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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN GERMANY

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INTRODUCTION

- Germany's strong [tradition](#) of alternative medicine and sui generis relationship with Russia made the country a particularly fertile ground for disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It is worth noting that [Germany](#) was the main Western target of Russian propaganda many years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine started.
- Far-right groups – in touch with the country's controversial Nazi past – have partly adopted racist and anti-Semitic theories, which also play a role in disinformation with hate speech overtones.
- External events exacerbated and intensified the flow of disinformation, exploiting and maximising polarisation around issues such as migration, gender issues or climate change.
- The recent discovery of a [coup plot](#) by the Reichsbürger movement, whose members deny the legitimacy of the German state and institutions, also sharing some views with [QAnon](#), highlights two potential risks of disinformation. First, the breakdown of the social-institutional contract that allows democracies to function. Second, the rise of radical political discourses.
- In a nutshell, the German disinformation landscape faces old and new challenges, as well as domestic and external threats that feed on each other.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

These are three emblematic disinformation cases that permeated German's public opinion to this day.

THE LISA F. CASE

- The [Lisa F.](#) case contains many ingredients that make up a true disinformation thriller and illustrates several challenges facing Germany today. It is about a hoax with anti-immigration narratives, amplified by Russian media and instrumentalised by German far-right groups. At the time, it triggered offline effects, including citizen mobilisation, incidents against refugees, and even affecting diplomatic tensions with [Moscow](#).
- In January 2016, Lisa F., a 13-year-old girl with dual German and Russian citizenship, disappeared in Berlin, on her way to school, and was missing for 30 hours. She later returned home and reported that she had been assaulted and raped by three men of Arab origin. Amid the steady stream of refugees in Germany, Russian media echoed her testimony, adding that the Berlin police had refused to search for the alleged perpetrators and to launch a criminal investigation of the incident.
- Russian-German citizens living in Germany and neo-Nazi groups such as the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) held demonstrations against migrants and refugees arriving from the Mediterranean, including an attack on a reception centre. Shortly after, the police determined that the girl's story was fabricated as there had been no kidnapping or assault.
- Nowadays, the story is still remembered in Germany as a hoax that exploited a controversial domestic issue (i.e., the reception of Arab refugees in the country) and that was instrumentalised by Russian media to stir up domestic polarisation.

THE BLUEWATER AFFAIR

- In 2009, film director [Jan Henrik Stahlberg](#) succeeded in deceiving established media outlets in Germany with a [terror prank](#). Stahlberg misled journalists into reporting an alleged terrorist attack in the Californian town of Bluewater, apparently committed by men of Arab descent. Neither the attack nor the city of Bluewater existed. The television channel that initially reported on the attack was also a complete fabrication.
- Stahlberg organised an artistic action using fake websites, videos, Wikipedia entries and telephone numbers to trick journalists under time pressure and to promote his film. However, the fact that the media initially picked up on and spread the hoax turned the "Bluewater affair" into a reminder of the need for fact-checking and the media's crucial role in amplifying and curbing disinformation. In Germany, satire-based artistic actions are not uncommon, which can sometimes be [misleading and even disinform](#).

ANNALENA BAERBOCK'S NUDE PICTURE

- During the 2021 elections campaign, disinformation heavily [targeted](#) the [Green Party](#), especially her top candidate, [Annalena Baerbock](#). Gender-based attacks tackled Baerbock's measures to counter climate change disliked by Germany's most polluting industries and in countries with dubious human rights records.
- Among the many hoaxes targeting her in the months leading up to the elections, one was particularly viral and harmful: an alleged photo of her posing nude, accompanied by a quote claiming she "was young and needed the money" attributed to Baerbock. However, the person portrayed in the picture was a model who looked like Baerbock.
- The hoax went viral nationwide and became a paradigmatic example of political polarisation attempts attacking the Greens and gender-based disinformation during the 2021 election campaign, with potential [Russian](#) involvement. At the time, Baerbock was constantly attacked by the Russian press, including disinformative content.

NARRATIVES

The section illustrates the most recurrent narratives in the German disinformation landscape.

