

# The Murder of Keira

## Misinformation and Hate Speech as Far-Right Online Strategies

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A young girl has been murdered in the German capital, Berlin. But before the police can launch their investigation, the German-speaking alternative right claims to have identified the perpetrator – or at least his origin: “On Wednesday, Keira has been slain in her bedroom. Everyone suspects that the perpetrator is not named ‘Thorsten’,”<sup>1</sup> posted a Twitter user going by the alias Walden. “We did not know such atrocities before the invasion of evil itself”, tweeted another user.

The case of the 14-year-old Keira is eagerly absorbed in right-wing echo chambers. Sadly, it blends all too well into the scene’s world-view, thanks to rumors that the murderer has a non-German background. All media outlets and influential actors of the alternative right contribute baseless speculations about the perpetrator’s origin. They weave Keira’s murder into a narrative by which Germany has turned into a hotbed of violent crime ever since the increased influx of refugees in 2015. Advocates who draw this picture see the country en route to civil war because of perceived ‘mass immigration’ and ‘Islamization’.

Consulting social media on today’s spectrum of political opinions, one quickly develops the impression that a majority of users support misogynous, racist, and anti-refugee sentiments. Such hateful positions are expressed aggressively, seeking to dominate and frame public debates. This poses a problem as online discussions are increasingly seen as a truthful

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**1** | Authors decided to not refer to websites, posts or tweets of the alternative right sphere with URLs, but do possess screenshots of every posting cited and will provide them for journalist or research purposes.

reflection of public opinion. In news reports, social media posts replace vox pop interviews with people on the street to represent what the public really thinks.

The German discussion about the deterioration of decency in online debates revolves around two phenomena: hateful comments and ‘fake news’. Both aspects can be subsumed under the rubric of ‘hate speech’. In terms of content, the debate is rather imprecise as it ignores one central aspect: both fake news and hateful comments are essential tools of a far-right media strategy. Hate speech, targeted misinformation, and strategic attacks on political opponents and minorities are employed to sow enmity and strengthen an antagonistic narrative.

The comments in the wake of Keira’s murder shine a light on the argumentative and functional logic within far-right echo chambers (Ama-deu Antonio Foundation 2017: 9; Brodnig 2016: 21–35). We analyze these chambers to demonstrate how rumors and false reports are used purposefully to strengthen right-wing narratives, but also because such case-studies can help those who want to oppose hateful speech, unfounded rumors and fake news. These phenomena cannot be marginalized as problems exclusive to the internet. Instead, they threaten minorities, erode social cohesion and thus pose a threat to democracy itself. The second part of this chapter highlights strategies to counter this treat, considering the reactions by the German state as well as providers of social networks, the remaining loopholes, and which promising counter strategies can help empower actors within civil society.

## **FAR-RIGHT POLITICS ONLINE**

The importance of the internet and social media for organized right-wing currents can hardly be overstated. Ever since the dawn of the internet age, right-wing actors utilized the internet for networking, recruitment of new followers, strategic communication, and the propagation of their world view (Dinar/Heyken 2017: 41–42; Caiani/Parenti 2013). The triumph of social media since the 2000s coincided with a surge of ethno-nationalist *völkisch*, and radically derogatory ideas that have been and are being spread through these new channels.

Initially, such ideas lingered on the fringes of non-existence within social networks. Organized enmity primarily found its niches in closed and

non-public groups or little-known websites. Here, hateful speech against entire populations could thrive without the public's notice. In 2015, this isolated sphere burst open in Germany due to the establishment of the anti-Muslim Pegida movement and the rise of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). According to Simone Rafael, the far-right spectrum has become significantly emboldened by the successes of the AfD and Pegida: "Racist, anti-refugee, and anti-Islam contents now occur undisguised on non-right-wing pages or are expressed vehemently in comments to stories by popular media outlets" (Rafael/Ritzmann 2018: 2). By and large, the discourse online has been gravitating to the right-wing and thus encouraged the normalization of hostile positions. "These positions have now become visible and a serious problem", continued Rafael.

