

97     Ryan Mac and Sheera Frenkel. "Internal Alarm, Public Shrugs: Facebook's Employees Dissect Its Election Role." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Oct. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html.

98     *Ibid.*

location of each user, or even the algorithmic updates made between 2019 and 2021. One thing is clear, however: Spring's findings underscore a blind spot for misogyny, which is an important facet of many extremist groups. Twitter,[99] Facebook,[100] and Google[101] all have clearly stated policies on hate speech, outlining protected groups and types of inappropriate content. In 2020, Facebook promised stricter action against hate speech.[102] That same year, Cindy Southworth, Facebook's head of women's safety, stated that the company tackles misogynistic content by "using technology that identifies and removes potentially abusive content before it happens, by enforcing strict policies, and by talking with experts to ensure Facebook stays ahead of new tactics."[103] But despite these policies and pledges, online hate targeting women continues to be a problem. So long as it proliferates and thrives with algorithmic recommendations, misogyny will serve as an important radicalizing element for white supremacists.

Aside from their struggles with sexually abusive content, social media companies have attempted to curtail the proliferation of extremist content. Their resolve was tested in the wake of the Stop the Steal movement, which garnered great attention across all platforms. Companies failed to significantly moderate the content prior to the election. For example, YouTube cracked down on QAnon in October of 2020.[104] It targeted videos that promoted or justified violence but stopped short of banning content associated with the theory. The removal of these videos came just weeks before the presidential

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99      Hateful conduct policy. Twitter, https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/hateful-conduct-policy.

100     Hate Speech. Transparency Center, *Facebook*, https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-stan-dards/hate-speech/.

101     Hate speech policy. YouTube, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939?hl=en.

102     Marty Johnson. "Facebook Pledges to 'Get Better and Faster' at Addressing Hate Speech." *TheHill*, 7 July 2020, https://thehill.com/policy/technology/tech-execs/506154-facebook-pledges-to-get-bet-ter-and-faster-at-addressing-hate.

103     Nandita Bose. "Facebook Must Do More to Stop Online Hate against Women, U.S. and EU Politicians Urge." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 6 Aug. 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-wom-en-politics/facebook-must-do-more-to-stop-online-hate-against-women-u-s-and-eu-politicians-urge-idUSKCN2522KK.

104     The YouTube Team. *Managing Harmful Conspiracy Theories on YouTube*. YouTube Official Blog, 15 Oct. 2020, https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/harmful-conspiracy-theories-youtube/.

election, which gave the group ample time to spread its MDM and allow facsimiles to propagate across other platforms.

Facebook also struggled to moderate its election-related content. In an attempt to block violent messages, the company announced that it would only remove new posts that used militarized language such as "army" or "battle."[105] Automatic censorship of words like these can be easily bypassed with codes and symbols.[106] For example, QAnon insinuated violence leading up to the January 6th riot using the phrase "Drop the hammer," and respondents displayed readiness by replying with a single period.[107] Facebook eventually tightened its moderation practices by removing the Stop the Steal group three days after the election. By then, its membership had reached over 350,000 and it had become inundated with election fraud MDM.[108] The group's shutdown did not deter supporters, however. New groups sprouted in its place.[109]

When the Proud Boys themselves were targeted for removal by Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the results were mixed. The companies banned the group and deleted its accounts in late 2018,[110] two years after its formation and one year after the Unite the Right rally. In that time, it was allowed to flourish and organize various rallies and events that erupted in violence. Despite the crackdown, many Proud Boys escaped detection. According to research conducted by the Center on Terrorism, Extremism,

105    Shannon Bond. "Facebook Vows to Crack down on Voter Intimidation in Election." *NPR*, NPR, 7 Oct. 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/10/07/921287946/facebook-vows-to-crack-down-on-voter-intimi-dation-in-election.

106    Scott Hershberger. "Social Media Restrictions Cannot Keep up with Hidden Codes and Symbols." *Scientific American*, Scientific American, 22 Oct. 2020, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/social-media-restrictions-cannot-keep-up-with-hidden-codes-and-symbols/.

107    Jarret Bencks-Brandeis. "Expert Decodes Trump Talk, Q Codes, and Road to Insurrection." *Futurity*, 19 Jan. 2021, https://www.futurity.org/trump-communication-supporters-2501462-2/.

108    Shirin Ghaffary. "Facebook Took down a Massive 'Stop the Steal' Group after Its Members Called for Violence." *Vox*, Vox, 5 Nov. 2020, https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/11/5/21551437/stop-the-steal-facebook-group-takedown-members-violence-election-fraud-trump.

109    Rachel Martin and Shannon Bond. "How the 'Stop the Steal' Movement Outwitted Facebook Ahead of the Jan. 6 Riot." *NPR*, 25 Oct. 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/25/1048918715/how-stop-the-steal-movement-outwitted-facebook-ahead-of-the-jan-6-riot.

110    David Ingram. "Facebook Removes Pages Belonging to Far-Right Group 'Proud Boys'." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 31 Oct. 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/face-book-removes-pages-belonging-far-right-group-proud-boys-n926506.

and Counterterrorism, at least fourteen Twitter accounts and two major profiles on Facebook have been linked to the Proud Boys through the use of #poyb (proud of your boy).[111] During the Stop the Steal movement, Proud Boys used vague language and insinuations to indicate their support for violence. The leader of the Proud Boys, Tarrio, posted to social media on November 16th, "If Biden steals this election, [the Proud Boys] will be political prisoners. We won't go quietly. . . . I promise."[112] Once they lost access to mainstream social media, many of the group's core conversations moved to private messaging services such as Parler, Telegram, and Signal – apps that they used to ultimately plan and coordinate the January 6th riot.

Aside from removing or banning extremist content, indirect strategies have also been implemented. For example, Google has responded to the threat of radicalizing content by filtering users' search results. In 2020, the ADL partnered with Moonshot CVE and the Next Gen Foundation to create the Redirect Method.[113] Utilizing Google's Jigsaw, the Redirect Method "use[s] advertising to divert individuals who searched Google for violent extremist material toward videos and other content that exposes the falsehoods of extremist narratives and suggests non-violent content."[114] The extremist content is not blocked. Instead, it is preceded by advertisements intended to lead searchers towards factual information and defusing content.

Extremists, however, have grown savvy to the Redirect Method. Along with conspiracy theorists, extremists began warning their followers about Google's suppression of desired content and advised them to switch to the private search engine

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111      Newhouse, Arlett, and McClintock, "Proud Boys," 2.

112      Philip Bump. "Timeline: How Two Extremist Groups Planned for Jan. 6." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 16 Mar. 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/15/timeline-how-two-extremist-groups-planned-jan-6/.

113      "ADL and Partners Counter White Supremacists Online through Google Search." *Anti-Defamation League*, 24 June 2019, https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-and-partners-counter-white-supremacists-online-through-google-search.

114      "'Redirect Method' Yields Valuable Insights for Countering Online Extremism." *Anti-Defamation League*, 16 Jan. 2020, https://www.adl.org/blog/redirect-method-yields-valuable-insights-for-countering-online-extremism.

DuckDuckGo.[115] Unlike Google, DuckDuckGo does not have control over its search algorithms because they were designed and are run by Microsoft's search engine, Bing.

Microsoft's engine has demonstrated a higher yield of MDM compared to Google due to how the two engines differ in their website rankings.[116] Whereas Google promotes credible websites affirmed by authoritative sources, Bing's searches are easier to manipulate by exploiting data voids.[117] According to Michael Golebiewski and danah boyd, two Microsoft researchers, data voids "occur when obscure search queries have few results associated with them, making them ripe for exploitation by media manipulators with ideological, economic, or political agendas." In other words, a user or group can exploit data voids by creating large quantities of content resonating with specific search terms in order to increase the ranking, and therefore exposure, of their preferred content. Before undergoing several changes, Google was also susceptible to data void exploitation. In one such incident, MDM attempting to link the Sutherland Springs shooter to anti-fascist groups proliferated across Google search results and YouTube.[118]

Bing has demonstrated its ability to directly influence search rankings on its engine. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the proliferation of MDM associated with it, Bing announced that it would demote Russia Today and Sputnik News in its search results.[119] DuckDuckGo CEO Gabe Weinberg echoed this

115    Stuart A. Thompson. "Fed up with Google, Conspiracy Theorists Turn to Duckduckgo." *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/technology/duckduckgo-conspiracy-theories.html.

116    Daniel Bush and Alex Zaheer. "Bing's Top Search Results Contain an Alarming Amount of Disinformation." *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 17 Dec. 2019, https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/bing-search-disinformation.

117    Michael Golebiewski and danah boyd. "Data Voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited." *Data & Society*, Nov. 2019, https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Data-Voids-2.0-Final.pdf.

118    Sam Levin. "Google and YouTube Spread False Claims Texas Shooting Suspect Had Leftwing Ties." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 6 Nov. 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/06/google-youtube-texas-shooting-fake-news.

119    Shannon Bond. "Tech's Crackdown on Russian Propaganda Is a Geopolitical High-Wire Act." *NPR*, NPR, 2 Mar. 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083824030/techs-crackdown-on-russian-propaganda-is-a-geopolitical-high-wire-act.

news by announcing that his engine would "down-rank sites associated with Russian disinformation."[120] Bing has the power to curb the reach of MDM should it choose to.

## *US Government Response to Proud Boys*

The Proud Boys have seen different responses from the Trump and Biden administrations. Although law enforcement agencies under the Trump administration flagged the group as a threat and arrested them on several occasions for violence and conspiracy, the Proud Boys have been handled more aggressively under the Biden administration. The discrepancy is partly due to the different attitudes towards the group, and domestic extremism in general, between the two presidents, but also because of the large role the group played in the January 6th riot. Arrests and prosecution of the Proud Boys that participated in the event occurred during Biden's presidency and required time for law enforcement to track down offenders and build cases against them.

Since their formation in 2016, the Proud Boys seldom received public admonishment from President Trump. During the first debate of the 2020 presidential campaign, he referenced them by saying, "Proud Boys – stand back and stand by." During the January 6th Capitol insurrection members of the Proud Boys alongside other rioters cried chants to hang Vice President Mike Pence, whom they viewed as a traitor for not exercising his power to halt the formal process of accepting Joe Biden's victory as the newly elected president. When interviewed by Jonathan Karl of ABC News about the vice president's safety, President Trump justified the rioters' violence and vitriol by claiming it was "common sense."[121]

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120    Paige Gross. "What Happened When Privacy-Minded Search Engine Duckduckgo Vowed to down-Rank Russian Misinformation?" *Technical.ly*, Technically Media, 11 Mar. 2022, https://technical.ly/civic-news/duckduckgo-down-rank-russia-misinformation/.

121    Mike Allen. "Exclusive Audio: Trump Defends Threats to 'Hang' Pence." *Axios*, 12 Nov. 2021, https://www.axios.com/trump-hang-mike-pence-january-6-audio-4f147245-becf-4766-ac60-7acece-6862be.html?utm_campaign=organic&utm_medium=socialshare.

Furthermore, although President Trump condemned white supremacists[122] after the violence and bedlam during the Unite the Right rally, he later dampened his response by attributing the violence to "both sides" and claimed that there were "very fine people" within the white nationalist groups.[123] This statement offered a tacit endorsement of instigators such as the Proud Boys, who attended the rally and participated in the violence. One of their members, Jason Kessler, was also the rally's main organizer.

During the planning stages of the Capitol riot, which was another momentously violent event for the Proud Boys, several policymakers and White House staff were discovered to have coordinated the coup attempt with extremist groups.[124] The Proud Boys were also offered "blanket pardons" to shield them from legal repercussions after committing the violence.

While the president was inconsistent with his messages towards extremists, federal agencies took more robust action. In 2018, the FBI officially labeled the Proud Boys an extremist group with white supremacy connections.[125] In their report, the FBI warned law enforcement agencies that "Proud Boys members have contributed to the recent escalation of violence at political rallies held on college campuses, and in cities like Charlottesville, Virginia, Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington."[126] In both 2019 and 2020, FBI director Christopher Wray indicated that white supremacy posed the greatest

122     "Trump Condemns 'Evil Racism' in Charlottesville." *BBC News*, BBC, 14 Aug. 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40927089.

123     Rick Klein. "Trump Said 'Blame on Both Sides' in Charlottesville, Now the Anniversary Puts Him on the Spot." *ABC News*, 12 Aug. 2018, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-blame-sides-charlottesville-now-anniversary-puts-spot/story?id=57141612.

124     Hunter Walker. "Exclusive: Jan. 6 Protest Organizers Say They Participated in 'Dozens' of Planning Meetings with Members of Congress and White House Staff." *Rolling Stone*, 25 Oct. 2021https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/exclusive-jan-6-organizers-met-congress-white-house-1245289/.

125     Molly Solomon. "FBI Categorizes Proud Boys as Extremist Group with Ties to White Nationalism." *NPR*, NPR, 20 Nov. 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/11/20/669761157/fbi-categorizes-proud-boys-as-extremist-group-with-ties-to-white-nationalism.

