REPORT

Antigypsyism online

Spirals of hate, racist framing and right-wing extremist propaganda as a risk for young users

December 2018

In cooperation with:

CENTRAL COUNCIL [**of German Sinti & Roma**

Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum
Deutscher Sinti und Roma

JUGEND SCHUTZ.NET

In a joint pilot project conducted by jugendschutz.net, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma and the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, antigypsyist hate content on the internet was researched and analysed. Among the several thousand documented pieces of content, a large number of discriminatory stereotypes and violations were identified. There were noticeable dynamic increases in comment sections: antigypsyist statements mutually reinforce one another, even to the point of dehumanising depictions and actual calls to violence. On the other hand, few objections were found; this can convey that agitation against Sinti and Roma is acceptable. Especially for children and adolescents, it presents the danger of a strengthening effect for antigypsyist attitudes.

Antigypsyism online: ubiquitous hate

Even if the manifestations of right-wing extremist agitation are constantly changing – above all on fast-moving social media platforms – they still exhibit "classic" concepts of the enemy. It is therefore not surprising that the internet also contains a large amount of such content, which expresses or incites hatred towards Sinti and Roma on the one hand and reproduces antigypsyist stereotypes and prejudice structures on the other. The term "antigypsyism" refers to preconceived ideas, constructions and fantasies of persons or groups that are projected onto Sinti and Roma as well as other affected persons completely independent of the truth. Historically and in its structure of meaning, antigypsyism is a specific form of racism that leads to exclusion, discrimination and violence.[1]

Research by jugendschutz.net and the experiences of cooperation partners show that antigypsyism is permanently present on the internet, it notably can achieve a particularly wide reach when it is related to socio-political debates and relevant events. For example, reports of criminal acts and violations of norms are used to denigrate Sinti and Roma.

Reports of poverty are included in racist campaigns, with the intention of defaming Sinti and Roma as "dirty" and "squalid". Biased media content and articles about Roma in other European countries are utilised to construe Roma as "inferior" and incite hatred. At the same time manipulated pictures and "fake news" are often spread. The emotional tone and sometimes subtle manipulation make it especially difficult for young users to identify the media content as hate propaganda.

Stereotypes and codes: linguistic forms of Antigypsyism

Antigypsyist hate speech can take different forms. It can be observed that terms are changing or codes and ciphers such as "rotational Europeans" or "child thieves" are used, which serve antigypsyist stereotypes and are intended to arouse clear associations in the target audience. Even not originally linked terms such as "Bulgarians" or "Romanians" are often used in antigypsyist contexts, with the result that they sometimes appear as synonyms for Roma. This becomes clear in comments on such web content: hate is blatantly stirred up and violence against Roma is incited. Thus, even harmless terms run the risk of conveying antigypsyist sentiment.

[1] http://antigypsyism.eu

The derogatory term "Zigeuner" ("Gypsies") can be found online in many contexts. Translation: *"Even the gypsies in my block salute me as they know how anti-social I am…"* (Source: Twitter, profile; original unpixellated)

All in all, the current focus area research showed that antigypsyist prejudices and stereotypes also appear on the internet in very different contexts and in different linguistic forms. The racist term "Zigeuner" is often used as a synonym for alleged thieves, "parasites", squatters, itinerant people, etc. without any reference to a specific population group and is also used by young people as a general insult.

Romanticising attributions are significantly less common, but still present on the internet. These are used to transport traditional antigypsyist prejudices against Sinti and Roma. Supposedly positive attributes such as independence, spirituality and nature-orientated lust for life are elevated to the essence of a whole group and racist stereotypes solidify the way of thinking that Sinti and Roma stand in opposition to a "civilized" majority society.

**Structure of the focus area research**

Keywords generated from a sample of antigypsyist web content were used for the research. In addition, the "click-through" behaviour of a typical user was simulated in areas where content was found. The research results were recorded using a browser tool.

The Central Council and jugendschutz.net viewed over 3,000 pieces of content (online articles, posts, videos, comments, etc.) over a period of four weeks. This resulted in over 400 sites with antigypsyist contents that violate legislation to protect minors from harmful media. After the research was completed, jugendschutz.net reported illegal content to the respective platforms or initiated proceedings under media law.

In addition, posts on Twitter in which the hashtag "Zigeuner" ("Gypsy") is used were automatically recorded for analysis and comparison purposes. These tweets totalled over 57,500. They were cursorily viewed and evaluated.