AGAINST THE GREEN PARTY AND THE INITIATIVES TO COUNTER CLIMATE CHANGE

- In the 2021 general election run-up, the Greens were the most likely target for hoaxes against political parties, according to data collected by EU DisinfoLab. But many of these hoaxes had been circulating in Germany for a [long time](#), motivated by fears about the party's proposed measures to combat climate change.
- The disinformation mainly focused on false proposals that questioned the German way of life (meat consumption, [barbecues](#), fireworks) or could affect the German industry with energy transition measures (renewable energies, electric cars), combining anti-immigration narratives with personal attacks on politicians. Regarding the latter, women like the party's leaders – Annalena Baerbock first and Ricarda Lang later – became victims of gender-based disinformation.

ALTERNATIVE HEALTH MINDSET: COVID-19 DENIALISM, RELATIVISM, AND VACCINE HESITANCY

- During the last three years, the Covid-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge in the disinformative landscape. At the outbreak of the pandemic in Germany, groups that were already promoting narratives of institutional distrust were reinforced by discourses questioning the new virus, albeit at different levels. Covid-19 denialism coexisted with other narratives that acknowledged the existence of the virus but denied its seriousness or the need for measures to combat it.
- Denialist and relativist messages merged with conspiracy theories and gave rise to protest movements known as [Querdenker](#) ("lateral thinkers") that later defended anti-Covid-19 vaccine positions.
- Germany's alternative medicine and [anthroposophy](#) tradition contributed to the proliferation of anti-vax tendencies and vaccine-related disinformation. The impact was real, as today, only [76.4 %](#) of the German population is fully vaccinated against Covid-19, a lower rate than in other European countries, while anti-vax narratives continue to thrive.

PRO-RUSSIAN STANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

- The inclusion of the extinct German Democratic Republic in the former Eastern Bloc, the special relationship with Russia cultivated by German leaders such as Gerhard Schröder, and the country's economic dependence on Russian energy sources made Germany fertile ground for pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.
- Even before the Russian invasion in February 2022, a [report](#) found that Germany was the main Western target of Russian propaganda, which was confirmed during the conflict. Narratives supporting the Russian justification for the aggression (e.g., NATO's eastward expansion, imminent attacks on pro-Russian citizens in Ukraine, or portraying Ukraine as a Nazi state), and Russia's success in the war (denial of harm to civilians and military victories), circulated in Germany, with a noticeable effect on [public opinion](#).
- Narratives evolved as events unfolded, attempting to position the German population against support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia by fuelling fears of economic consequences for their own country.

ANTI-REFUGEE AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES

- The war in Ukraine has also reopened an already controversial issue: the presence of refugees in Germany. Angela Merkel welcomed with open arms the refugees arriving via Mediterranean routes after the outbreak of the conflict in Syria and the Arab Spring in 2015. - The new government under Olaf Scholz has also opened the door to Ukrainian refugees.
- In both cases, false content denounced the alleged benefits for refugees over national citizens and alluding to their criminal nature (as the case of Lisa F. shows). Pro-Russian propaganda exploited the controversy in both instances.
- Anti-refugee hoaxes soon evolved into more general ones against migrants in the country, especially from different cultures and religions, such as those of Arab origin.

INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST AND EVEN DENIALISM

- All of the previous narratives have a point of convergence: they can be instrumentalised to undermine the foundations of democracy in Germany.
- Disinformation questioning the government's policy on Covid-19 or the war in Ukraine are some examples. In recent years, hoaxes have also attempted to undermine the reliability of electoral processes and the German media.
- The erosive narratives of German institutions culminate in the theories penned by the [Reichsbürger](#) movement, whose members do not recognise the legitimacy of the German state and its institutions. They claim that Germany has been occupied since World War II, and is not a sovereign state, therefore, having no authority at any level, not even fiscal. The movement, which also draws on the deep state theories of QAnon, went so far as to plan a coup d'état discovered and prevented by the police in December of 2022, highlighting the risk of the offline impact of this narrative.

COMMUNITY

The main actors countering disinformation in Germany are described hereafter.