126     Jason Wilson. "FBI Now Classifies Far-Right Proud Boys as 'Extremist Group', Documents Say." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 19 Nov. 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/19/proud-boys-fbi-classification-extremist-group-white-nationalism-report.

domestic threat.[127] The FBI also pursued those in connection with Unite the Right. Kessler was arrested, and a jury later found him liable for engaging in a conspiracy ahead of the rally.[128]

In response to the Proud Boys and other extremists that grew increasingly violent in 2020, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued $10 million through its Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program.[129] The grant program is designed to provide funding to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, nonprofits, and institutions of higher education in order to establish or improve prevention capabilities. In 2020, acting chief of the DHS intelligence office, Joseph Maher, agreed with Director Wray's assessment of white supremacy.[130] Maher's claim came in the wake of whistleblower Brian Murphy's allegations that DHS tailored reports to fit President Trump's public narratives, which called for white supremacy to be presented as a less severe threat.[131] Despite his statement attesting to the severity of white supremacy, Maher was criticized for scaling back DHS efforts on analyzing social media and issuing reports on domestic extremists, which ultimately disrupted the department's ability to properly assess threats leading to January 6th.[132] Although DHS did track Proud

127    Amy Sherman. "Politifact–FBI Director Warned about White Supremacist Violence." *Politi-Fact*, 9 Oct. 2020, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/oct/06/joe-biden/fbi-director-warned-about-white-supremacist-violen/.

128    James Doubek and Vanessa Romo. "Jury Finds Rally Organizers Liable for the Violence That Broke out in Charlottesville." *NPR*, NPR, 23 Nov. 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/11/23/1058024314/charlottesville-unite-the-right-trial-verdict.

129    "DHS Provides $10 Million to Local Communities to Prevent Targeted Violence and Terrorism." *Department of Homeland Security*, 16 Sept. 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/09/16/dhs-provides-10-million-local-communities-prevent-targeted-violence-and-terrorism.

130    Mark Hosenball. "Acting U.S. DHS Security Intelligence Chief Says He Agrees with FBI on White Supremacist Threat." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 Oct. 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-intelligence-homeland/acting-u-s-dhs-security-intelligence-chief-says-he-agrees-with-fbi-on-white-supremacist-threat-idUSKBN26N35E.

131    U.S. House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. "Open Hearing With DHS Senior Official Performing The Duties of the Undersecretary Joseph B. Maher, Office of Intelligence and Analysis." 2 October 2020, https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/111083/documents/HHRG-116-IG00-Transcript-20201002.pdf.

132    Rachael Levy. "Jan. 6 Panel's Hiring of Homeland Security Official Draws Scrutiny." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 12 Aug. 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/jan-6-panels-hiring-of-homeland-security-official-draws-scrutiny-11628723176.

Boys activity through Facebook, Twitter, and other means in the days preceding the riot, reports documented through January 5th gave conflicting messages about the potential threat.[133] In an interview, former assistant secretary for threat prevention Elizabeth Neumann explained how federal law enforcement agencies dismissed the Proud Boys as a true threat. "There was a sense that, yes, their ideology is of concern, and, yes, they are known to have committed acts of violence that would be by definition terrorism, but we don't worry about them."[134]

In contrast to the Trump years, under the Biden administration the federal government has seen an invigorated crackdown on extremists. President Biden publicly condemned the Proud Boys and stated, "That is the greatest threat to terror in America, domestic terror."[135] Congress took a firm approach towards holding the Proud Boys accountable for the events of January 6th, and in November 2021, group members were subpoenaed by the Select Committee investigating the riot. The Department of Justice (DOJ) also pursued and arrested Proud Boys members and charged them with conspiracy and other offenses related to January 6th.[136] In March 2022, Enrique Tarrio was arrested for "[conspiring] to corruptly obstruct, influence, and impede an official proceeding, the certification of the Electoral College vote."[137] According to ADL, "Proud Boys members accounted for one of the highest number of extremist arrestees in relation to the Jan 6 insurrection."[138] DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas along with

133    Brianna Sacks and Jason Leopold. "Documents Show How Law Enforcement Was Tracking Extremists Ahead of the Capitol Riot." *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed News, 5 Mar. 2021, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/dhs-federal-protective-service-capitol-riot.

134    David Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer. "Police Shrugged off the Proud Boys, until They Attacked the Capitol." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 Mar. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html.

135    Terry Sater. "Biden: Proud Boys One of the Greatest Threats to America." *WISN*, 24 June 2021, https://www.wisn.com/article/biden-proud-boys-one-of-the-greatest-threats-to-america/35540985.

136    "Third Member of Conspiracy Involving Proud Boys Members Arrested in Connection to Jan. 6 Capitol Breach." *Department of Justice*, 23 Apr. 2021, https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/third-member-conspiracy-involving-proud-boys-members-arrested-connection-jan-6-capitol.

137    Vanessa Romo. "Enrique Tarrio, Who Led the Proud Boys, Is Arrested over the U.S. Capitol Attack." *NPR*, NPR, 8 Mar. 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085201623/enrique-tarrio-proud-boys-arrested-indicted-jan-6.

138    "Proud Boys." *Anti-Defamation League*, https://www.adl.org/proudboys.

Attorney General Merrick Garland called white supremacy "the most persistent threat in the homeland" and also stated that violence stemming from that type of extremism was "often prompted by false narratives, conspiracy theories and rhetoric found on social media and Internet platforms."[139] In 2021 and 2022, DHS also doubled the TVTP grant award to $20 million.

### *US Government Response to MDM*

The US government's response towards MDM was severely lacking when it mattered most. Often, the Trump administration itself was the source of misleading or outright false claims. During the pandemic, for example, research conducted by Cornell University concluded that "the President of the United States was likely the largest driver of the COVID-19 misinformation 'infodemic'."[140] By not severely condemning extremists and freely propagating misinformation, the president and his allies exacerbated the threats of civil discord. In 2020 when social media companies like Twitter started fact-checking his messages, President Trump signed an executive order to strip companies of their legal immunity if they stifle free speech on their platforms.[141] Following the order, the Trump administration also called on the Federal Communications Commission to develop new regulations for social media.[142]

While the president encouraged the spread of MDM, federal agencies and Congress took steps to address it and raise awareness during both election season and the Covid pandemic. The US responded differently to domestic and foreign MDM

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139     Alexandra Kelley. "Garland, Mayorkas Warn White Supremacy Is Now Top Security Threat in the Country." *TheHill*, 12 May 2021, https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/553197-garland-mayorkas-attorney-general-warn-white-supremacy-is.

140     Sarah Evanega et al. "Corona Virus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 'Infodemic.'" The Cornell Alliance for Science, 23 July 2020, https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/evanega-et-al-coronavirus-misinformation-submitted-07-23-20-1/080839ac0c22bca8/full.pdf.

141     Bobby Allyn. "Stung by Twitter, Trump Signs Executive Order to Weaken Social Media Companies." *NPR*, NPR, 28 May 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/05/28/863932758/stung-by-twitter-trump-signs-executive-order-to-weaken-social-media-companies.

142     Brian Fung. "Trump Is Moving Forward with His Plan to Regulate Social Media." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 28 July 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/27/tech/fcc-social-media-petition/index.html.

efforts. With the shadow of Russia's interference in the 2016 election cast over the upcoming 2020 election, the DOJ's Special Counsel Robert Mueller released a report in 2019 underscoring the role foreign MDM played in misleading Americans.[143] The report detailed the machinations of the Internet Research Agency, a Russian organization, in its use of fake American social media accounts and group pages[144] to push MDM on real American social media users. Throughout 2020, both the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA) issued multiple warnings about MDM.[145] The alerts focused on the threat of foreign interference and common tactics expected to be used during the election. The FBI also established the Countering Foreign Influence Task Force (CFITF) in 2017, which works with US agencies across the country, as well as international partners, to "identify and counteract malign foreign influence operations targeting the United States."[146] Within the Pentagon, Cyber Command took measures through the DOD's defend forward[147] strategy to preemptively counter election-related MDM, as well as potential cyberattacks.[148]

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143    Robert Mueller. *US Department of Justice*. "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election." https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download.

144    According to the report, the Internet Research Agency commonly created accounts in the names of fictitious U.S. organizations and grassroots groups and used these accounts to pose as anti-immigration groups, Tea Party activists, Black Lives Matter protestors, and other U.S. social and political activists." p. 22.

145    Tia Sewell. "FBI & CISA Issue Another Warning about 2020 U.S. Election Disinformation ." *Lawfare*, 28 Sept. 2020, https://www.lawfareblog.com/fbi-cisa-issue-another-warning-about-2020-us-election-disinformation%C2%A0.

146    Countering Foreign Influence Task Force. Federal Bureau of Investigation. https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/foreign-influence.

147    David Vergun. "Leaders Discuss DOD." *U.S. Department of Defense*, 6 Dec. 2021, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2862784/leaders-discuss-dods-cyber-strategy-to-protect-america-partners/.

148    Erica Lonergan. "Cyber Command's Role in Election Defense: Important, but Not a Panacea." *Lawfare*, 3 Nov. 2020, https://www.lawfareblog.com/cyber-commands-role-election-defense-important-not-panacea.

In August 2020, the State Department's Global Engagement Center[149] (GEC) released its very first report, "Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda," which detailed modern Russian tactics in political warfare.[150] It should be noted, however, that under the Trump administration, the GEC was described as "understaffed, underfunded, and overextended."[151] This would explain why in the four years following its creation, the agency was only able to produce a single publication.

In October[152] and November[153] of 2020, the Senate held hearings with the executives from top social media companies to discuss concerns about MDM used during the election. The hearings put pressure on companies to do more before and after election day.

Regarding Covid-related domestic MDM, the federal government struggled to keep the false information under control. It was also oftentimes at odds with the President. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) often had to issue corrections to President Trump's claims, such as when he commented that "it would be interesting to check" injecting bleach as a potential Covid treatment.[154] Dr. Anthony Fauci, a leading member of the White House's coronavirus task force and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was also often at odds with

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149     The Global Engagement Center was established under Executive Order 13721 signed by President Barack Obama on March 14th, 2016. Their mission statement is: To direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations.

150     Global Engagement Center. US Department of State. "GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda. August 2020. https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/

151     Abigail Tracy. "'A Different Kind of Propaganda': Has America Lost the Information War?" *Vanity Fair*, 23 Apr. 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/04/russia-propaganda-america-information-war.

152     "Does Section 230's Sweeping Immunity Enable Big Tech Bad Behavior?" US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation. 28 October 2020, https://www.commerce.senate.gov/2020/10/does-section-230-s-sweeping-immunity-enable-big-tech-bad-behavior.

153     "Breaking the News: Censorship, Suppression, and the 2020 Election." *US Senate Committee on the Judiciary*. 17 November 2020, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/breaking-the-news-censorship-suppression-and-the-2020-election.

154     "Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump Suggests Injecting Disinfectant as Treatment." *BBC News*, BBC, 24 Apr. 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177.

President Trump's presentation of Covid-19's severity, treatments, and various other facets about the disease.[155] With regards to handling Trump's frequent use of MDM, Fauci stated, "I can't jump in front of the microphone and push him down. OK, he said it. Let's try and get it corrected for the next time."[156] Indeed, Fauci would often issue corrections or play down claims made by the President.

Other federal agencies also worked to dispel domestic MDM about the pandemic. Within DHS, both CISA[157] and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)[158] established portals to help expose and counter Covid MDM. The National Guard also jumped into the MDM fight to dismiss rumors circulating about its troops imposing martial law to enforce Covid-related quarantines.[159]

In contrast to President Trump's tactics, the Biden administration's approach has acknowledged the threat posed by MDM, but it has demonstrated some early stumbles. In particular, the President ignored calls by disinformation experts and his party to appoint a dedicated czar or task force in charge of tackling Covid-related MDM before the Delta variant grew dominant.[160] Instead of a single task force, the administration argued it would be more effective to approach MDM from multiple angles with various personnel, such as staff from the CDC and the Surgeon General all communicating with social media companies. The President also called on Facebook and other companies

155     Savannah Behrmann and Jeanine Santucci. "Here's a Timeline of President Donald Trump's and Dr. Anthony Fauci's Relationship." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 28 Oct. 2020, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/28/president-donald-trump-anthony-fauci-timeline-relationship-coronavirus-pandemic/3718797001/.

156     Jon Cohen. "'I'm Going to Keep Pushing.' Anthony Fauci Tries to Make the White House Listen to Facts of the Pandemic." *Science*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 22 Mar. 2020, https://www.science.org/content/article/i-m-going-keep-pushing-anthony-fauci-tries-make-white-house-listen-facts-pandemic.

157     Covid-19 Disinformation Toolkit. *Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency,* https://www.cisa.gov/covid-19-disinformation-toolkit.

158     Coronavirus Rumor Control. *Federal Emergency Management Agency*, https://www.fema.gov/disaster/coronavirus/rumor-control.

159     "Guard Leaders Battle Misinformation as Guardsmen Take on Coronavirus." *National Guard Association of the United States*, 24 Mar. 2020, https://www.ngaus.org/about-ngaus/newsroom/guard-leaders-battle-misinformation-guardsmen-take-coronavirus.

