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MONITORING DISINFORMATION AROUND ELECTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE GERMAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS IN 2021

By CORRECTIV.Faktencheck

EU DISINFO LAB



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About EU DisinfoLab

EU DisinfoLab is an independent nonprofit research organisation specialised in analysing disinformation.

We uncover and expose sophisticated disinformation campaigns. We seek to amplify the voices of our community of counterdisinformation experts across the EU and contribute with collective expertise to policy making.

You can find more information about our work on our website:

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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation before or after democratic elections can serve different purposes. During the competitive campaigning phase, which may start months or even over a year before the election day, disinformation usually seeks to discredit candidates or is directed at the policies of a certain political party. It tends to focus on the election process on election day or shortly before. Claims about alleged voter fraud become more prevalent, seeking to confuse and discourage people from voting or giving them false information on how to vote so that their votes become invalid.

The nature of disinformation varies from country to county and can, of course, be influenced by unprecedented events. Still, similar patterns have been observed during state-level and federal elections in Germany. This technical document details the knowledge that CORRECTIV.Faktencheck has gained over five years of fact-checking work. The first part describes the pre-election campaigning phase. In particular, the background is provided on how the 2017 federal election campaign helped shape the subsequent monitoring and exposed key narratives that would return in 2021. The second part outlines the 'hot phase' around the 2021 federal elections in Germany and the key learning that can be drawn from it. This includes the different tasks within the CORRECTIV team, the monitored platforms, used tools, and thoughts behind the chosen approach.

BACKGROUND: INSIGHTS FROM THE 2017 GERMAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS THAT SHAPED CORRECTIV'S MONITORING IN 2021

The fact-checking organisation started investigating dis- and misinformation in the beginning of 2017 when Donald Trump had just been elected president of the United States. The world was alerted about the potential danger of (foreign) disinformation, [trolling, hacking activities](#), and their [meddling in election campaigns](#) – and so was Germany, facing federal elections in September 2017. About three weeks before election day in Germany, CORRECTIV created a newsroom named '[WahlCheck17](#)', joining forces with First Draft, journalism students, and freelance journalists to publish articles about disinformation in a daily newsletter starting on 4 September.

The [false claims identified on election weekend](#) centred around suspected irregularities in the voting process and certain types of pens, allegedly prohibited when filling out the ballot paper. Simultaneously, false flag accounts were spotted, which pretended to be left-wing activists who volunteered as election workers and secretly invalidated votes for AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). Far-right activists also encouraged their follower base to become election workers, [amplified by a small Russian-speaking botnet on Twitter](#). Altogether, disinformation was present during the German federal elections in 2017, it did not influence its outcome or even receive much [attention outside of right-wing circles](#).

Since then, CORRECTIV observed only minor disinformation activities during state-level elections, which nonetheless echoed the same narratives. Nevertheless, there was deep concern about the upcoming federal elections in 2021, as they took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Disinformation about vaccines and anger about containment measures like lockdowns and mask mandates created a tense political climate in Germany, a fertile ground for anti-democratic and conspiracy groups who more or less openly demanded to overthrow the government – or [the alleged “dictatorship” that it had become](#). This shows that the disinformation during the U.S. presidential elections and the storming of the Capitol cast a long shadow.

Based on the 2017 elections' experience, the CORRECTIV team believed voting decisions influenced by longer-term campaigning. That is why they deemed it insufficient to monitor election-specific topics only a few weeks before election day. Instead, in 2021, mis- and disinformation activities were documented for five months to track its evolution alongside polls, mainstream media reports, and other influences.

MONITORING PROCESS

In 2021, the CORRECTIV fact-checking team consisted of seven full-time journalists. Their daily monitoring routine includes spending one hour screening Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter to detect potential misinformation that is both viral and relevant. Each team member looks at a different platform. Moreover, the organisation has a WhatsApp tipline and its online platform named CrowdNewsroom. Both offer a direct way for the audience to ask for verification of suspicious material found online. This monitoring set-up can be easily tailored to specific news topics, such as an upcoming election.

I. PRE-ELECTION MONITORING (LONG-TERM)

Steps:

- 1. IDENTIFYING AND LISTING POTENTIAL TARGETS OF DISINFORMATION:**
The candidates for the highest office may be among them. In Germany, this is the Chancellor (Bundeskanzler).
- 2. LOOKING OUT FOR ADVERSE CLAIMS ABOUT THESE PERSONS ON DIFFERENT PLATFORMS:**
For starters, this could mean searching for their names in groups (Facebook) or on pages (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter profiles, Telegram channels, websites) already known to be potential spreaders of misinformation.
- 3. FINDING CAMPAIGN HASHTAGS, SPECIAL TERMINOLOGY, KEYWORDS, OR NICKNAMES THAT ARE USED TO DISCREDIT A PERSON OR PARTY:**
For instance, #baerbockfail and other hashtags, including the name of the Green party candidate. These wordings and hashtags can also be used as search terms.
- 4. FOLLOWING EACH NEW GROUP OR PAGE THAT SPREADS DISINFORMATION REGULARLY:**
They should be included in the daily monitoring to understand what they share and who follows them.
- 5. THESE FINDINGS SHOULD BE DOCUMENTED (E.G., SPREADSHEETS) TO SPOT RECURRING NARRATIVES OR ACCOUNTS/WEBSITES THAT TURN OUT TO BE INFLUENTIAL SPREADERS OF DISINFORMATION.**