FACT-CHECKERS

- [CORRECTIV](#) is one of Germany's leading fact-checker that combines hoax debunking with investigative journalism. The organisation is financed by a mix of private donations, institutional support and its income sources. It is a verified signatory of the [International Fact-Checking Network \(IFCN\) Code of Principles](#). Since its foundation in 2014, CORRECTIV has been awarded over 30 prizes for its journalistic work.
- [DPA-FACTCHECKING](#) is the fact-checking section of the leading news agency in Germany, dpa. According to their self-description: "Our goal is to advance the fact-checking format journalistically and thus counteract the worrying social developments. We have an independent factchecking editorial team that specifically checks possible false claims and produces professional factchecks. The editorial team decides on the publication itself - without editorial influence from outside". It is also a verified signatory of the IFCN Code of Principles, and debunks hoaxes in multiple languages.
- [ARD - Faktenfinder](#) is the fact-checking section of the German public broadcaster ARD. Despite not being an IFCN member, it complies broadly with its high standards and publishes feature stories on disinformation narratives in Germany.
- [BR24 #Faktenfuchs](#) is the fact-checking section of the Bavarian public broadcaster BR, and an IFCN verified signatory.
- [AFP – Faktencheck](#) is based in Austria but it also debunks disinformation that circulates in Germany, as an IFCN signatory and the fact-checking section of the French news agency AFP in German language.

SOME ORGANISATIONS RESEARCHING DISINFORMATION

- [CeMAS](#) (Centre for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy) combines interdisciplinary expertise on conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism. The non-profit addresses current developments within the thematic fields online through systematic monitoring of central digital platforms and modern study designs in order to derive innovative analyses and recommendations for action. In addition, CeMAS advises decision-makers from civil society, media and politics.
- [ISD GERMANY](#) (Institute for Strategic Dialogue). ISD self-describes as an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising tide of polarisation, extremism, and disinformation worldwide. As a German subsidiary of the homonym London-based think tank, it analyses social and political trends in the German-speaking world from a global perspective, focusing on “analysis, advisory, action”.
- [NEWSGUARD GERMANY](#) is the German subsidiary of NewsGuard, a journalism and technology tool that rates the credibility of news and information websites and tracks online disinformation in several countries.

JOINT VENTURES AND AD HOC INITIATIVES AGAINST DISINFORMATION

- In November 2022, [GADMO](#), the German-Austrian Digital Media Observatory, [started](#) its activity. Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa), Agence France-Press (AFP), Austria Presse Agentur (APA), and the independent research network CORRECTIV work together in this local hub of the broader European project EDMO (European Digital Media Observatory), that was recently extended to the German speaking [countries](#).
- On the occasion of the German 2021 general elections, several initiatives were created to counter electoral disinformation, as EU DisinfoLab [reported](#).

POLICY

- Germany does not have an ad hoc law criminalising disinformation as such. However, the Network Enforcement Act ([NetzDG](#)) allows criminally punishable fake news and other unlawful content to be removed from social media. These include insult, malicious gossip, defamation, public incitement to crime, incitement to hatred, disseminating portrayals of violence and threatening the commission of a felony. Approved in October 2017, the law obligates platform operators such as Facebook, Twitter, Google or Instagram to remove illegal content within 24 hours after users report it. Recently, the German authorities also applied it to [Telegram](#).
- Another legal tool is the criminal code article against [incitement to hatred](#), leading to the conviction of some disinformation and anti-Semitic transmitters, also considering the illegality of Holocaust denialism.
- Regarding laws to protect journalists or whistleblowers from abuse, Germany passed the [Whistleblower Protection Act](#) in December 2022, transposing the European Directive for the Protection of Whistleblowers (EU 2019/1937 – “Whistleblower Directive”) with some delay. However, some organisations filed a [lawsuit](#) after the German federal parliament, as part of its reform of the Constitution Protection Act last June, permitted all intelligence agencies to use spyware to hack into smartphones and computers. They are now also allowed to record encrypted messages and calls via Signal, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others, which could conflict with whistleblowers’ protection.

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