160     Alexandra S. Levine. "Biden's Vaccine Misinformation Road Not Taken." *POLITICO*, 21 July 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/21/coronavirus-misinformation-biden-500450.

to better control their content and moderate false information because "they're killing people."[161]

Federal agencies under the new administration also stepped up their efforts to combat MDM. In 2021, the CDC published information debunking MDM related to the Covid vaccine.[162] In 2021, CFITF was absorbed into CISA as the new MDM team, which developed new programs and resources such as the social media series *Optical Illusions*,[163] a CISA Insights article entitled "Preparing for and Mitigating Foreign Influence Operations Targeting Critical Infrastructure,"[164] and even a collection of graphic novels.[165] The Foreign Malign Influence Center set to open through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence had been proposed in 2020, but as of January 2022 it is still awaiting Congressional approval.[166]

Aside from executive branch efforts, Congress moved to address MDM by again summoning social media heads. A hearing took place on March 25, 2021 in which Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, and Jack Dorsey gave testimony.[167] Zuckerberg indicated that modifications to Section 230 of the CDA, which shields social media companies from legal liability for the content posted by their users, would encourage companies to pursue the removal of MDM. He stated, "Instead of being granted immunity,

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161     Salvador Rodriguez. "Biden on Facebook: 'They're Killing People' with Vaccine Misinformation." *CNBC*, 18 July 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/16/white-house-says-facebook-needs-to-do-more-to-fight-vaccine-misinformation.html.

162     "How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 Nov. 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/health-departments/addressing-vaccine-misinformation.html.

163     MDM Resource Library. Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency, https://www.cisa.gov/mdm-resource-library.

164     "Preparing for and Mitigating Foreign Influence Operations Targeting Critical Infrastructure." *CISA Insights*, Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency, Feb. 2022, https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/cisa_insight_mitigating_foreign_influence_508.pdf.

165     Resilience Series Graphic Novels. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, https://www.cisa.gov/resilience-series-graphic-novels.

166     Nomaan Merchant. "US Delays Intelligence Center Targeting Foreign Influence." *Federal News Network*, 10 Jan. 2022, https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2022/01/us-delays-intelligence-center-targeting-foreign-influence/.

167     "Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation." *House Committee on Energy and Commerce,* 25 March 2021. https://energycommerce.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-on-disinformation-nation-social-medias-role-in-promoting.

platforms should be required to demonstrate that they have systems in place for identifying unlawful content and removing it."[168] Pichai also spoke about Section 230 but hesitated to endorse any changes to the law. Instead, he focused on ways Google has progressively worked with US government agencies to improve search results and filter MDM content.[169] Dorsey, on the other hand, addressed misinformation by stating that Twitter has invested in "Birdwatch," a system that allows Twitter users to flag MDM, and "Bluesky," a team of independent developers hired to create an open source platform for reviewing recommendation algorithms.[170]

The largest barrier to tackling MDM and other illegal content on social media platforms is a lack of transparency. On October 4, 2021, the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen gave Congressional testimony and stated that a shift from algorithmic feeds to chronological rankings would be a step in the right direction.[171] She has also advocated for Congress to revisit Section 230 and make algorithmic ranking exempt from the law's liability protection.[172] According to Haugen, "A critical starting point for effective regulation is transparency: full access to data for research not directed by Facebook. On this foundation, we can build sensible rules and standards to address consumer harms, illegal content, data protection, anticompetitive practices, algorithmic systems and more."[173]

168     "Testimony of Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook, Inc." *House Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 25 March 2021. https://energycommerce.house.gov/sites/democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/files/documents Witness%20Testimony_Zuckerberg_CAT_CPC_2021.03.25.pdf, p. 7.

169     "Written Testimony of Sundar Pichai Chief Executive Officer, Alphabet." *House Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 25 March 2021. https://energycommerce.house.gov/sites/democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/files/documents/Witness%20Testimony_Pichai_CAT_CPC_2021.03.25.pdf.

170     "Written Testimony of Twitter CEO Jack Dorset (@jack)." *House Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 25 March 2021. https://energycommerce.house.gov/sites/democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/files/documents/Witness_Testimony_Dorsey_CAT_CPC_2021.03.25.pdf.

171     Karissa Bell. "What Facebook Should Change, According to Its Whistleblower." *Engadget*, 6 Oct. 2021, https://www.engadget.com/what-facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-said-should-change-143051354.html.

172     Karen Hao. "The Facebook Whistleblower Says Its Algorithms Are Dangerous. Here's Why." *MIT Technology Review*, MIT Technology Review, 20 Oct. 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/10/05/1036519/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-algorithms/.

173     "Statement of Frances Haugen." *Senate Committee on Commerce*. https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/FC8A558E-824E-4914-BEDB-3A7B1190BD49, p. 2.

On October 28, 2021, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held a hearing for Social Media Platforms and the Amplification of Domestic Extremism & Other Harmful Content.[174] Witness testimony came from experts in domestic extremism, cyber policy, and social media. The radicalization effect of algorithms came under scrutiny, and there was a consensus among witnesses that social media companies needed to take a stronger approach to reengineering how platforms influence users. In her statement, Karen Kornbluh, Director of the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative, also called on the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to ensure the transparency of social media companies through third-party audits and to also force those companies to share their data with independent researchers.[175]

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174     "Social Media Platforms and the Amplification of Domestic Extremism & Other Harmful Content." *Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.* https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/social-media-platforms-and-the-amplification-of-domestic-extremism-and-other-harmful-content.

175     "Karen Kornbluh Written Testimony." *Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.* https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Kornbluh-2021-10-28.pdf.

## Case Study #2: Germany and the Querdenker Movement

Like the US, Germany has suffered MDM pertaining to the Covid pandemic and efforts to undermine candidates and the democratic process during the 2021 German election. Many conspiracy theories have also flourished in Germany, including QAnon, which has been combined with popular Covid misinformation. Extremist groups have leveraged the fears, doubts, and uncertainty of the pandemic to broaden their recruitment and organize violent protests. This section focuses on the Querdenker (someone who thinks outside the box), an anti-lockdown movement inspired by QAnon mythology that has been on the rise since the advent of the pandemic.

Identified as a right-wing extremist threat in early 2021 by the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV)[176] – Germany's domestic intelligence agency and known in English as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution – the Querdenker movement originated in Stuttgart and includes anti-vaxxers, Covid skeptics, and anti-lockdown protestors among its followers. The composition of the group is diverse, spanning across all corners of the political spectrum and comprising members that include economists, naturopaths, and average people.[177] Querdenker thrives most in areas where there is great distrust of the democratic government[178] and calls into question not only the legitimacy of Covid health measures, but of the German government itself.[179] While the group insists that it is peaceful in nature, its protests

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176    "Neuer Phänomenbereich 'Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung Des Staates.'" *Bundesamt-fuerVerfassungsschutz*, 21 Jan. 2021, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2021/2021-04-29-querdenker.html.

177    Darren Loucaides, Alessio Peronne, and Josef Holnburger. "How Germany Became Ground Zero for the Covid Infodemic." *OpenDemocracy*, 31 Mar. 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/germany-ground-zero-covid-infodemic-russia-far-right/.

178    Katharina Pfaff, Eric Neumayer, and Thomas Plümper. "Querdenker: The German Anti-Lockdown Movement That Thrives on Public Distrust." *LSE COVID-19*, 29 Sept. 2021, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/09/29/querdenken-the-german-anti-lockdown-movement-that-thrives-on-public-distrust/.

179    Joseph Keady. "Querdenker, Querfront, and Qanon: On the German Far-Right and Its American Occupation." *EuropeNow*, 25 July 2021, https://www.europenowjournal.org/2021/07/25/querdenker-querfront-and-qanon-on-the-german-far-right-and-its-american-occupation/.

have often erupted in violence.[180] In one instance, an anti-mask dispute sparked by a belligerent Querdenker resulted in the murder of a twenty-year-old petrol station worker in the western town of Idar-Oberstein.[181]

Querdenker was created by Michael Ballweg, an information technology (IT) entrepreneur and founder of the start-up Media Access GmbH. Hailing from Stuttgart, Ballweg named his movement Querdenker 711 after the city's area code. During an interview with GQ, he stated of his movement, "My idea was always to build a hierarchy-less system like this. It's democratic. I always say it's the most challenging start-up."[182] To rally support for his Covid-related beliefs, he organized and attended numerous events where he took the stage to promote an anti-mask and anti-vax agenda, and often received speaking fees and other private donations that went into his personal bank account.[183] In 2020, Ballweg and some of his Querdenker followers were reported to have met with Peter Fitzek, a well-known political activist affiliated with the violent right-wing extremist Reichsbürger movement. Fitzek, who calls himself the "King of Germany" after founding the kingdom NeuDeutchland (New Germany),[184] established a bank called GK

180    Marcel Fürstenau. "Meet Germany's 'Querdenker' COVID Protest Movement." *Deutsche Welle*, 3 Apr. 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985.

181    Madeline Chambers. "Germans Shocked by Killing of Cashier after Covid Mask Row." *Reuters*, 21 Sept. 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germans-shocked-by-killing-cashier-after-covid-mask-row-2021-09-21/.

182    Sean Williams and Florian Neuhof. "Qanon's Second Act: How a Rampant Conspiracy Theory Took Hold in Europe." *British GQ.* Conde Nast. 19 Apr. 2021. https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/politics/article/qanon-conspiracy-theory-germany.

183    Sophia Ankel. "The Leader of Europe's Largest Anti-Lockdown Movement Is Facing Questions about Cash Flowing into the Group. Now, He's Called for Protests to Be Paused." *Business Insider.* Business Insider. 10 Jan. 2021. https://www.businessinsider.com/leader-of-german-anti-lockdown-group-accused-making-unfair-profit-2021-1.

184    David Gauvey Herbert. "The King of Germany Will Accept Your Bank Deposits Now." *Bloomberg.* Bloomberg. 19 May 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-05-19/who-is-germany-s-self-proclaimed-king-peter-fitzek.

GemeinwohlKasse to house Reichsbürger funds.[185] In September 2020, Ballweg opened an account with GK.[186]

Ballweg's association with questionable allies did not stop with Fitzek. He made several appeals to QAnon, quoting their slogan "Where we go one, we all go," and followers donned in QAnon apparel often attended Querdenker gatherings, marches, and protests.[187] Jürgen Elsässer, editor-in-chief of *Compact*, a German magazine that promotes conspiracies such as the Great Replacement and all manner of Covid-related MDM, endorsed Ballweg in one of its issues. The cover sported a large "Q" and asked, "Will the freedom movement topple the corona dictatorship?"[188] During preparation for a protest in the summer of 2020, Querdenker social media accounts reached out to high profile Covid skeptics such as President Trump, President Vladimir Putin, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Of the three, only Kennedy – a purveyor of anti-vax MDM – attended, and he met with Ballweg on stage in Berlin.[189]

Some Querdenker followers are also part of the German government and have fraternized with controversial extremists. In 2021, it was revealed that a government IT employee known as "M" had leaked sensitive information to Attila Hildmann, a notorious conspiracy theorist. Hildmann, who was known as a vegan cookbook author before becoming a leader in the Querdenker movement, evaded arrest by German authorities and escaped to Turkey in late 2020.[190] Not only did "M" leak Hildmann's arrest warrant,

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185 "Bafin Wickelt 'Reichsbürger'-Bank Von Peter Fitzek Ab." *Der Spiegel.* Der Spiegel. 25 Mar. 2021. https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/bafin-wickelt-reichsbuerger-bank-von-peter-fitzek-ab-a-72197fb6-7328-4346-bd3b-5c84d13b4b6c.

186 Teresa Eder and Elizaveta Firsova. "Out of the Box: Surveillance of Querdenker Movement in Germany Reflects a New Political Reality." *Wilson Center*, 21 May 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/out-box-surveillance-querdenker-movement-germany-reflects-new-political-reality.

187 Katrin Bennhold. "Qanon Is Thriving in Germany. The Extreme Right Is Delighted." *The New York Times.* The New York Times. 11 Oct. 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/europe/qanon-is-thriving-in-germany-the-extreme-right-is-delighted.html.

188 Williams and Neuhof, "Qanon's Second Act."

189 Patricia Zhubi and Alexander Reid Ross. "Inside the Weird Pro-QAnon Group behind RFK Jr.'s Latest Anti-Vaxx Stunt." *The Daily Beast.* The Daily Beast Company. 2 Sept. 2020. https://www.thedailybeast.com/rfk-jrs-latest-anti-vaxx-stunt-backed-by-weird-pro-qanon-german-group-querdenken-711.