Interacting hatred: antigypsyism, antisemitism and hatred against refugees

That migrants come to Germany to specifically exploit the welfare state is a widespread, right-wing extremist narrative; in particular, it has been playing a central role in right-wing extremist online propaganda since 2015. While the main intention is to stir up hatred against refugees, Sinti and Roma are also frequently mentioned in this context and generally lumped together with refugees, regardless of whether they have recently arrived in Germany or not. In particular, however, Eastern and South Eastern European Roma are construed to be a burden and problem for society. Reasons for fleeing such as structural racism and discrimination at all levels of social life are denied, as is violent persecution.
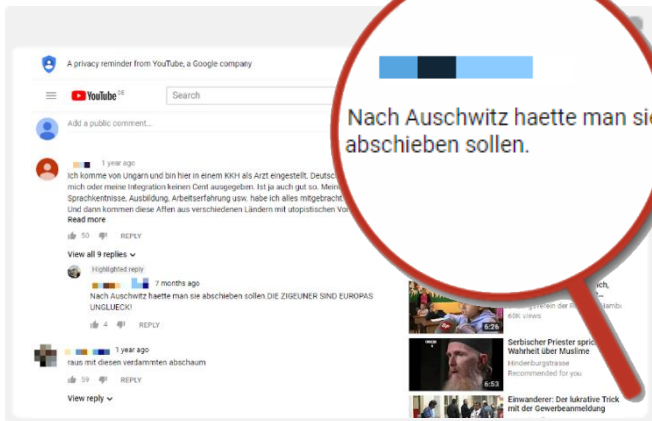
Annihilation fantasies against Sinti and Roma: as with anti-semitism, the Holocaust is often alluded to. Comment in magnifying glass: *"They should have been deported to Auschwitz."*
(Source: YouTube, comments)

Reference to the National Socialist extermination policy, to which hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma fell victim, reveals parallels to antisemitism online; there were both allusions to the Holocaust and denials of it. However, the underlying construct is different: while "Jews" are imagined to be influential, wealthy and intelligent and therefore portrayed as a threat, the antigypsyist narrative is based on the devaluation of Sinti and Roma as "useless" and "uncivilised". Any ability to live together with mainstream society is denied, which dehumanises Sinti and Roma.


Relativisation and denials of the Holocaust can also be found in the context of antigypsyist hatred.
(Source: VK, single profile; original unpixellated)

Massive violations: antigypsyism is also a problem when it comes to protecting minors

More than 400 violations of the German Youth Protection Act (JuSchG) and often also criminal offences such as incitement to hatred and violence were documented as part of the research. The spectrum ranged from a single infringement, such as an illegal post on VK[2], to 30 or more infringements on a single web content, such as a YouTube channel. In particular, the majority of antigypsyist agitation was found in comment sections. It should be highlighted here that it is not only right-wing extremist content online, which specifically spreads hate propaganda.

Violations according to platforms

- 7% Others
- 3% Facebook
- 9 % VK
- 10% Web
- 71% YouTube
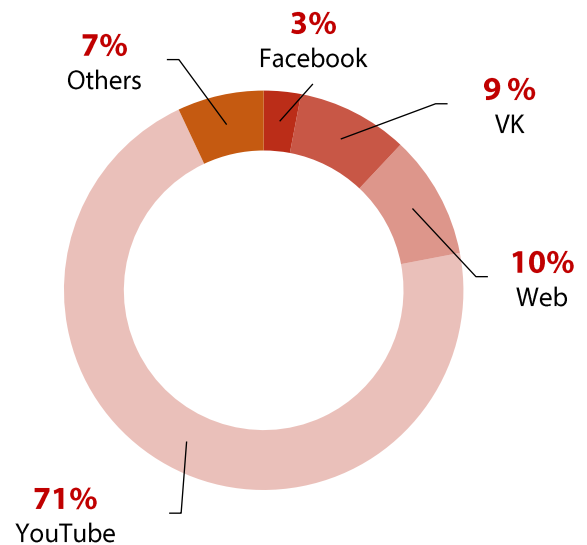
The majority of the violations found were posted on the social media accounts of traditional media, such as in the comment sections of the *Spiegel TV* and *RT Deutsch* YouTube channels. Over 70% of the infringements were found on YouTube alone. In total, jugendschutz.net took action in more than 70 cases.

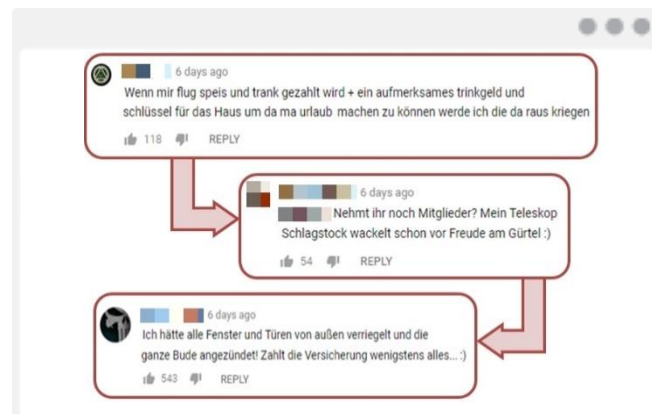[2] VK (*VKontakte) is* a Russian online social media network.

