

Germany Is Losing the Fight Against QAnon

The German government beat back the coronavirus pandemic—but has largely given up against conspiracy theories.

BY TYSON BARKER | SEPTEMBER 2, 2020, 6:28 AM

On Aug. 29, 38,000 people amassed in Berlin for Europe's largest protest against COVID-19 safety measures and lockdowns. The eclectic mix of right-wing extremists, conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists, club kids, and New Age esoterics blurred political messages. Signs with "We are the Second Wave" and "Fight the Corona Dictatorship" filled the streets, coupled with a motley potpourri of "Free Assange" banners, QAnon signs, and American, rainbow, Russian, German, and Wilhelmine Imperial War flags. The Reichsbürger—a group of far-right revisionists who reject the legitimacy of Germany's post-World War II federal republic—enacted a symbolic storming of the Bundestag and trotted out a "Peace Treaty" to the Russian and U.S. embassies. Robert Kennedy Jr. railed against vaccines and Bill Gates just miles from where his uncle John F. Kennedy gave his famous 1963 "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech.

The Berlin government tried, but failed, to ban the protests on public safety grounds. But the demonstrations may have a positive, if unintended, effect: they are already jolting Germany and Europe awake to a new wave of political disinformation aimed right at the heart of European democracy.

Berlin's coronavirus pandemic management has been the source of global admiration and pride at home, and it has driven government approval to new heights. German Chancellor Angela Merkel enjoys a 71 percent approval rating. Her health minister, Jens Spahn, has 60 percent support. And her Social Democratic Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, the architect of Germany's coronavirus rescue package, is at 57 percent approval. But there is still a broad, vocal segment of the population unsatisfied with the government's response. Berlin's August demonstrations in opposition to the COVID-19 lockdown are the latest in a groundswell of disinformation-infused civil disobedience across Germany. From Stuttgart to Ulm, Gera, Düsseldorf, Munich, and Hanover, so-called hygiene demos against the lockdown have blurred lines between legitimate political expression, disorderly conduct, and conspiracy theories. An earlier such protest in Berlin—under the motto "Day of Freedom"—drew 20,000 attendees before it was preemptively broken up by police for not obeying public health measures. Organizers and their supporters—including some in the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party—claimed that over 1.3 million people took part.

The leading organizer of Germany's coronavirus rebellion is the group Querdenken 711, a diffuse and growing grassroots movement with origins in Stuttgart. Querdenken 711 has become the epicenter of Germany's so-called Corona-Pegida movement—a reference to the Dresden-based anti-Islam, ethnonationalist Pegida movement that caught fire in Germany's east. In fact, Pegida leader Lutz Bachmann has redirected his conspiratorial organizing away from Islamization and toward Merkel's COVID-19 policies. The AfD has leveraged these sentiments by submitting parliamentary motions titled "Restoring fundamental rights despite corona," implicitly claiming these rights have been taken from German citizens. Together with other movements such as the nationalist Zukunft Heimat in Brandenburg, some wings of the AfD and left-wing activists such as the Berliner playwright Anselm Lenz, they have blamed shadowy elites, particularly the billionaire tech founder and philanthropist Bill Gates, for puppeteering the COVID-19 crisis. This loose alliance of right and left, conspiracy-fueled illiberal forces is eerily reminiscent of the Querfront cross-ideological affinities of extremists in the Weimar era.

As in other democracies, Germany's early coronavirus disinformation mixed rumors, truth-adjacent content, home remedies, out-of-context imagery, and a minimization of the crisis. Germany saw a crop of debunked but credentialed so-called experts minting conspiracy theories and undermining fact-based information. One prominent example is Sucharit Bhakdi, German Thai epidemiologist, who has started a YouTube channel claiming that COVID-19 deaths are exaggerated, linking deaths in China and Italy to air pollution, and calling lockdowns unconstitutional. His coronavirus-related YouTube channel has gained over 100,000 followers in less than six months, and his videos have over 8 million views total. Another example is Wolfgang Wodarg, a former member of parliament for the Social Democrats and a virologist by training, who has linked COVID-19 to attempts by the pharmaceutical industry to sell vaccines.

One of the most savvy and influential figures in the sphere of coronavirus disinformation has been the celebrity vegan chef turned right-wing firebrand Attila Hildmann. Hildmann, whose background is Turkish but who was raised by German adoptive parents, rails against COVID-19 measures, Gates, the Rothschild family, and the federal republic's legitimacy. The chef-turned-influencer, who has announced his intention to launch a political party, has accumulated a following of over 80,000 on the messaging platform Telegram. At the Aug. 29 Berlin protest, Hildmann rallied the crowd in front of the Russian Embassy until his arrest. He is quickly becoming the face of Germany's anti-lockdown, anti-Merkel nationalism.

In Germany, as in other countries, Telegram has become a nest for conspiracy theories, radicalization, and organizing of so-called hygiene demos. For his part, Hildmann drives his potential followers from Twitter and YouTube to his Telegram group as the central location for his activism. The messaging app is currently the world's fifth most popular, behind WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and QQ. It is adding 1.5 million new users daily. The number of German Telegram users has exploded during the pandemic. According to one study, two-thirds of the 100,000 German conspiracy theory adherents sampled for the report had not been on Telegram prior to March.