190 "Attila Hildmann: Judiciary Mole Suspected of Leaks to Conspiracist." *BBC News*, BBC, 1 Nov. 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59119319.

but it was also reported that she "consulted documents from the public prosecutor's office concerning conspiracy movements and far-right activists."[191] Before he fled Germany, Hildmann was responsible for perpetuating myths that the country's Covid vaccination program was a genocide in disguise orchestrated by Chancellor Merkel and billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates.[192] He once told a crowd of 200 supporters, "Hitler was a blessing compared to the communist Merkel, because she is planning a global genocide of 7 billion people with Gates." Those and similar statements, such as calling "for a 'blitzkrieg' against toy manufacturer Playmobil over an animated video where toys explain the pandemic and face masks," led to government officials banning his planned rally in July 2020.[193]

MDM fueling contemporary unrest within Germany has some of its roots in the mass exodus of asylum seekers fleeing the Middle East and North Africa regions. In 2015, Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed close to a million asylum seekers into the country, which led to a social debate and divide over the concept of German identity.[194] Extremist rumblings rippled through the police and military, and the xenophobia culminated in the rising popularity of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Societal fissures deepened during the Covid pandemic. In 2020, Germany reported a 4% increase in far-right extremists, many of whom participated in protests against pandemic-related restrictions.[195] 2020 also saw a record of 24,000 reported extremist crimes. According to The Guardian, "Crimes ranged from displaying Nazi symbols and antisemitic remarks to physical attacks and murder. Activities targeted

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191    "German Judiciary Worker Accused of Leaking Information to Conspiracist." *Euronews*, 1 Nov. 2021, https://www.euronews.com/2021/11/01/attila-hildmann-german-judiciary-worker-accused-of-leaking-information-to-conspiracist.

192    "Berlin Bans Rally by Vegan Chef and Conspiracy Theorist Attila Hildmann." *Deutsche Welle*, 23 July 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-bans-rally-by-vegan-chef-and-conspiracy-theorist-attila-hildmann/a-54299794.

193    *Ibid.*

194    Gouri Sharma. *Angela Merkel's Mixed Legacy: Open-Door Policy, Rise of Far Right*. Al Jazeera, 8 Dec. 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/8/angela-merkels-mixed-legacy-open-door-policy-rise-of-far-right.

195    Frank Jordans. "Rise in Far-Right Extremists Seen in Germany Last Year." *ABC News*, https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rise-extremists-germany-year-78284659.

mainly immigrants, refugees and black Germans, but also included a rise in anti-Asian violence, linked to the pandemic."[196] Germany's anti-Semitism commissioner,[197] Felix Klein, warned that although Querdenker was not known for espousing Nazi ideology, diverse anti-establishment groups "were finding common cause and anti-Semitism was the cement that binds them together."[198]

In August of 2020, German conspiracy theorist Oliver Janich made an open appeal to US President Donald Trump and Fox News to watch "the biggest protest on the face of the Earth." He further went on to state that members of "the movement with the seventeenth letter of the alphabet" would be in attendance – an allusion to the QAnon movement – coupled with the QAnon slogan "where we go one, we go all."[199] What subsequently followed was the violent protest where members of Querdenker and other extremists broke past a police line and advanced on the Reichstag, Germany's seat of government.[200] The police were able to push them back, and the chaos fell very short of what the US would see during the January 6th Capitol riot, where Capitol police were in disarray and thinned in active officers. But it was clear that extremists were rising in popularity and were determined to openly challenge the government. The protest had been organized by Ballweg, but he claimed that the violent demonstrators had "nothing to do" with his movement.[201]

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196     "German Society 'Brutalised' as Far-Right Crimes Hit Record Levels." *The Guardian*, 4 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/04/rightwing-extremism-germany-stability-interior-minister-says.

197     The anti-Semitism commissioner, also known as the Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism, is a role first created in May 2018 to address growing concerns of anti-Semitism in Germany. The commissioner acts as a liaison between Jewish groups and organizations and the government at federal and state levels.

198     "German Call to Ban 'Jewish Star' at Covid Demos." *BBC News*, 7 May 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57020697.

199     Keady, "Querdenker, Querfront, and Qanon."

200     Katrin Bennhold. "Far-Right Germans Try to Storm Reichstag as Virus Protests Escalate." *The New York Times*, 31 Aug. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/world/europe/reichstag-germany-neo-nazi-coronavirus.html.

201     "Germany Coronavirus: Anger after Attempt to Storm Parliament." *BBC News*. BBC. 30 Aug. 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53964147.

From a political standpoint, the Querdenker movement's values have been courted by populist parties. AfD was quick to adopt anti-lockdown rhetoric, and leading up to the 2021 election, one assessment projected that "the AfD could almost double votes in Querdenker circles to 27%, while the Greens and conservative [Christian Democratic Union] would not get any support at all."[202] Other parties like new grassroots contenders also surfaced during the 2021 election, many espousing an anti-lockdown agenda. Querdenker follower Henning Hacker formed "dieBasis" (the grassroots), a new party based on the idea that Covid did not warrant the government "suspending basic rights" by forcing the population into lockdown.[203]

When it came time for the 2021 election, Germany's MDM landscape bore several resemblances to its 2020 American counterpart. Claims that mail-in ballots[204] and broken ballot locks/seals[205] facilitated voter fraud ran rampant on social media. AfD was a principal factor in perpetuating election MDM. It attempted to utilize anti-pandemic sentiment as a launchpad for garnering support during the election, but due to the German public's largely pro-vaccination sentiment at the time, the plan failed.[206] In January 2021, the AfD was placed under BfV surveillance "for posing a threat to Germany's political system and violating the constitution."[207] AfD's popularity

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202     Fürstenau, "Meet Germany's 'Querdenker' COVID Protest Movement."

203     Ben Knight. "Covid Lockdown Opponents Try to Sway German Election." *Deutsche Welle.* Deutsche Welle. 28 Aug. 2021. https://www.dw.com/en/covid-lockdown-opponents-try-to-sway-german-election/a-59005055.

204     Volker Witting and Ian Bateson. "German Election: The Postal Vote and Fraud Claims." *Deutsche Welle.* 25 Sept. 2021. https://www.dw.com/en/german-election-the-postal-vote-and-fraud-claims/a-58844693.

205     Joscha Weber et al. "Fact Check: Myths about Ballot 'Fraud' at German Election Polls." *Deutsche Welle.* 26 Sept. 2021. https://www.dw.com/en/germany-election-fact-check-fraud/a-59319536.

206     Benjamin Dodman. "Isolated, Volatile and Divided, Has Germany's Far-Right AFD Reached a Dead-End?" *France 24*, France 24, 23 Sept. 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210923-isolated-volatile-and-divided-has-germany-s-far-right-afd-reached-a-dead-end.

207     Rob Schmitz. "Germany Expected to Put Right-Wing AFD under Surveillance for Violating Constitution." *NPR*, 22 Jan. 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/01/22/959264440/germany-expected-to-put-right-wing-afd-under-surveillance-for-violating-constitu.

subsequently declined due to internal party disputes[208] and condemnation from the rest of Germany's political spectrum.

However, the group still maintained a powerful presence on social media. A comprehensive investigation conducted by *Der Spiegel* revealed, "While political surveys indicate that support for the party is currently between 11 and 15 percent, fully 85 percent of all shared posts [on Facebook] originating from German political parties stem from the AfD."[209] Data analysts tracking AfD attribute their success to several factors, including frequency of posts and photo uploads, encouraging users to comment, discussing emotional issues such as migration and crime, and receiving foreign assistance to generate and disseminate content.[210] The AfD is known to have close connections to Russia, and leaked documents show how the Kremlin aimed to use the AfD as a vehicle to promote a pro-Russia agenda during the 2017 German election.[211] During the 2021 election, Russia, through its media outlet RT DE, continued supporting AfD all across social media by emphasizing skepticism for mail-in ballots and Covid vaccines.[212] Although AfD's country-wide popularity fell from winning 12.6% of the vote in previous election to 10.3% in 2021, it gained ground and established itself as a regional force in former East Germany states like Saxony and Thuringia,[213] which have been bastions of extremist groups and anti-lockdown-related violence.

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208     Philip Oltermann. "Germany's Rightwing AFD Party Struggles to Cope with Internal Crisis." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 27 Feb. 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/27/germany-rightwing-afd-party-struggles-internal-crisis.

209     Jörg Diehl et al. "Germany: AFD Populists Dominate on Facebook." *DER SPIEGEL*. DER SPIEGEL. 29 Apr. 2019. https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-afd-populists-dominate-on-facebook-a-1264933.html.

210     *Ibid*.

211     "Documents Link AFD Parliamentarian to Moscow." *DER SPIEGEL*. DER SPIEGEL. 12 Apr. 2019. https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/documents-link-afd-parliamentarian-to-moscow-a-1261509.html.

212     Mark Scott. "Russia Sows Distrust on Social Media Ahead of German Election." *POLITICO*. POLITICO. 3 Sept. 2021. https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-russia-social-media-distrust-election-vladimir-putin/.

213     Emily Schultheis. "Germany's Far-Right AFD Loses Nationally, but Wins in the East." *POLITICO*. POLITICO. 27 Sept. 2021. https://www.politico.eu/article/german-election-far-right-afd-loses-nationally-but-wins-in-east/.

*German Laws & Social Media*

Unlike the US, Germany has laws prohibiting hate speech and Nazi glorification. In 2017, these policies were incorporated into restrictions for social media companies in a law known as the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG). According to the law, social media sites must remove hate speech, fake news, and "obviously illegal" content within 24 hours or else be subjected to fines of up to €50M.[214] NetzDG also made a form available on the German justice ministry site for users to report content in violation of the law or content that has not been removed in a timely manner. In 2019, Germany enhanced NetzDG by making it obligatory that social media companies report "criminal content" to the Federal Criminal Police Office.[215]

As a result of these policies, social media platforms operating within Germany have exercised greater scrutiny over MDM-related content than in the US. For example, YouTube aggressively deleted all of Russia Today's German channels in response to the news organization's rampant use of Covid misinformation, which is in violation of YouTube policy.[216] Facebook cracked down on the Querdenker movement under its 2021 social harm policy.[217] During the German 2021 election, Facebook also heavily clamped down on MDM pertaining to the election and Covid pandemic.[218]

214  "Germany Starts Enforcing Hate Speech Law." *BBC News*, BBC, 1 Jan. 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-42510868.

215  Natasha Lomas. "Germany Tightens Online Hate Speech Rules to Make Platforms Send Reports Straight to the Feds." *TechCrunch*, 19 June 2020, https://techcrunch.com/2020/06/19/germany-tightens-online-hate-speech-rules-to-make-platforms-send-reports-straight-to-the-feds/.

216  "YouTube Deletes RT's German Channels over Covid Misinformation." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 28 Sept. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/youtube-deletes-rts-german-channels-over-covid-misinformation.

217  David Klepper. "Facebook Bans German Accounts under New 'Social Harm' Policy." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 16 Sept. 2021, https://apnews.com/article/technology-business-europe-germany-coronavirus-pandemic-0d5a34a4b78a64f9507ca97b1e41728c.

218  David Klepper. "'The Big Delete:' inside Facebook's Crackdown in Germany." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 28 Sept. 2021, https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-technology-germany-europe-97cdf5effe5e29fbf3314b45d844707c.

NetzDG is by no means a perfect solution nor is it broadly embraced. Heated debates within Germany and the EU[219] continue around the highly controversial law. It has been criticized for creating legal barriers for digital services and as a potential blueprint for authoritarian governments to silence political dissent.[220]

Unintended consequences stemming from NetzDG included an activity shift for extremist groups. No longer able to freely operate on social media, groups like Querdenker moved to Telegram. Querdenker has a large presence on the app, and its main channel has over 65,000 subscribers.[221] Although Telegram announced a crackdown on American right-wing extremists,[222] it has not signed up to the European Commission's voluntary code of practice on disinformation and does not display many rules about what is allowed on its platform in Germany.[223] It subsequently has left Querdenker-related accounts untouched.

Messaging apps like WhatsApp and Signal are not covered by NetzDG because they are used for private, non-public communication. Telegram falls into a grey area in this respect because the channels created can have an unlimited number of subscribers in either a private or public setting, the latter of which translates into public communication. Along this reasoning, the German Federal Office of Justice initiated two

219     Oliver Noyan. "Germany's Online Hate Speech Law Slammed by Opposition, Commission." *EURAC-TIV*, 10 May 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/germanys-online-hate-speech-law-slammed-by-opposition-commission/.

220     Janosch Delcker. "Germany's Balancing Act: Fighting Online Hate While Protecting Free Speech." *POLITICO*, 6 Oct. 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-hate-speech-internet-netzdg-controversial-legislation/.

221     Christopher F. Schuetze. "German Intelligence Puts Coronavirus Deniers under Surveillance." *The New York Times*, 28 Apr. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/world/europe/germany-coronavirus-deniers-surveillance.html.

222     Kevin Collier, Anna Schecter, and Ezra Kaplan. "Telegram, a Recent Haven for the Far Right, Purges Extremist Content." *NBC News*, 14 Jan. 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/telegram-recent-haven-far-right-purges-extremist-content-n1254215.

223     Mark Scott. "Ahead of German Election, Telegram Plays Radicalizing Role." *POLITICO*, 23 Sept. 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/german-telegram-election-misinformation/.

fine proceedings against Telegram, but the company failed to respond.[224] Because the company is located in the United Arab Emirates, Germany has limited options for reprisal.