To date, deletion has only been achieved in 18% of the cases. Legal action under media law was initiated against two content providers with a large number of infringements and operating liability in Germany.

Hate comments and fast momentum of antigypsyist agitation

What is striking is that antigypsyist hate comments escalate unusually quickly and often according to the same scheme. An example: In the comments on a Spiegel TV report with over 500,000 views on homeless squatters referred to as Roma in Mallorca, a "tough" crackdown by the state is called for. The racist term "Zigeuner" ("Gypsy") is also introduced into the debate. As a result, the discussion escalates, in which it is initially suggested that the owners of the squatted house could engage "criminal thugs" for the eviction. Thereupon some users reacted to be willing to volunteer for this and make reference to appropriate skills and the availability of various weapons. Finally, the discussion escalates in such a way that killing fantasies are openly exchanged and decisively described. Particularly drastic comments receive many likes.

One of the research's focus areas was therefore comments on YouTube videos, as the described spiral of hate is clearly and forcefully shown there. The lack of comment moderation was particularly striking among a number of high-reach videos on the YouTube channels of *Spiegel TV* and *RT Deutsch*. A large number of inflammatory remarks were made here, most of which remained unchallenged. Antigypsyist agitation thus appears to be acceptable to the majority, and young users in particular can be influenced by such a normalising effect. This is particularly relevant because YouTube is the most popular platform among young people according to the JIM study[3]. It is therefore very likely that young users in particular will come across antigypsyist hate comments.

Drastic calls for violence and blatant fantasies of killing quickly escalate. Translation of comments from top to bottom: *"If flight, meals and drinks are paid + a considerate pocket money and the keys for the house in order to go on holidays, I will get them out of there", "Do you still accept members? My telescope bat shakes already thrilled on the belt :)", "I would have locked all windows and doors from the outside, and burned the whole shack! The insurance would at least pay everything… :)"*
(Source: YouTube; original unpixellated)

Right-wing extremist concept of the enemy reframed for modern times

Clearly right-wing extremist web content deliberately spread hatred of Sinti and Roma. Almost 100 such offers were viewed by jugendschutz.net. Particularly noteworthy here is the antigypsyism spread by neo-Nazi music. The latter is able to emotionalise in a special way, to incite hatred and, not least, to infiltrate young people's listening habits.

One example is the song "Zigeunerpack" ("Gypsy Vermin") by the neo-Nazi band "Landser", who enjoy cult status within the right-wing extremist scene in Germany, and were banned as a criminal organisation. The lyrics express a wilful hatred of Sinti and Roma and blatantly incite violence against them.

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[3]Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (mpfs): JIM 2017. Jugend, Information, (Multi-)Media.

Moreover, this violence is reinterpreted as "self-defence" against the alleged destruction of Germany. Like antigypsyist songs of other far-right rock bands, the song is easy to find on the internet and is distributed through various channels. A multitude of such youth-related content can be found on the VK platform in particular.
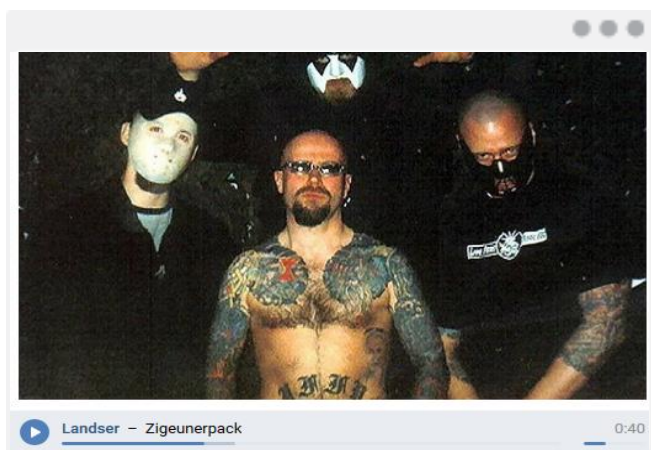
Right-wing extremist music is easy to find on the VK network, including the forbidden song "Zigeunerpack". (Source: VK, I'm Rock)

Right-wing extremist blogs also purposefully use antigypsyist propaganda, which is often paired with manipulated stories or "fake news". Here, shocking images, some of which come from completely different contexts or countries, are associated with Sinti and Roma. Topics such as cruelty to animals and sexualised violence are touched upon with particular frequency. Right-wing extremists zero in on users' emotions.

Framing and context: right-wing extremists specifically incite hatred

One essential factor that affects the manner in which comments are made is the framing given to an article or video by means of the heading or introductory text. The term "gypsy" acts as a catalyst for antigypsyist hate speech.