For now, online hate speech has become a popular topic in Germany. The term itself comprises expressions that aim to deprecate and denigrate individuals because they are identified as part of a specific group. Hate speech stands in for several forms of group-focused enmity, such as antisemitism, racism, or hostility towards Sinti and Roma. (Zick et al. 2016: 33–41) Other than cyberbullying or personal insults, hate speech always seeks to denigrate characteristics that are ascribed to a certain group (Committee of Ministers 2016: 77). Victims of this form of online abuse are bereft of the capacity to lead a self-determined life, as hate speech is fueled by an ideology of inequality, directed against the democratic principle that all people are created equal.

We decided to use the term *Alternative Right* to describe the variety of contemporary far-right groups and ideologies which try to convince others that the 'identity of the German people' is threatened by multiculturalism. The concept has been criticized – with some justice – as being euphemistic. Still it seemed more appropriate to us than speaking only of the *New Right*: While both phenomena share an ideology that emphasizes cultural and racial homogeneity in one country, the heavy use of social media is characteristic for the 'Alternative Right' – as the 'Keira case' highlights. (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2017: 2; Nagle 2017)

### **The 'Keira Case' and its Hijacking by the Alternative Right**

On 7 March 2018 a girl was killed at home in the Berlin district Hohen-schönhausen. Several stab wounds injured the 14-year-old severely. Paramedics tried to save her life but could not help. A day later, Berlin's Police

Department issued a press release about the horrible event: The homicide division had begun investigations but details on the sequence of events or potential suspects were not publicized.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the press release, the first posts on Facebook and Twitter using the hashtags #keira and #keiraberlin started to appear. Alternative right actors did not need verified information on events or perpetrators to instrumentalize Keira's tragic death for their own political agenda. "20 stab wounds! The culprit was definitively not German!" wrote one user on Twitter. Another suggested: "It is Merkel's fault, even in the unlikely case that the culprit is *biodeutsch*. Because: We did not know such atrocities before the invasion of evil itself". This last tweet is remarkable in several aspects. Its argument provides the justification for improper speculations: Even if their allegations are false, they claim to still be entitled to identify migrants as "evil itself". The existence of such violent crimes before the summer of 2015 is being ignored despite the facts. The expression *biodeutsch*, which roughly translates to 'biologically German', contains a cultural essentialism, according to which only those can be German that have a certain number of Germanic ancestors. Its opposite would be 'passport Germans' (*Passdeutsche*), who are German citizens, but 'only' according to their papers and can therefore be singled out as migrants by 'biological' Germans. Exclusion based on origin becomes ineluctable. And last but not least: Angela Merkel is eventually responsible for the whole disaster. Not only individual users of social media proliferate such interpretations and the corresponding posts. They only retweet and share points made by certain actors – right-wing extremists, far-right populist groups, parties, media – who stir up fear and hate.

On 11 March, two days after the first press release, Berlin police announced that they had arrested a suspect who was being interrogated by homicide detectives. No additional information was published, which only kindled further speculations: "The skanky PR department of @polizeiberlin refuses to name the cultural origin of the suspect in the case of #Keira who was butchered with a knife", wrote attorney Maximilian Krah on Twitter. Krah is a member of the AfD and a popular speaker for the party. Gunnar Lindemann, an AfD state representative in the Berlin parliament, addressed the local police's Twitter account directly: "Why

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**2** | Berlin.de (2018): "*Tatverdächtiger ist geständig*", 11 March 2018 (<https://www.berlin.de/polizei/polizeimeldungen/pressemitteilung.682619.php>).

are no details made public? E.g. the perpetrator's origin? Is something being played down?"