During the 2021 election, Facebook took several measures to tackle MDM. It expanded its Facebook Protection Program, which strengthens account protection for politicians, government officials, and other high-profile targets.[225] In September 2021, the company launched a campaign with the Federal Agency for Civic Education to improve media literacy in Germany.[226] It also partnered with Germany's fact-checker Correctiv to reach younger users on Instagram and provide tips for how they can identify and report MDM.[227] In addition, Facebook sought a partnership with the German Press Agency (dpa) to create a series of videos aimed at teaching older users how to identify MDM.[228]

Other social media companies also heightened their vigilance for election MDM. Google created a "digital toolbox" to aid users in accessing credible election-based sources across all of its platforms.[229] The popular video platform TikTok launched in-app information services to inform users when the origin or authenticity of content cannot be proven and deployed fact-checking measures in cooperation with the dpa.[230] However, a Mozilla investigation discovered several problems with TikTok's efforts. The platform's automated system failed to label some AfD videos as political, and the company also

224     Thomas Mossburger. "Politik Sagt Telegram Den Kampf an: Hat Sie Die Waffen Dafür?" *BR24*, 14 Dec. 2021, https://www.br.de/nachrichten/netzwelt/politik-sagt-telegram-den-kampf-an-hat-sie-die-moeglichkeiten-dafuer,SrYiCve.

225     Laurens Cerulus. "Facebook Promises to Ramp up Security for German Election." *POLITICO*. POLITICO. 11 May 2021. https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-promises-to-ramp-up-security-for-german-election/.

226     "Fake News: Facebook Baut Faktencheck Zur Bundestagswahl Aus." *Handelsblatt*. Handelsblatt. 2 Sept. 2021. https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/fake-news-facebook-baut-faktencheck-zur-bundestagswahl-aus/27574620.html?ticket=ST-538863-GEYc1YwhPRV2T6729sEU-ap2.

227     *Ibid.*

228     *Ibid.*

229     Isabelle Sonnenfeld. "Unsere Maßnahmen Rund Um Die Bundestagswahl 2021." *Google*. Google. 12 Aug. 2021. https://blog.google/intl/de-de/unternehmen/inside-google/massnahmen-bundestagswahl-2021/.

230     Christina Honnef. "Tiktok Stellt in-App-Informationsseite Zur Bundestagswahl Zur Verfügung." *Newsroom*. TikTok. 16 Aug. 2019. https://newsroom.tiktok.com/de-de/tiktok-stellt-in-app-informationsseite-zur-bundestagswahl-zur-verfuegung.

failed to take down significantly popular accounts impersonating prominent German political institutions and figures.[231]

## *German Government Response & Struggles*

In some instances, the German government has demonstrated swift and decisive action against both MDM and extremism. After Chancellor Angela Merkel enacted a controversial open-door policy that welcomed over one million immigrants,[232] xenophobic rhetoric and sentiment increased throughout the country. It was further fueled by the New Year gang rape attacks in Cologne, in which over a thousand women were assaulted.[233] This event spawned fake news of a repeat one year later, but the disinformation was not allowed to flourish. Both media and government clamped down on the lie to quickly disprove and bury it, forcing the original source to publish an apology and delete the article.[234]

The German government took several actions against extremist MDM during the 2021 election and pandemic. The BfV placed members of Querdenker, as well as other anti-lockdown groups, under observation. The Federal Chancellery established "hybrid" working groups within different institutions, integrating experts from various ministries as well as intelligence services for IT security. One such group specialized in planning for election-related scenarios, including preparing for Russian cyberespionage.[235] The

231    Marcus Bösch and Becca Ricks. "Broken Promises: Tiktok and the German Election." *Mozilla Foundation.* Sept. 2021. https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/tiktok-german-election-2021/.

232    Matthew Karnitschnig. "Germany Now Expects 1.5 Million Refugees in 2015." *POLITICO*, 5 Oct. 2015, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-now-expects-1-5-million-refugees-in-2015-report/.

233    "Germany Shocked by Cologne New Year Gang Assaults on Women." *BBC News*, 5 Jan. 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35231046.

234    Melissa Eddy. "Bild Apologizes for False Article on Sexual Assaults in Frankfurt by Migrants." *The New York Times*, 16 Feb. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/bild-fake-story.html.

235    Markus Balser and Daniel Brössler. "Cyberattacken: Ist Die Bundestagswahl in Gefahr?" *Süddeutsche.de.* Süddeutsche Zeitung. 23 May 2021. https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/bundestagswahl-cyberattacken-desinformation-1.5301618.

Election Commission launched "Facts Against Fake News," a website dedicated to debunking broad, election-based MDM.[236]

To further combat MDM, the Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik (BSI) – Germany's Federal Office for Information Security – set up a situation center to connect experts with social media companies in order to improve takedown abilities.[237] The BSI was also named a central part of Germany's Cyber Security Strategy 2021, which set the country's cyber guidelines for the next five years.[238] As part of the policy, the BSI developed requirements for securing the transmission of federal electoral results.[239]

In addition, Germany, along with other EU member states, negotiated the DSA. Passed into law by the European Parliament in April 2022, the DSA forces social media companies to police their platforms more aggressively for MDM and other illegal activities. In serious cases, companies that fail to comply with DSA regulations can be fined up to 6% of their global turnover or be issued a ban from operating in the EU in the case of systematic non-compliance. It also mandates that companies submit risk assessments on MDM content, offer more transparency into their algorithms, and open up their code to independent audits.[240]

To limit confusion and potential MDM at the onset of the Covid pandemic, the German government adopted a unified response across federal, state, and local levels. This consistency in messaging helped foster solidarity within the country and

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236 "Facts Against Fake News." *Bundestag Election 2021.* The Federal Returning Officer. 2021. https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/fakten-fakenews.html.

237 Stefan Krempl. "Bundestagwahl: Bsi Hat 'Rotes Telefon' Für Hybride Bedrohungen Eingerichtet." *Heise Online.* Heise Online. 17 June 2021. https://www.heise.de/news/Bundestagwahl-BSI-hat-rotes-Telefon-fuer-hybride-Bedrohungen-eingerichtet-6110345.html.

238 Max Muth. "Cybersicherheit: Kurz Vor Schluss Noch Schnell Eine Strategie." *Süddeutsche.de.* Süddeutsche Zeitung. 9 Sept. 2021. https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/cybersicherheitsstrategie-2021-1.5404879.

239 Cyber Security Strategy for Germany. *Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community.* 2021. https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/it-internet-policy/cyber-security-strategy/cyber-security-strategy-node.html#:~:text=The%202021%20Cyber%20Security%20Strategy%20for%20Germany%20replaces%20the%202016,action%20areas%20and%20strategic%20objectives. p. 88.

240 "Digital Services Act: regulating platforms for a safer online space for users." European Parliament News, 20 Jan 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220114IPR21017/digital-services-act-regulating-platforms-for-a-safer-online-space-for-users.

an acceptance of Covid-related policies, which were largely seen as a success due to Germany's National Pandemic Plan[241] and the country's ability to keep hospital ICUs from incurring severe strain.[242] However, sentiments began to shift after the second surge necessitated another lockdown, and political opinions eventually diverged during the following election season. Combined with a growing fatigue towards Covid regulations, the public sentiment started to fracture in line with political positions.[243]

Despite having about 76% of its population fully vaccinated,[244] Germany has struggled to quell increasingly vocal anti-vax sentiment, particularly in former East German states. The government's debate regarding a possible vaccination mandate drew a heated response from protestors.[245] Violence and death threats have risen against German politicians espousing support for the mandate, including a murder plot organized on Telegram targeting the state governor of Saxony.[246] Other members of the Saxony political body were also targeted by Covid protestors upset about the mandate, who exchanged addresses for notable officials on Telegram and organized demonstrations in front of their homes.[247] Regardless of the pushback, Chancellor Olaf Scholz continued to support the mandate. When speaking about anti-vax sentiment, the Chancellor stated, "We will not put up with a tiny minority of uninhibited extremists trying to force their

241     Robert Koch Institute. *Ergänzung zum Nationalen Pandemieplan – COVID-19 – neuartige Coronavi-ruserkrankung.* 2020, https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Ergaenzu-ng_Pandemieplan_Covid.html.

242     Lothar Wieler, Ute Rexroth, and René Gottschalk. "Emerging Covid-19 Success Story: Germany's Push to Maintain Progress." *Our World in Data*, 20 Mar. 2021, https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exem-plar-germany.

243     German Lopez. "Germany Contained Covid-19. Politics Brought It Back." *Vox*, 21 Apr. 2021, https://www.vox.com/22352348/germany-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic.

244     Mathieu Edouard et al. "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations." *Our World in Data*, 5 Mar. 2020, https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=DEU.

245     Katrin Bennhold. "Eco-Leftists and the Far Right: Vaccine Mandate Forges Unlikely Coalition of Pro-testers in Germany." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Jan. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/europe/germany-vaccine-mandate-antivax-movement.html.

246     Christopher F. Schuetze. "Germany Is Investigating Vaccine Opponents over a Plot to Kill a State Gov-ernor." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 15 Dec. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/germany-is-investigating-vaccine-opponents-over-a-plot-to-kill-a-state-governor.html.

247     Jenny Hill. "German Covid Protests Turn Nasty in Row over Rules and Vaccinations." *BBC News*, BBC, 24 Jan. 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60059543.

will on our entire society."[248] The bill came to a vote in April 2022, but it was ultimately

defeated.[249]

In response to the vast spread and influence of conspiracy theories, Germany's

sophisticated system for implementing new programs to prevent and combat violent

extremism quickly introduced phenomenon-specific counseling services. At least two

centers, Zebra and Veritas, were founded during the pandemic era. Through German

government funding, they offer free counseling for victims and their families struggling

to cope with the effects of MDM.[250] In 2021, Zebra saw 825 requests for counseling,

which they distributed through their network of experts.[251] Of those, 377 were specifically

about conspiracy theories. Veritas does not publicly list its statistics for privacy reasons.[252]

However, Tobias Meilicke, head of Veritas, has publicly stated that the center's services

were in such high demand that eventually people had to be turned away due to long

waiting lists.[253]

Both Zebra and Veritas primarily focus on rekindling and fortifying relationships

that were strained by conspiracy theories and MDM. According to Sarah Pohl, a counselor

and psychotherapist that works for Zebra, "Often there is a lot of intolerance on both

sides of the argument. Both sides get extreme because they no longer speak to each

other."[254] In Veritas's mission statement, the center reaches out to distraught loved ones

and encourages them to seek counseling in how to best repair their relationships: "We

248    Scott Neuman. "German Police Move against an Alleged Murder Plot by Anti-Vaccina-
       tion Extremists." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Dec. 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-up-
       dates/2021/12/15/1064463596/german-police-anti-vax-assassination-plot.

249    Laurenz Gehrke. "German Parliament Rejects Mandatory Coronavirus Vaccination." *POLITICO*, PO-
       LITICO, 7 Apr. 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/german-parliament-rejects-mandatory-coronavi-
       rus-vaccination/.

250    Alessio Perrone. "Germany's Promising Plan to Bring Conspiracy Theorists Back from the Brink." *Slate
       Magazine*, 18 Oct. 2021, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/10/germany-conspiracy-theo-
       ry-counseling-centers-covid-misinformation-zebra-veritas.html.

251    "Jahresrückblick ZEBRA/BW 2021." Zebra, 12 February 2022, https://zebra-bw.com/uncategorized/
       jahresrueckblick-zebra-bw-2021/.

252    Mentioned during an e-mail exchange inquiring into data and statistics information.

253    Perrone, "Germany's Promising Plan to Bring Conspiracy Theorists Back from the Brink."

254    *Ibid.*

work resource- and solution-oriented to enable you to strengthen strained relationships again. Even without directly cooperating with the conspiracy-believing persons, a long-term change can thus be set in motion."[255] An approach incorporating loved ones is important because all counseling services are voluntary, and the person espousing MDM might not want support. Empowering loved ones with the skills they need to reconnect with conspiracists is an important step in breaching the echo chamber.

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255     Veritas. https://veritas-beratung.de/counseling.html

# Analysis & Policy Recommendations

*Current Policy Gaps*

Considering the body of research identifying key components for countering MDM – namely addressing social media algorithm contributions to echo chambers, improving digital literacy, and providing counseling services and training programs that directly address extremism related to MDM and conspiracy theories – it is clear that Case Study 1 demonstrates challenges in the US government's approach to counter-extremism and MDM policy. At present, the US lacks comprehensive policies that directly address deficiencies in the aforementioned components. Case Study 2 outlines examples of how Germany has addressed these issues and offers a roadmap for potential best practices that could be adapted into US law.

Due to its legislative gaps, the following are recommendations for advising the US on the application of innovative policy solutions to address opaque algorithms, lackluster digital literacy education, and deficient extremist and MDM-related counseling services and training programs.

*Recommendations*

Issue #1 – Social Media Algorithms

The US and Germany exhibit social and political differences, predominantly in regard to free speech. In Germany, Nazi glorification and hate speech are subject to censorship and criminal penalty. This allows the German government a pathway into social media moderation as exemplified by the NetzDG. Even with its speech restrictions, Germany has struggled to contain public outrage from fringe extremist groups like Querdenker. These groups organize and share content on Telegram, a platform where it is difficult for Germany to moderate content and penalize users without cooperation from the company.