If, for example, the term is used in the title of a video that shows a theft without further context, the comments are much more extreme and uninhibited. Many serious violations were found in comment sections: Killing fantasies were openly exchanged and the Holocaust was glorified. In the comments of a video suggested by YouTube with comparable content, but without a corresponding racist attribution, the dexterity and routine of the alleged thief is commented positively and appreciatively.


Right-wing extremists use manipulated reports to create a mood and stir up hatred. Picture: *"The criminal organization BAMF [Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees] simply made gypsies to Syrians. Asylum."* Text below: *"Human trafficker federal agency BAMF simply made gypsies to Syrians and gave asylum away."* (Source: halle-leaks.de)

Even articles and videos that are quite differentiated and balanced are abused by right-wing extremists to incite hatred. The content is framed with a different heading, a new picture or a different description, encouraging users to make antigypsyist hate comments. For example, reports referring to "Bulgarians" or "Romanians" are picked up by right-wing extremists and linked to Sinti and Roma. Thus, by being integrated into an antigypsyist narrative, even media content without a specific bias is abused for racist propaganda.

Identifying antigypsyism on the net and counteracting it

While other ideologies of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' also receive increased attention in their online manifestations, antigypsyism is rarely an issue. There is a lack of social awareness of antigypsyist hate content: many stereotypes are reproduced unquestioningly, and many false claims are widely accepted. However, platform and site operators apparently also lack the sufficient sensitivity when it comes to antigypsyist hate comments. It is therefore necessary to train support teams with regard to antigypsyist hate content and to proactively address offensive and illegal content.

Conventional media providers who also distribute their products via social media platforms must assume greater responsibility for their comment sections. The research showed that the comment sections of non-infringing or even balanced content also constitute a space for the dissemination of antigypsyist hate. Suitable moderation is indispensable here: it is necessary to delete inadmissible hate speech and to enforce compliance with the respective community guidelines and netiquette.
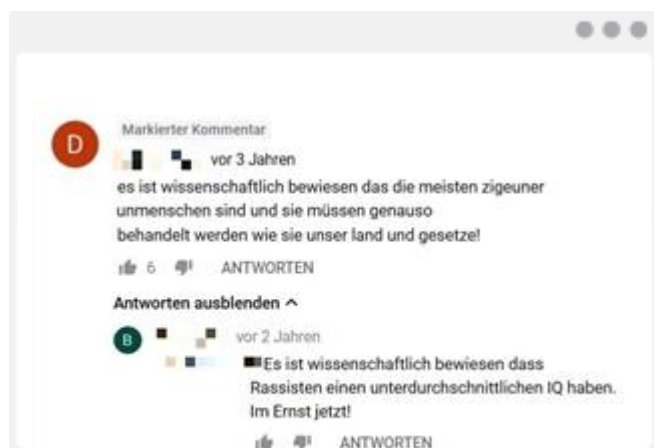
The research showed that direct counter-speech against antigypsyist hate speech can be only occasionally observed. Comment: *"It is scientifically proven that most gypsies are brutes, and they have to be treated like that, as they do with our country and laws!"* Reaction: *"It is scientifically proven that racists have an IQ below average. No kidding!"* (Source: YouTube, comments; original unpixellated)

Although 36 cases in which objections were raised were also documented in the course of the research. For example, among the twenty most shared tweets with the hashtag "#Zigeuner" are mainly posts that deal critically with antigypsyism. However, the frequent use of the hashtag, with over 57,500 tweets, illustrates an overall lack of awareness and reflection on the use of racist language. It is therefore not surprising that hate speech usually remains unchallenged. In order to combat antigypsyism sustainably and across society as a whole, the work of civil society organisations, who carry out important educational work in this field, must be strengthened.

Last but not least, it is necessary to develop strategies for action in media education that specifically address prejudices that exist in society and to raise people´s awareness to antigypsyism. This way, in connection with concepts that enable young users to critically reflect on and act independently on the internet, it is possible to create the conditions for solidarity with those affected by racism online and to have the courage to stand up against antigypsyism.

Further information:

www.inach.net

www.hass-im-netz.info

What can you do?

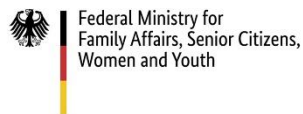www.hass-im-netz.info/was-tun/user

Reporting problematic content

www.hass-im-netz.info/hass-im-netz-melden

Enabling children and adolescents to grow up well with the media

jugendschutz.net looks closely at dangers and risks in internet services specifically targeting young people and urges providers and operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles. jugendschutz.net operates a hotline accepting reports about illegal and harmful content and takes appropriate action to have this content removed as quickly as possible. The focus of the work is on risky contacts, self-harm behavior, political extremism and child sexual exploitation.

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