Germany's disinformation landscape is evolving—and metastasizing—rapidly. In recent months, Querdenken 711 has developed connective tissue with the Reichsbürger, Hildmann, and the growing German following of the QAnon cult of conspiracy. In fact, Germany has the second-highest number of QAnon believers after the United States. NewsGuard has identified more than 448,000 QAnon followers in Europe. On YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram, accounts dealing with

the QAnon conspiracy have over 200,000 followers in Germany alone. Telegram Channels related to QAnon (such as Frag uns doch! WWG1WGA and Qlobal-Change) have gone from 10,000 to nearly 200,000 followers combined in the past five months. The German-language QAnon YouTube channel Qlobal-Change has over 17 million views. Public figures such as the former national news anchor Eva Herman, the rapper Sido, and Hildmann have all expressed sympathy with the conspiracy theory. The German pop star Xavier Naidoo, a former judge on the German version of American Idol—Deutschland Sucht den Superstar—regularly shares QAnon content and tearfully lamented the supposed shadowy globalist sex-trafficking ring on YouTube.

In Germany, most QAnon followers are people under 50. This tracks a pattern in Germany's anti-establishment right. In the 2019 elections in the East German states of Brandenburg and Saxony, voters under 50 supported the AfD more than any other party. Establishment parties were only able to cling to power because of overwhelming backing from voters over 60.

Many of these conspiracist groups risk violating Germany's constitution, which has limitations on anti-Democratic and pro-Nazi speech owing to the country's dark past. Bavaria's Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann pointed at QAnon's use of anti-Semitic tropes. (Imagines of supposed conspirators drinking the blood of children draws directly on medieval anti-Semitic conspiracies that led to pogroms in Germany.) Vocabulary associated with QAnon-adjacent conspiracies has also been drawn on by the right-wing terrorists responsible for the June 2019 assassination of Walter Lübcke in Kassel, the October 2019 synagogue attack in Halle, and the Hanau shisha bar attack that left 11 people dead and 5 injured this February. In June, Germany's federal and state interior ministers began thinking about a strategy to combat coronavirus-based disinformation and conspiracy theories, including raising questions around the constitutionality of some of them. A strategy should be adopted at their next meeting in the fall.

The depth and intensity of Germany's conspiracy theory-addled unrest has surprised many both at home and abroad. Germany has a well-established and highly regarded gatekeeper media. Outlets such as ZDF, ARD, Der Spiegel, and Süddeutsche Zeitung continue to play important roles in shaping political discourse, providing uncontested facts, drawing public attention to important issues, and myth-busting. But they continue to lack channels to niche communities already hostile to mainstream media and their perceived cozy relationships with established elites like Merkel's Christian Democrats. Twenty percent of Germans believe the term "Lügenpresse" ("lying press") as a description of the German media has some truth to it. Lack of access in these communities opens up vulnerabilities and blind spots in news coverage.

In contrast to the highly regulated radio, TV, and print media space, Germany is only beginning to consider the regulatory frameworks addressing the rules for online political speech. Currently, speech on social media platforms, mass private messaging systems, and influencer speech remain a Wild West of political information on everything from COVID-19 to climate change to incitement to overthrow the government. Germany—and Europe—have begun to take weaponized disinformation and radicalization amid the COVID-19 crisis seriously. The European Union is currently working on a Democracy Action Plan to support transparent, vibrant, fact-based information ecosystems and develop on legal, civic, and economic instruments to fight disinformation and conspiracy theories.

On content monitoring, the 2017 Network Enforcement Act or the Maas Law—named after the former justice minister and current foreign minister, Heiko Maas—requires social media platforms to remove illegal hate speech within 24 hours of its reporting. The law prompted platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to staff up with hundreds of German-language content monitors to take down incendiary speech and get tougher on disinformation. But despite rigorous notice-and-takedown efforts, German-language disinformation on COVID-19 is removed from platforms less often than English or French-language equivalents, partly due to staff shortages. The government must look to increased training programs and technological solutions like artificial intelligence to fill current platform shortfalls.

Germany must also consider how to tackle the issue of hate speech enforcement in messaging systems, particularly those with mass groups that should be reclassified as platforms. The Maas Law does not apply to messenger apps such as Telegram, and, thus far, the messenger has been uncooperative in assisting German law enforcement with unmasking users who incite hate and violence. Telegram allows users to form groups of up to 200,000 members, well beyond WhatsApp's 256-member limit. This makes it a potential space for radicalization and organizing action.

Finally, Germany—and Europe more broadly—needs to consider the intermediary role that social media influencers play both in spreading disinformation and offering it entry into mainstream discourse. Germany already has experience with the social media influencer power in shaping political action. In 2019, a viral video from the Generation Z influencer Rezo, titled "The Destruction of the CDU," struck a nerve among young German voters about the establishment Christian Democratic Union party's unfulfilled promises on climate change, tech, and Germany's role in NATO. The video—viewed more than 17 million times—engulfed Germany's European election campaign and sparked a deep crisis in the party.

But influencers can also be information launderers—vectors by which disinformation is legitimated, spreads quickly and finds adherents. As Hildmann, Bhakdi, and others have shown, adjacency and in-group credibility are important variables in how disinformation travels. Influencers can accelerate disinformation-spreading, because of their adjacency, trust, and in-group credibility built up with niche audiences. Initiatives in Finland and Quebec have shown that influencers can play an important role in the fight to stave off the spread of disinformation. Engaging white hat influencers in what some call the coronavirus infodemic fight would help fortify Germany's fact-based COVID-19 information ecosystem—particularly in advance of growing disinformation campaigns on exit strategies and vaccines. They can also help squash omnivorous conspiracy theories like QAnon before they take root.