To enhance its ability to identify and track down users that post hateful content or MDM, the German government is considering legislation that would implement a login trap.[256] The trap is designed to identify internet users that violate German laws without compromising anonymity. Social media companies would be required to offer a form used to report accounts guilty of posting unlawful content. Once the claim is verified, the next time the user logs into their account their IP address is forwarded in real-time to authorities, who then use it to obtain name and address information from telecommunications companies. This will not work if the user is masking their IP address with a VPN, although social media platforms could respond to this by checking for conflicts between IP addresses and the Domain Name Server.

Germany's methods have provided a framework for other countries in search of a way to hold social media companies responsible for illegal content. However, regardless of the efficacy demonstrated by NetzDG or the potential security provided by a login trap, making any similar motion to curtail Americans' right to free speech will likely result in hostility and exacerbate contemporary societal friction.

In fact, such an approach could backfire. Some misinformation is shared and believed due to a lack of trust in the US government and traditional news sources. Limiting a fundamental right that is so intricately woven into the American identity carries the potential of further eroding trust between the people and government. It is also unlikely that any attempt to abridge the freedom of speech will garner public approval regardless of political climate.

The US has strict protections guaranteeing freedom of speech as enshrined in the First Amendment and also the CDA. Under Section 230, "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."[257] Many have argued that

256     Oswald, Bernd. "Kampf Gegen Hass Im Netz: Falle Für Die Hater." *BR24*, 16 Dec. 2021, https://www. br.de/nachrichten/netzwelt/kampf-gegen-hass-im-netz-falle-fuer-die-hater,SrgFNLe.

257     47 U.S. Code § 230.

Section 230 has allowed the Internet to flourish as a democratic platform allowing the free exchange of ideas through blogs, videos, artwork, and reviews.[258]

**Policy Recommendations:** Rather than focusing on censorship, a better method for protecting vulnerable users from MDM would be to target social media algorithms. Studies have demonstrated that these algorithms are chiefly responsible for shepherding a user down the path towards extremist content. Researchers agree that altering these algorithms could shield users from exposure to increasingly radicalized content.

To this effect, Congress should emulate the EU's DSA and introduce legislation that will render social media algorithms transparent. Algorithms are a black box because they are not subject to independent, third-party review. One possible avenue is to formally introduce and pass the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, a bipartisan draft bill announced in December 2021 which would provide a pathway for researchers to analyze social media data. The bill prevents social media companies from blocking independent research and allows researchers to request data from these companies through proposals made through the National Science Foundation. It also grants authority to the FTC to require the disclosure of specific platform data and amends Section 230 of the CDA to allow the FTC to penalize companies that fail to disclose this data.

Passing the Social Media NUDGE Act would provide another avenue for Congress to mandate access for independent algorithm research. The act is a bipartisan bill that was introduced in the Senate in February 2022 and referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. The bill specifically addresses "the harm of algorithmic amplification"and it also uses terminology such as "viral" and "amplified by platforms," which insinuates algorithmic function. The purpose of the bill is to engage the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to study "content neutral" methods to slow down the spread of MDM. Acting as circuit breakers, these methods will be designed to place limits on content creation

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258     "Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act." Electronic Frontier Foundation, https://www.eff.org/issues/cda230.

and content sharing. Before passing, however, the bill should first be amended to greater extend the level of transparency mandated for social media companies. In its current form, the bill does not offer independent researchers sufficient information or access to algorithmic data.

In addition, Congress should pass the Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2022. There are two identical bills that were introduced by Democrats in the House and Senate, with the former referred to the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce and the latter referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. The bill requires Internet companies to conduct impact assessments of their automatic decision-making systems and report their findings to the FTC. Companies must provide an explanation of methodology used when collecting user data and other input information, which forces transparency for algorithms. The FTC will publish an annual anonymized aggregate report on trends and data sources which the public can then review to identify critical decisions that have been automated by companies. The bill also establishes a Bureau of Technology inside the FTC with resource allocation to hire 50 staff.

Issue #2 – MDM Immunization

MDM will continue to proliferate. Outright censoring content is not feasible for the US from a legal standpoint or a practical one. There are other methods that have proven useful in curbing the effect and believability of MDM.

Experts believe that it is possible to train individuals how to identify MDM. Known as the Inoculation Theory,[259] researchers have demonstrated that by exposing subjects to controlled types of misinformation, it is possible to immunize those subjects against it in the wild. One experiment found that explaining misinformation techniques to

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259     W. J. McGuire and D. Papageorgis. "The relative efficacy of various types of prior belief-defense in producing immunity against persuasion." The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62(2), (1961): 327–337. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042026.

participants before exposing them to the actual misinformation significantly neutralized its believability across the political spectrum.[260]

Another approach to improving user MDM detection is through increased digital and media literacy. In a study conducted by the MIT Sloan School of Management, two methods to measure digital literacy were used to determine susceptibility to false information. The first method relied only on participants' technical skills with digital devices, while the second focused more on media comprehension skills. Both methods of measurement demonstrated that "lack of digital literacy is indeed associated with less ability to tell truth from falsehood."[261] However, digital literacy did not significantly affect the likelihood of a user sharing misinformation. An explanation for this discrepancy is that there are many reasons why a user would choose to share misinformation. Aside from genuinely believing the information, a user spreading misinformation may want to signal to a particular group, gain attention, or attract/please followers and friends.[262]

In Germany, studies on digital literacy provide important insights. In one report[263] from 2021 published by the Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, a non-profit think tank specializing in the analysis of political and societal challenges posed by new technologies, researchers tested Germans' ability to discern MDM in the news.[264] The study created a test to determine participants' ability to distinguish between real journalism, opinion pieces, advertisements, and misinformation. Their findings demonstrated that digital

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260    John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ulrich Ecker. "Neutralizing misinformation through inoculation: Exposing misleading argumentation techniques reduces their influence." PLoS ONE 12(5), (2017). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175799.

261    Nathaniel Sirlin et al. "Digital literacy and susceptibility to misinformation." Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 2(6), (2021). https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/digital-literacy-is-associated-with-more-discerning-accuracy-judgments-but-not-sharing-intentions/.

262    Gordon Pennycook et al. "Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online." *Nature* 592, 590–595 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03344-2.

263    A summary of the study's findings can be found here: https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/digitale-medien-kompetenz-in-deutschland-studie-liefert-beunruhigende-ergebnisse-a-13624abd-cd41-4541-9cf1-7f4ff822d0e0.

264    Anna-Katharina Meßmer, Alexander Sängerlaub, and Leonie Shultz. "Quelle: Internet? Digitale Nachrichten- Und Informationskompetenzen Der Deutschen Bevölkerung Im Test." *Stiftung Neue Verantwortung*, Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, Mar. 2021, https://www.stiftung-nv.de/sites/default/files/studie_quelleinternet.pdf.

news skills decrease significantly as age increases, but those that scored the lowest were people under 40 with a low education. Those with low education also displayed a low level of trust in journalism. 22% of participants also felt overwhelmed by the amount of information presented by digital media, and 27% found likes on a post to be indicative of trustworthiness. In all, the study determined that 15% of people between the ages of 18–30 had good media literacy.

In another study released by Initiative D21, one of Germany's largest digital society non-profits, experts called for more robust media literacy skills. The 2021/2022 Digital Index acknowledged the dangers posed by social media's propagation of MDM, referencing MDM's influence on the August 2020 violent march on the Reichstag and the US Capitol riot.[265] The report indicates that about 56% of respondents trusted themselves to be able to correctly identify disinformation.[266] The report also found that German digital literacy is 82%,[267] but unlike the Stiftung Neue Verantwortung study that focused exclusively on subjects' ability to distinguish between different types of media posts, the Initiative D21 definition included a wide variety of digital skills in its measurement with no clear distinction made to separately measure media literacy. However, in an accompanying presentation focusing exclusively on the digital skills gap, experts emphasized the need for more comprehensive media literacy education that focuses on critical thinking and research skills applied to social media.[268]

The German government responded to digital literacy concerns by implementing more digital literacy classes and extracurricular workgroups. Some schools, such as Leonore-Goldschmidt Schule where many underprivileged students attend, introduced

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265   D21 Digital Index 2021/2022: Jährliches Lagebild zur Digitalen Gesellschaf. https://initiatived21.de/app/uploads/2022/02/d21-digital-index-2021_2022.pdf, p. 8.

266   *Ibid.*

267   *Ibid.*, 2.

268   "Digital Skills Gap." Initiative D21 Digital Index 2021/2022, Initiative D21, https://initiatived21.de/app/uploads/2021/08/digital-skills-gap_so-unterschiedlich-digital-kompetent-ist-die-deutsche-bevlkerung.pdf, slide 13.

"iPad classes"[269] in which students work primarily with digital devices instead of printouts and books and focus a lot on digital research.[270]

**Policy Recommendations:** Schools across the US are configuring lectures and classwork to help students identify MDM. But at present, the US lacks a universal method for measuring digital literacy. As a result, it is also difficult to determine the efficacy of MDM-oriented instruction.

To address these issues, Congress should reintroduce and pass the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act. Originally introduced by Democrats as a bill in the Senate in conjunction with a companion bill in the House in 2019, the act mandates that the Department of Education award grants for the development of media literacy guidelines and curriculum. It also instructs that grant funds are to be used for creating a media literacy advisory council tasked with providing recommendations for overcoming barriers and implementing best practices when developing media literacy programs.

Furthermore, the bill establishes definitions for media literacy and digital citizenship. According to the bill, media literacy is defined as "the ability to access relevant information, analyze media content, evaluate the accuracy of information, and make educated decisions about products and services, education, health, and wellness based on information obtained from media and digital sources." Digital citizenship is defined as "the ability to safely, responsibly, and ethically use communication technologies and to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life related to technology and the digital world." The bill would go a long way in equipping state and local educational agencies with the funds and direction they need in order to prepare students for safely circumnavigating the deluge of MDM spreading across digital platforms.

Congress should also consider passing the Digital Literacy and Equity Commission Act. The bill was introduced in the House in January 2022 and was referred to the

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269     "iPad-Klassen an der Leonore-Goldschmidt-Schule." https://leonore-goldschmidt-schule.de/un-sere-schulgemeinschaft/sekundarstufe-i/ipad-klassen.

270     From discussions with Elizaveta Firsova.

House Committee on Energy and Commerce. According to the bill, the definition of digital literacy is "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills." Information exchanged using social media requires evaluation. It is important to include a digital literacy education program that touches upon social media algorithmic functionality in order to demonstrate to students how and why some content can be deceptive or outright false.

In its present form, the bill would require a report to Congress regarding the state of digital literacy in the US and a proposal for strategies to improve digital literacy through the analysis of programs in other countries. Germany is currently improving upon its digital literacy policies, and some of the recommendations from German studies could prove useful for the US. The Stiftung Neue Verantwortung report made several good guiding remarks. Aside from teaching students how to use digital devices, primary and secondary schools need to focus on political education, critical reflection on one's own role in digital media, and trust in journalism. It would also be wise to test students on their ability to distinguish genuine journalistic works from other formats, such as satirical content, advertisements, and opinions.

Issue #3 – Extremist Counseling Services and Training Programs

Domestic extremism poses a threat across all levels of US society, from civilians to law enforcement and the military. The government needs to do more to address this issue by implementing robust counseling services and training programs that incorporate techniques to address the influence of conspiracy theories and MDM.

Germany has a storied past with domestic extremism, and its current laws are a product of the denazification process following WWII. It has over 1,600 active programs and projects for P/CVE that receive approximately €150 million in federal funding.[271] The country's ability to quickly adapt to new extremist phenomena allows for the

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271     Daniel Koehler. "Deradicalisation in Germany: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism." *Revista CIDOB D'Afers Internacionals*, no. 128, Sept. 2021, pp. 59–79. https://doi.org/10.24241/rcai.2021.128.2.59/en. p. 66.

establishment of tailored programs. As there is no singular approach that works for every person or in every situation, Germany readily offers multiple exit pathways. For example, EXIT-Germany[272] is a comprehensive program that assists extremists in leaving their groups by connecting them with the people and resources necessary for rehabilitation. Its counseling services are customized for each situation, which can include family and members of the community.

Germany also actively monitors its military to discover and remove extremists through the Military Counterintelligence Service (Militärische Abschirmdienst, MAD). In 2020, for example, MAD flagged over 500 soldiers for investigation due to suspected right-wing extremism.[273] Its law enforcement is also subject to scrutiny, and in 2020, the BfV released a report warning of 319 police officers with right-wing ties.[274] The BfV also publishes annual reports on the state of extremism.[275] Experts have called on the US to follow a similar practice and expunge extremists from both its military and law enforcement.[276]

The Capitol riot illustrates some weaknesses in the US military's ability to respond to extremists within its ranks. Several of the rioters were active-duty Service personnel, with active-duty marine Chris Warnagiris named as one of the first in a group that pushed through the doors of the Capitol East Rotunda. Footage shows Warnagiris holding a door open for fellow rioters while forcing away officers attempting to close the door.[277]

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272    Exit Germany. https://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/.