In its response the police department simply referred to the press code. The German Press Council (Deutscher Presserat) states in its guidelines for reasonable reporting on crimes that generally neither ethnic nor religious affiliation should be reported. The rule was designed to avoid "discriminating generalizations of individual acts of wrongdoing".<sup>3</sup> Lindemann received support from Julian Reichelt, editor-in-chief of BILD, a tabloid with the highest circulation in Germany. According to him, the press code does not apply to a police Twitter account, tweeting: "We'd like to have the regular information on the perpetrator. Thank you!". By this time, speculations on the culprit had been circulating within the alternative-right echo chambers for two days. The leading far-right magazine *Compact* wrote that the rumors were justified since the police declined further comments.

### Toxic Narratives

On the blog PI-News one could read already on 9 March: "'Mia – Maria – Keira' and hundreds of other injured, raped, and sacrificed German girls: Merkel and her system lackeys [*Systemlinge*] joined in the murders." The website's name stands for 'politically incorrect news'. It is one of the most-read right-wing populist and anti-Islam blogs in Germany. By listing three girl's names, Keira's murder was connected to two other victims of recent violent crimes. For the murder of the student Maria L., an Afghan refugee was sentenced to life in prison in Freiburg in 2016. Fifteen-year-old Mia from Kandel in Rhineland-Palatinate was stabbed to death in December 2017. The suspect is her ex-boyfriend, also a refugee from Afghanistan.

Characteristic for far-right echo chambers, several narratives have been interwoven in the short statement on PI-News. The three female names serve as an insider reference to the blog's readership that creates assumed connections between refugees, Islam, and violence. It is further suggested that the increase in asylum seekers correlates with a dramatic rise in violent crimes, especially against women: An external threat is

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3 | Presserat: "Richtlinie 12 – Diskriminierungen", ([http://www.presserat.de/pressekodex/pressekodex/#panel-ziffer\\_12\\_\\_\\_\\_diskriminierungen](http://www.presserat.de/pressekodex/pressekodex/#panel-ziffer_12____diskriminierungen)); Schade (2017).

infiltrating and destabilizing the country. Another sweeping insinuation posits that all arriving Muslim men are murderers and rapists (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2016a: 4–7). Politicians, collectively signified in the original quote with ‘Merkel’, facilitate this development by not regulating immigration and even encouraging it. By doing so, they are opening doors to the ‘Islamization’ of Germany. *Systemlinge* are all those who are arbitrarily identified as part of ‘the establishment’. Generally, this includes all parties – except for the AfD – journalists of the ‘lying press’, and ‘do-gooders’ (*Gutmenschen*).

Narratives help to explain the world as they establish sensible connections between isolated events. They provide a wider frame of interpretation that structures personal opinions. Narratives stir up emotions and can help to motivate and mobilize. Thus, they are valuable tools for sowing fear and hatred – cornerstone emotions that help exclude whole groups of people. One way to trigger such emotions is to repeatedly postulate correlations and causalities that do not exist. Utilized in this manner, narratives become toxic to society. As the Alternative Right constantly preaches the bleak dystopian vision of the demise of Germany and its people, the groups create an artificial need to take action (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2017: 9).

This is the playbook that far-right populist AfD party followed in the case of Keira. Since its foundation in 2013 as an anti-Euro platform, the party has seen a meteoric rise as it continually drifts towards the far-right fringes. It masterfully taps into the hysteria raging in alternative-right echo chambers. On 31 May 2018 the party’s national Twitter account reached 118,000 followers and amassed more than 400,000 likes on Facebook.

On the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> March, the party published a graphic illustration via both social media accounts showing a blood-splattered wall as a background and a stylized knife in the front, accompanied with an all-caps warning: “KNIFE EPIDEMIC RAMPANT!”. The posts’ text listed eleven crimes that involved knives, counted during the previous week. It claimed that Turks, Kurds, Chechens, Afghans, Eritreans, Gambians, and Syrians had committed all attacks. Keira’s case had also been listed, accompanied with the rhetorical question: “Is this still Central Europe?” Factually, only five of the eleven crimes fit the party’s suggested pattern (Vorreyer 2018). Despite its false allegations, the post was shared almost 3,000 times on Facebook.