I.I. FOLLOWING DISINFORMATION TRENDS

According to the polls in early 2021, three parties could reasonably hope to nominate the new chancellor: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Green Party (Grüne). While CORRECTIV's daily monitoring usually focuses on viral claims and not on a certain topic for a longer time, they had to slightly change this approach during the election campaigns. Instead, they identified two major phases of disinformation during the election campaign. During each stage, the monitoring was intensified following the prevailing trend, always using related terminology to search for more similar content.

In the first phase, the research focused on the Green party, which is traditionally a target of the right-wing scene and was a victim of coordinated efforts from very early on in 2021. On 20 April 2021, the Green Party announced Annalena Baerbock as its candidate, who received a lot of positive mainstream media reporting, accompanied by a record approval of her party in the polls. Soon, platforms were flooded with negative memes and derogatory comments about Baerbock, calling her stupid and attributing her several [fake quotes](#). A social media campaign against her evolved over the next two months, focusing on her CV and [accusing her of forging her University degree](#). Over the following months, poll ratings for the Green party started to decrease, and by the beginning of June, the CDU [took over as the strongest party](#). Around that time, disinformation against the Greens seemed to slow down.

The second phase began in July when online disinformation shifted its focus towards CDU candidate Armin Laschet. The disinformation campaign came from very different actors; his critics often attacked him by calling out his inadequate response to climate change. Despite these different motivations, he was also

the victim of fake quotes and hashtags with his name like (#laschetluegt, translated: "Laschet lies"). Moreover, the severe flooding in Western Germany in the middle of July was seized as an opportunity to blame Laschet, former Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia. There were false claims that Laschet [faked his visit to the affected areas](#) or that he [used the donations paid to a charitable organisation](#) that his wife chairs for his election campaign. In the following months, poll ratings for the CDU declined.

One cannot prove a causal relationship between disinformation and declining poll ratings. However, given these dynamics, it is possible to conclude that disinformation during the 2021 election campaign prevented a specific candidate or party from being successful. Disinformation came from different parts of the political spectrum, and unlike 2017, the right-wing scene was not the only actor in this build-up. Unprecedented events like the pandemic or flooding can fuel new campaigns.

I.II. MONITORING OF DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

At the beginning of June, the CORRECTIV fact-checking team had a strategy meeting. After disinformation had focussed on the Greens for about two months, they decided to try and trace the origins of these campaigns, especially of some of the very viral fake quotes that had been circulating. With this goal in mind, we broadened our monitoring to include more platforms, namely:

- **Facebook;**
- **Instagram;**
- **TikTok ;**
- **Telegram;**
- **Twitter ;**
- **Reddit;**
- **LinkedIn;**
- **Pinterest.**

In this regard, the division of labour was efficient and useful. Each team member monitored one platform, becoming an expert on its functionalities, trends, and user behaviour.

Not all of the platforms received the same scrutiny. Over time, Reddit, LinkedIn, and Pinterest turned out to be irrelevant, and attention shifted back to more easily accessible and frequently used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram. In addition, YouTube plays a significant role in Germany, but it offers no monitoring tool, so it was impossible to track disinformation systematically there. As a result, fact-checkers had to rely on submissions from the audience.

Different tools make monitoring of these platforms easier, e.g., [CrowdTangle](#) for Facebook and Instagram, or [TweetDeck](#) for Twitter. On other platforms such as Telegram, the CORRECTIV team set up an account and opted for a snowball sampling method. This consisted of following certain accounts or channels known to spread disinformation, looking at what content they share, and then following related accounts. Other tools exist, such as [TG-Stat](#), but they are insufficient to spot viral disinformation daily.

CrowdTangle was employed to search for Facebook pages and groups with names like "Anti-Grüne" or "Gegen die Grünen" (i.e., "against the Greens"). Additional lists were created with the pages of political parties or politicians or using terms like "voter fraud" on Tweetdeck.

I.III. DECISION-MAKING ABOUT FACT-CHECKS

During this electoral monitoring, much information came up that was not eligible for fact-checking. These include expressions of opinion or exaggerations without a real claim implied, of which the team of fact-checkers kept track of them, despite concentrating on actually verifiable claims.