273    Scott Neuman. "Germany Disbands Elite Military Unit Following Reports of Right Wing Extremism." NPR, 2 July 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/886458028/germany-disbands-elite-military-unit-following-reports-of-right-wing-extremism.

274    Loveday Morris and Luisa Beck. "German Study Finds Suspected Cases of Far-Right Extremism in Police Forces." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 6 Oct. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/german-study-finds-suspected-cases-of-far-right-extremism-in-police-forces/2020/10/06/4ae824f2-0794-11eb-8719-0df159d14794_story.html.

275    Publications. *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*. https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SiteGlobals/Forms/Suche/EN/Publikationensuche_Formular_Eng.html?nn=679248.

276    Daniel Koehler. "Fighting Domestic Extremism: Lessons from Germany." *Lawfare*, 31 Aug. 2021, https://www.lawfareblog.com/fighting-domestic-extremism-lessons-germany.

277    Eleanor Watson and Robert Legare. "Over 80 of Those Charged in the January 6 Investigation Have Ties to the Military." *CBS News.* CBS Interactive. 15 Dec. 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/capitol-riot-january-6-military-ties/.

In another instance, Army Specialist James Mault enlisted in the Army despite his participation in the Capitol riot. The Army claimed that it was unaware of the Specialist's involvement, but the FBI had investigated and interviewed Mault prior to his enlistment and he admitted his attendance at the rally. He is currently being charged for violent crimes related to January 6th.[278] Army applicants are supposed to be screened for a history of extremist and criminal activity before they join. The US military also has rules of conduct for Service members, such as those contained in Army Regulation 600-20,[279] which states that extremist and gang-related activities are not permissible. AR 600-20, paragraph 4-12a dictates that, "Military personnel must reject participation in extremist organizations and activities," which include "[t]he use of unlawful violence or force to achieve goals that are political, religious, discriminatory, or ideological in nature" and "[e]xpressing a duty to engage in violence against DOD or the United States in Support of a Terrorist or extremist cause."[280]

In response to the Capitol riot, the DOD issued a 60-day stand-down order on February 5, 2021.[281] According to DOD Instruction 1325.06 "Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces," military personnel are prohibited from actively advocating for and participating in supremacist, extremist or criminal gang doctrine, ideology or causes.[282] Following the stand-down, the DOD established the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG), which published its "Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense" in December 2021. In the report, CEAWG made several recommendations, including

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278      Eleanor Watson and Robert Legare. "Army Combat Engineer Who Enlisted after His Participation in January 6 Riot Is Arrested." *CBS News*. CBS Interactive. 15 Oct. 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/army-soldier-enlisted-january-6-riot-arrested/.

279      Army Regulation 600-20. *Department of the Army*. Army Command Policy. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN32931-AR_600-20-004-WEB-6.pdf.

280      AR 600-20, p. 30.

281      "DOD Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks." *U.S. Department of Defense*, 5 Feb. 2021, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2495924/dod-stand-down-to-address-extremism-in-the-ranks/.

282      Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces. *Department of Defense*. https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf

developing a comprehensive training and education plan for prohibited extremist activity, creating a centralized Behavioral Threat Analysis Center staffed by behavioral science and threat-assessment/management personnel, and a study to determine whether reported information leads to appropriate responses.[283] According to the report, "The overall intent of these policies has been to provide guidance to commanders and guidelines for military personnel regarding prohibited and dangerous activities – including violence, actions that undermine good order and discipline, and the inequitable treatment of Service members."[284] Most responsibilities for intervention fall under the jurisdiction of commanders because of their familiarity with the personnel under their charge.

There are several critiques of the CEAWG's report. Some say the new policies require more reach, especially when collecting data to incorporate into training programs. Anthony Brown, Representative from Maryland, expressed concerns with DOD data collection, saying, "The recommendations that were issued by the Pentagon are lacking in terms of a commitment to collecting data, analyzing the data, and then being able to adapt training procedures for identifying and, where necessary, removing extremists in the ranks."[285] Others have criticized the report's recommendations for going too far. Some Republican senators denounced the new training proposals, claiming, "We are alarmed that so much training time and taxpayer money was devoted to a partisan, political agenda instead of recruiting, training and equipping the lethal force we need to defend this country."[286]

283 "Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense." *Department of Defense*. https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EX-TREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF.

284 *Ibid.*, 6.

285 Scott Maucione. "Dod's New Rules on Extremism Still Don't Have Enough Punch, Lawmaker Says." *Federal News Network*, 22 Dec. 2021, https://federalnewsnetwork.com/defense-main/2021/12/dods-new-rules-on-extremism-still-dont-have-enough-punch-lawmaker-says/.

286 "Military Has Spent 6 Million Man-Hours on 'Woke' Training under Biden, Senators Find." *U.S. Senator Roger Wicker*, 15 Feb. 2022, https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2022/2/military-has-spent-6-million-man-hours-on-woke-training-under-biden-senators-find.

Compared to the scope of MAD's actions, the DOD's policies are limited. This is because of the First Amendment. If the DOD publishes a list of extremist groups or removes Service personnel for their non-violent affiliation to groups, it will conflict with the First Amendment's freedom of association. First recognized in the 1958 Supreme Court case *NAACP v. Alabama*, in which the Court ruled that individual members of the NAACP, a civil rights group, had the right to associate together free from state interference because the First Amendment ultimately protects two forms of associative freedom: the right to expressive association and the right to intimate association.[287] For this reason, in the absence of severe violation of DOD policy, it is unlikely that Service personnel will face outright bans just by associating with extremist groups that have been identified by other federal agencies.

Like the DOD, DHS also launched an internal review in 2021.[288] The agency had previously come under fire after Christopher Hansen, an officer in the Coast Guard, was arrested for planning a terror attack. Fifteen guns and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition were discovered in his basement, and Hansen, who desired a "white homeland," wrote in a draft e-mail, "I am dreaming of a way to kill almost every last person on the earth."[289] The DHS released its findings in a report on March 15th, 2022, in which it detailed fifteen recommendations for "short- and long-term opportunities that would enhance the Department's ability to prevent, detect, and respond to violent extremist activity or behaviors that may be indicators of domestic violent extremism."[290]

287     David L. Hudson. "Freedom of Association." *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State Universitive, https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1594/freedom-of-association.

288     Geneva Sands. "DHS Launches Internal Review to Address Domestic Violent Extremism within Its Own Ranks." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 26 Apr. 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/26/politics/dhs-internal-review-extremism/index.html.

289     "US Coast Guard Officer Hoped to 'Kill Every Person on the Earth'." *BBC News*, BBC, 21 Feb. 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47313724.

290     "Report to the Secretary of Homeland Security Domestic Violent Extremism Internal Review: Observations, Findings, and Recommendations." US Department of Homeland Security, 15 March 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/Report%20to%20the%20Secretary%20of%20Homeland%20Security%20Domestic%20Violent%20Extremism%20Internal%20Review%20Observations%2C%20Findings%2C%20and%20Recommendations.pdf.

DHS is chiefly responsible for civilian P/CVE programs. In response to escalating extremist activity, DHS created the Countering Violent Extremism Task Force in 2011, which has grown and evolved into the current Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3). The program works to establish local prevention frameworks by connecting multi-disciplinary teams of educators, psychologists, faith leaders, medical personnel, law enforcement, and social workers with the information and resources necessary to identify radicalization signs and risk factors.[291] It is a small stepping stone towards building the comprehensive network of programs found in Germany, but it is nonetheless a vital first step. The US must aspire to reach the same level of Germany's rapid implementation of new programs so that it can face future extremist trends head-on.

Although the community-based approach is one of many models for deradicalization and disengagement, CP3's emphasis on training and delegating P/CVE responsibilities to local networks cannot be understated. One of the largest deficiencies in the US's approach to prevention is the country's reliance on punitive measures and ignoring radicalized individuals until they have resorted to violence. An effective strategy for preventing violent extremism is through strengthening the community. Building a network of trusted, trained, and informed professionals that share deep, communal bonds augments their ability to identify and respond to troubled individuals that are either demonstrating signs of radicalization or that have been radicalized. If the US is to succeed in combating domestic extremism, it must first accept that rehabilitation for at least some extremists – particularly the ones that have not yet engaged in violence – is possible.

**Policy Recommendations:** Prevention, deradicalization, and disengagement efforts require greater resources. Germany's approach towards domestic extremism offers insight into what is achievable through effective government-sponsored programs and technology. Although not all of Germany's policies can transfer neatly into US policy,

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291     "Building Local Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Frameworks." *Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships*, Feb. 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/Building%20 Local%20Prevention%20Frameworks_2.pdf.

the country provides evidence that counseling and community services offer a path to prevention and disengagement.

Congress should authorize CP3 and increase its grant to address funding and staffing shortages. In 2019, RAND published a report that stated, "Compared with other countries, current U.S. expenditures on terrorism prevention fall at or below the bottom of the funding ranges, however those ranges are calculated."[292] Greater funding will allow CP3 to provide more resources that could potentially include free counseling services for at-risk individuals, as well as services incorporating digital and media literacy in order to directly address social media's radicalizing effect. The US currently suffers from a deficiency in psychologists and counselors that specialize in P/CVE and contemporary conspiracy theories that tie into extremism. An increase in CP3 funding is imperative for introducing new training programs, opportunities for continuing education, and establishing a practitioners' network.

In addition, CP3's prevention methodology should also be applied at the federal level to DHS personnel. In the "Report to the Secretary of Homeland Security Domestic Violent Extremism Internal Review: Observations, Findings, and Recommendations," one recommendation outlines the need for employee early prevention support. It states, "[CP3's] approach incorporates violence prevention principles that leverage behavioral threat assessment and management tools and addresses early-risk factors that can lead to radicalization to violence."[293] The US government can assert greater control over its personnel, as federal employees, and hold them to higher standards. Lessons learned and successful counseling and intervention strategies at the federal level could also be adapted for use with the general public.

The DOD also needs to more efficiently address extremism within its ranks. First, it must better enforce the rules it has already outlined in DOD Instruction 1325.06 and other

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292 Brian A. Jackson et al. "Practical Terrorism Prevention: Reexamining U.S. National Approaches to Addressing the Threat of Ideologically Motivated Violence." Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center operated by the RAND Corporation, RR-2647-DHS, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2647.html. p. 212.

293 *Ibid.*, 14.

military regulations, such as AR 600-20, the latter of which provides a more detailed description of what acts relating to extremist, gang, and cyber activity are prohibited. The DOD needs to take firmer action and follow through with its policy throughout all levels as it did with its vaccine mandate. Second, the CEAWG report does not offer any indication of digital literacy instruction incorporated into its new training requirements for commanders and Service personnel. Digital literacy training will enable Service personnel to better discern fact from fiction when engaging online and has the potential to dampen or prevent radicalization.

## Conclusion

The Internet is a forum for the free exchange of ideas, and at its core it embodies the American spirit. The US holds free speech as an inalienable right that the government must not abridge, and MDM will not be the exception to that rule. It is possible to allow people the right to free publication on the Internet and reduce the proliferation, reach, and efficacy of MDM without resorting to censorship. Through digital literacy education, counseling services specializing in countering MDM, and regulation of social media algorithms, the US government can safely combat MDM.

Users browsing the web are presented with many information pathways. Some are steered by social media algorithms down rabbit holes full of increasingly hateful and violent content. Domestic extremist groups take full advantage of social media's radicalizing power to spread MDM and boost recruitment. The Proud Boys in the US and Querdenker Movement in Germany illustrate two cases where MDM was harnessed by groups to organize their followers into movements that ultimately resulted in violent clashes with government forces. Social media played a pivotal role in facilitating the growth and actions of these groups.

Both the US and Germany have approached domestic extremism and MDM in different ways. Whereas the US is beholden to the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech, Germany's post-WWII laws against hate speech and Nazi glorification have allowed it to censor and regulate social media companies. Although Germany has also experienced an increase in violence, its government has been quick to respond, both in cracking down on extremists and in approving rapid-response counseling services to address new trends in extremist conspiracy theories. The US must adopt more proactive measures in regulating social media companies and addressing gaps in its digital literacy and extremist counseling programs in order to combat domestic radicalization. In doing so, it will both protect and fortify America's democracy.

# Further Research

More research is needed to measure the efficacy of strategies for inoculating Internet users against MDM. Results will benefit most from longitudinal studies that can assess whether efficacy of the strategies wanes over time or whether users prove less resilient to specific types of MDM. Although a body of work exists for preventing and treating Islamic radicalization, methods for addressing domestic American radicalization are sparse. An article titled "Deradicalizing Domestic Extremists" published by the American Psychological Association states that techniques used on Islamists will not necessarily have the same benefit or impact on Americans due to situational differences in behavior.[294]

Although this paper focuses mostly on MDM propagated by social media, traditional media is also a factor in both spreading and combatting MDM. A 2021 Pew Research study found that trust in national news organizations has significantly declined, especially among Republicans.[295] More research is needed to understand the relationship between the erosion of trust in national news and the efficacy of MDM. Some US news organizations are also prominent sources of MDM and have radicalizing capabilities. Future research should examine the effect of removing these news sources from a viewer's media intake and what, if any effect, is observed on their extremist views. In "The manifold effects of partisan media on viewers' beliefs and attitudes: A field experiment with Fox News viewers," a study conducted by political scientists David E. Broockman and Joshua L. Kalla, findings suggests that it is possible to alter the partisan perspectives of a news viewer regardless of that viewer's political ideology.[296] By adapting this

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294     Zara Abrams. "Deradicalizing Domestic Extremists." *Monitor on Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 5, 1 July 2021, https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/cover-domestic-extremists.

295     Jeffrey Gottfried and Jacob Liedke. "Partisan Divides in Media Trust Widen, Driven by a Decline among Republicans." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 30 Aug. 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/.

296     David Broockman and Joshua Kalla. "The Manifold Effects of Partisan Media on Viewers' Beliefs and Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers." OSF Preprints. April 1 2022. doi:10.31219/osf.io/jrw26.

methodology, a study could be designed to assess what changes in MDM belief are possible by exposing subjects to different media sources.

Additionally, reinstating the Fairness Doctrine could also improve the trust between the public and news media, which could reduce American susceptibility to MDM. Compared to Germans' trust in public television (71%) and radio (77%) news,[297] Americans' trust in the media is declining.[298] In 1987, the Fairness Doctrine was abolished by the Federal Communications Commission. The policy required that television and radio broadcast license holders provide multiple, opposing views about important public issues. Reinstatement of this policy as a first step in rebuilding trust between the public and news media could potentially immunize Americans against MDM by virtue of offering exposure to more diverse viewpoints. When taken in conjunction with the Broockman & Kalla study, there is room to argue that immunization efforts must include balanced news sources – meaning ones that deliver information in either a bipartisan or nonpartisan fashion. However, more research is needed to determine the potential financial and social ramifications of the policy's reinstatement. News media will be significantly impacted by the decision, which could potentially cause some to lose their viewer base and revenue. The social impact might also be detrimental depending on how uniformly the policy is enforced. While in the past the Fairness Doctrine made it difficult for polarizing and extremist content to permeate into national news, today's political and social landscape is different, and some extremists might exploit the policy in order to proliferate MDM without repercussions. Social tensions within the US have escalated in recent years, and Americans exhibit hostility towards increasingly polarized and entrenched viewpoints that often dismiss undesirable yet factual arguments as "fake news." Therefore, any effort to reinstate the Fairness Doctrine should first explore ways to modernize the policy and take MDM into account.

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297 "Glaubwürdigkeit Der Medien." *Infratest Dimap*, 30 Oct. 2015, https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/glaubwuerdigkeit-der-medien/.

298 Megan Brenan. "Americans' Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record." *Gallup.com*, Gallup, 20 Nov. 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx.

One final note concerns the unity and integrity of government communication. Both the US and Germany demonstrate how crucial it is to have solidarity and unity across all levels of government. From the onset of the Covid pandemic, the US suffered from mixed messages, political discord, and arguments spanning the federal, state, and local levels. The CDC alone has faced heavy criticism for its contradictory, confusing recommendations.[299] As a result, the American populace has exhibited equally fractured support for the ever-shifting policies handed down across all levels of government.

Germany, once heralded as an exemplary role model for its handling of the pandemic, eventually succumbed to internal political pressures that cast doubt on the safety and efficacy of pandemic-related policies. Confusion acts as a primer for misinformation to take root, which in turn has been used by domestic extremists in both countries for recruitment purposes and as a catalyst for often violent protests. Future research will want to examine methods to encourage all levels of the US government to speak with one, united voice.

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299    Selena Simmons-Duffin. "CDC Is Criticized for Failing to Communicate, Promises to Do Better." *NPR*, 8 Jan. 2022, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/01/07/1071449137/cdc-is-criticized-for-failing-to-communicate-promises-to-do-better.

# Glossary

**Algorithm**: A set of rules and instructions used by computers to solve a problem or accomplish a task. Social media companies use algorithms that are capable of self-learning in order to adapt content recommendations to each user's preferences.

**Alternative for Germany**: Known as Alternative für Deutschland in German, it is a German euroskeptic, far-right populist party established in 2013. It gained considerable favor with voters during the 2017 federal election through xenophobic rhetoric targeting refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. It lost parliamentary seats in the 2021 federal election but gained a stronger foothold in former East Germany states, which harbor hostility towards the federal government.

**Black Box**: A system or object that has an internal mechanism hidden from the user. Social media algorithms are a black box in two ways. First, companies closely guard how they have configured their algorithms and have resisted calls for making their code transparent for independent review. Second, algorithms utilize machine learning to evolve beyond their initial programing, which obscures their decision-making processes. However, it is possible for engineers to deconstruct and reprogram them should companies adequately invest in such measures.

**Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik**: Germany's Federal Office for Information Security. It investigates information technology security risks and was responsible for establishing a direct line between social media companies and researchers during the 2021 German federal election in order to enhance MDM takedown efforts.

**Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz**: Germany's domestic intelligence agency and known in English as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. It uses a combination of open source and covert intelligence gathering techniques and regularly releases reports on its findings.

**Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency**: A federal agency operating within the Department of Homeland Security. It was established in 2018 to replace the National Protection and Programs Directorate. It is responsible for federal cybersecurity, coordinating the execution of American national cyber defense, leading asset response for significant cyber incidents, and ensuring that timely and actionable information is shared across federal and non-federal and private sector partners. It also provides public information, toolkits, and other resources detailing cyber-related threats.

**Communications Decency Act of 1996**: Title V of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which was a rewrite of the Communications Act of 1934. Its main function was to regulate indecency and pornographic materials through the use of new technologies

such as the Internet. However, the Supreme Court ruling *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union* deemed the law's indecency provisions unconstitutional. Section 230 of the law is currently being debated by lawmakers with regards to the immunities it grants to social media companies.

**Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships**: Was established inside the Department of Homeland Security in 2021 to replace the Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention. Uses a community-based approach to prevent domestic violent extremism and all other forms of targeted violence and terrorism. Also provides grants for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, nonprofits, and institutions of higher education with funds to establish or enhance capabilities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. Its Regional Prevention Coordinators are stationed across the United States to help establish and support prevention efforts at the local level. They deliver CP3's trainings, connect prevention practitioners, and build networks that can support local prevention frameworks.

**Data Void**: Occurs when obscure search queries have few results associated with them, making them ripe for exploitation by media manipulators with ideological, economic, or political agendas. A malicious actor can proliferate MDM by flooding vulnerable search engines with phrases specially tailored to boost search rank visibility of pernicious content.

**Department of Homeland Security**: Was established in 2002 in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. It is responsible for public security and contains numerous subordinate agencies such as the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, US Coast Guard, US Customs and Border Protection, and US Secret Service.

**Deradicalization**: A cognitive change, usually the result of a reorientation in belief or ideology.

**Digital Literacy**: The critical comprehension of journalism, opinions, advertisements, and other forms of literary content found on the Internet. It also includes understanding of how social media platforms decide which news stories or other content they show the user. Other definitions of this term might instead focus on a user's ability to click on hyperlinks, send e-mails, use smartphones and tablets, and open applications.

**Disengagement**: A behavioral change, usually the result of breaking off participation in terrorism.

**Disinformation**: Content that is deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country.

**Echo Chamber**: An environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered.

**European Commission**: The executive branch of the European Union. It operates as a cabinet government, with 27 members of the Commission headed by a president.

**European Parliament**: The European Union's law-making body. It is directly elected by EU voters every 5 years.

**Extremism**: A concept used to describe religious, social, or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., "mainstream" beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion, or society. Extremism can also be used to refer to the radical wings of broader movements, such as the anti-abortion movement or the environmental movement. Not every extremist movement is "bad" – the abolitionist movement is one example of an extreme movement that had admirable goals – but most extremist movements exist outside of the mainstream because many of their views or tactics are objectionable.

**Federal Chancellery**: Known as the Bundeskanzleramt in German, it is Germany's executive office of the chancellor, who is Germany's head of the federal government. As of 2022, the chancellor is Olaf Scholz.

**Foreign Malign Influence Center**: A center proposed to operate within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in order to address rising concerns of foreign-origin MDM. It has not yet been approved by Congress.

**Global Engagement Center**: An inter-agency center established within the US Department of State under Executive Order 13721 signed by President Barack Obama on March 14th, 2016. Their mission statement is "To direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations."

**Militärische Abschirmdienst**: Known as the Military Counterintelligence Service in English. It is one of the three federal intelligence agencies in Germany and is responsible for military counterintelligence.

**Manosphere**: A loose collection of blogs and forums devoted to men's rights, sexual strategy, and misogyny.

**Malinformation**: Information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm.

**Media Literacy**: Is the ability to access, critically analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms.

**Misinformation**: Content that is false but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm.

**Network Enforcement Act**: A German law passed in 2017, also known as Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or NetzDG. According to the law, social media sites must remove hate speech, fake news, and illegal content within 24 hours or else be subjected to fines of up to €50M. An interactive form was made available on the German justice ministry site for users to report content in violation of the law or content that has not been removed in a timely manner. In 2019, Germany enhanced NetzDG by making it obligatory that social media companies report criminal content to the Federal Criminal Police Office.

**NUDGE Act:** A bipartisan bill developed to address "the harm of algorithmic amplification" by engaging the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to study "content neutral" methods to slow down the spread of MDM. Acting as circuit breakers, these methods will be designed to place limits on content creation and content sharing. Also known as the "Nudging Users to Drive Good Experiences on Social Media Act."

**QAnon**: A conspiracy theory movement originating online in the US and started by an anonymous 4chan poster known as "Q Clearance Patriot" or more simply as "Q." Its followers believe that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles comprised of prominent Democrat lawmakers and presidential candidates, celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks, and religious leaders such as Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. Many of them also believe that, in addition to molesting children, members of this group kill and eat their victims to extract a life-extending chemical called adrenochrome. The conspiracy appropriated the hashtag and phrase "Save the Children," which has long been used by legitimate anti-trafficking organizations. The conspiracy theory eventually absorbed Donald Trump into its mythos and started referring to "The Storm," which is code for Trump using his presidential powers to unmask and punish the cabal. After the 2016 election, QAnon began spreading to Europe. During the Covid pandemic, QAnon adopted anti-lockdown, anti-mask, and anti-vax rhetoric. Many of the January 6th rioters wore QAnon paraphernalia, and perhaps the group's most memorable representative was Jacob Chansley, the so-called "QAnon Shaman" that wore horns and a bearskin headdress, with a US flag painted on his face.

**Querdenker**: A word that translates into "someone who thinks outside the box" or "a lateral thinker." The Querdenker Movement is sometimes also referred to as "Querdenken," which means "thinking outside the box" or "lateral thinking." Michael Ballweg, an IT entrepreneur, created the movement in response to Germany's Covid pandemic lockdown, masking, and vaccination policies. The movement originated in Stuttgart and includes anti-vaxxers, Covid skeptics, and anti-lockdown protestors among its followers. The composition of the group is diverse, spanning across all corners of the political spectrum and comprising members that include economists, naturopaths, and average people. Although Ballweg claimed his movement was peaceful, Querdenker followers have often resorted to violence during Covid-related disputes and protests.

**Rabbit Hole**: A metaphorical long and winding exploratory path with many connections and offshoots. There is no final destination, and the tunnels are infinite. Put into Internet context, someone that "falls down the rabbit hole" becomes engrossed in searching for content relating to a specific topic, which then branches out into adjacent topics in an almost infinite supply of content.

**Radicalization**: Occurs when someone starts to believe or support extreme views and in some cases begins to participate in terrorist groups or acts. When someone becomes radicalized, they are so committed to their extreme beliefs that they reject conflicting viewpoints and arguments.

**Reichstag**: Historic building in Berlin that houses the German parliament.

**Reichsbürger Movement**: Translates as "Citizens of the Reich" in English. An often violent movement, its members do not accept the legality of the German government. They refuse to pay taxes and have declared their own small "national territories," which they call the "Second German Empire," the "Free State of Prussia," or the "Principality of Germania." Members are mostly men over 50 and they ascribe to right-wing populist, anti-Semitic, and Nazi ideologies.

**Red Pill**: Phrases such as "taking the red pill" or "redpilling" are concepts taken from the film *The Matrix* in which the main character Neo chooses between a red and blue pill. As the character Morpheus explains to Neo, "You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Put into the context of social media and the manosphere, when someone "takes the red pill," it refers to a male whose perspective is dramatically transformed through exposure to anti-feminist, white supremacist, and conspiratorial content.

**Section 230**: Part of the Communications Decency Act of 1996. It shields online services from facing liability for third-party content.

**Trilogue**: An informal meeting on legislative proposals between representatives of the European Parliament, Council and Commission. Its purpose is to reach a provisional agreement on a text acceptable to both the Council and the Parliament. It may be organized at any stage of the legislative procedure and can lead to what are known as "first reading," "early second reading" or "second reading" agreements, or to a "joint text" during conciliation.

**White Supremacy**: A term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people.

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