During the morning team conference, the staff decided whether we publish a fact-check or not, based on the following criteria:

1. **VIRALITY:** CORRECTIV intentionally overlooks claims that have no reach at all. Assessing virality can be difficult, but in general, they consider a claim to be viral if it appears on several different platforms simultaneously. For single posts that appear only on one platform, they look for content with 50.000-100.000 views on Telegram or more than 1.000 shares on Facebook as a rule of thumb. A single tweet should have more than 300 retweets, and a single Instagram post more than 1.000 likes. A YouTube video should have more than 100.000 views.
2. **RELEVANCE:** During an election campaign, this category is not as strict as in other times. When monitoring misinformation, it is essential to look at the journalistic news relevance (Is the topic new? Is it harmful? Is it affecting many people?). Nonetheless, during an election campaign, trivial claims about a candidate's private life can be relevant – if viral – because they could affect people's opinions and even voting decisions.

Publishing fact-checks about false or misleading claims is important to gather evidence of an existing disinformation campaign and to distinguish real disinformation from negative campaigning methods. For example, digging through a candidate's life until a plagiarised article or a CV incongruity is found is different from inventing fake quotes.

I.IV. DOCUMENTATION

The narratives (including unverifiable statements that a certain politician is 'stupid'), the names of the accounts identified, the hashtags, and relevant links were collected in a Google spreadsheet that was open to all members of CORRECTIV.

The main spreadsheet contained information on:

- **The claim or narrative;**
- **The earliest date of appearance available;**
- **The platform where it first appeared;**
- **Source(s);**
- **The number of shares of the content;**
- **Links (archived).**

Another spreadsheet exclusively documented the Twitter hashtags used in campaigns against the CDU. It contained information on:

- **The date when the hashtag was first used on Twitter;**
- **The account that used it first;**
- **The date(s) when it trended in Germany;**
- **Where it also appeared on Telegram.**

The main spreadsheet developed into a detailed timeline of the election campaign, which became the basis for our main report: a [chronology of disinformation and negative campaigning](#) during five months.

II. MONITORING AROUND ELECTION DAY (SHORT-TERM)

A few days before election day, disinformation about policies or candidates in Germany mainly stopped. Instead, the focus turned again to the election process itself. [Voter fraud allegations](#) are the most common – e.g., ballot boxes that are not properly sealed, alleged irregularities with how votes were counted, false information on the pens to be used, and so on.

Steps:

1. **THINKING** of the different terms for “voter fraud” in the language that is being investigated, writing them down, and using them as search terms on TweetDeck and CrowdTangle. It is also advised to save the searches so they can be used again every day.
2. **MAKING** a list with other relevant search terms, like “ballot box”.
3. **SEARCHING** for claims about the postal vote, which is often targeted by voter fraud allegations. In view of this, it is a good practice to write a pre-bunking piece about the safety of voting by mail and to publish it as soon as the postal voting process starts.

Fact-checkers should publish as many fact-checks as possible about the specific claims that appear before, on, and after the election day. Most claims about voter fraud appeared on the very day of the vote and during the week after it. Making sure that there is enough staff to work on fact-checks during this phase is vital.

LEARNINGS

- Disinformation in the months before the election aims to prevent a certain party or candidate from being successful (negative campaigning).
- Disinformation shortly before election day usually targets voting by mail.
- Claims about voter fraud appear on election day and during the week(s) after.
- Monitoring during the campaigning phase should focus on the potential main targets of such disinformation. Usually, one can expect these to be the candidates with a good chance of winning.
- Monitoring should be based on relevant search terms. These terms should be adapted in real-time according to the different phases of the election campaign and news trends. The hashtags used for campaigning and buzzwords should be documented in lists and used in searches on various platforms.

CORRECTIV did not find evidence of foreign interference in disinformation campaigns of the 2021 federal elections in Germany, except for some [right-wing media outlets from Austria](#) that joined the campaign against the Green party. The disinformation spreaders organised themselves online, on Telegram or Twitter, in loose grassroots movements. Identifying a single driving force behind them or tracking links to official parties who benefitted from the disinformation against their opponents was impossible. According to the fact-checking organisation, disinformation activities were like organic campaigns by motivated individuals on social media.

The attempt to find the spreaders of disinformation did not succeed. The team of verifiers talked to a young man who had an Instagram account campaigning against the Green party, but his dislike was based on trivial animosities. His account was a good example of an influence campaign that was not eligible for fact-checking, as it contained mainly opinions. Nevertheless, efforts to search for the players behind the scenes are worthwhile and should not be neglected, even if they fail most of the time.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to track back the ‘patient zero’, who fabricated some wildly viral fake quotes attributed to Annalena Baerbock. When disinformation becomes viral, it usually circulates in private messaging apps. Therefore, fact-checkers are highly recommended to set up a tipline on WhatsApp so that users can directly reach out if they find something suspicious.

When a very viral fake appears, fact-checkers have to move quickly to find its origin – if no evidence can be found and archived on the first day – it is unlikely to come up later. Speaking from experience, CORRECTIV recommends to optimise time and resources, letting go of if there are no immediate chances of success.

Before the next elections, the German fact-checking organisation will set up their monitoring infrastructure even earlier – as it still took about one and a half months, the investigation was approached strategically, between defining the ultimate goal and setting up spreadsheets for documentation. Finally, improvement is needed to better monitor TikTok trends, because the platform is gaining ground in the disinformation field.