Such statements distort the discussion on criminality and ethnic belonging. With its wrongful accusations and non-existent connections the party caters to narratives of Germany's decline, threatened from both outside (read: refugees) and inside (read: rotten establishment). The 'logical' conclusions are implied and do not need to be spelled out: taking action against refugees and their supporters, backing up the AfD's restrictive refugee and immigration policies.

### Targeted Misinformation

On the eve of 11 March, the Berlin police informed the public that the perpetrator had been arrested in his parents' apartment and confessed to the crime. According to the press release it was a 15-year-old student from the victim's circle of acquaintances.<sup>4</sup> And yet again the speculation machine went into overdrive.

Lutz Bachmann is one of the initiators of the right-wing populist Pegida marches (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2016b: 4). On 12 March, Bachmann posted a picture of a 15-year-old boy on both his Twitter and Facebook accounts, slandering him in the process. Bachmann wrote: "The murder of Keira [...] Now it seems to be official: The beast from Caucasus [here Bachmann uses the young man's name], a Chechen Muslim, and former refugee". The post provided a hyperlink to the youth's Facebook page. The images that Bachmann used were snapshots taken from the juvenile's profile. This type of collection and publication of personally identifiable information is called doxing and, in this case, there is a particularly deceitful quality to it: Bachmann's online vigilantism targeted the wrong person on purpose. The youth in question had no connection to Keira. He merely shared the first name and the initial of his last name with the real perpetrator.

The term 'fake news' has been in broad circulation since Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States. Trump himself has titled all media that reported critically on him as fake news, accusing those outlets of deliberately drawing an unfavorable image of his presidency. In the run-up to the German elections in September 2017, many commentators feared that false reporting could impact and sway voters.

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4 | Berlin.de (2018): "Tatverdächtiger ist geständig", 11 March 2018 (<https://www.berlin.de/polizei/polizeimeldungen/pressemitteilung.682619.php>).

Researchers from the Stiftung Neue Verantwortung (SNV), a think tank at the intersection of technology and society, investigated the reach of and ways through which fake news was proliferated. The authors concluded: “‘Fake news’ are targeted, false or at least deceptive information, designated to harm someone (individuals, organizations, or groups)” (Sängerlaub et al. 2018: 11). The willful intention behind the information is essential. Intentionality is what differentiates fake news from sloppily researched reporting (“poor journalism”) or glossy headlines online that captivate readers’ interest to generate clicks but deviate from the article’s contents – a scheme known as ‘click-baiting’.

As the SNV’s study suggests, the fake news in Germany have been predominantly spread by right-wing populists or right-wing extremists. Their use of the concept to discredit established media constitutes “a double perversion of truth” criticized by the authors. “While they berate established media as fake news and lying press (*Lügenpresse*) they do not put truthfulness front and center. Only the type of media content that supports one’s own world-view is regarded as legitimate – the rest is ‘fake news’” (ibid; Brodnig 2017: 28–38).

In order to protect himself from hate speech within social media, the unjustly accused 15-year-old deleted his profile picture and several posts on his Facebook timeline. And yet, months later and despite the facts that Bachmann’s tweet is obviously a lie and the police are investigating him for it, the false accusations, full name and pictures of the 15-year-old still circulate online, accessible to everyone. Political actors like Lutz Bachmann aim to fabricate assumed truths in service of their own agenda. Bachmann’s own reaction, once his tweet had been uncovered as fake, also reflects this. In response to critical posts he merely replied with several smilies and insisted that what he wrote, “*seems to be official*” (Wienand 2018). He then deleted his posts. Any sign of regret for wrongfully accusing a high school student is missing.

The police also reacted to Bachmann’s posts, trying to quell the rumors spreading within the alternative right’s echo chambers. Berlin’s police department published a screenshot of Bachmann’s post crossed by red, bold letters spelling “FAKE” on Facebook and Twitter. The pictures of the student had been pixelated to prevent identification. In the post, police officers stated that “willful misinformation regarding the suspect’s background and citizenship” circulated online. They demanded: “Please, do not take part in speculation and agitating speech and please do not



share FAKES". In another post, the department explained potential consequences of sharing misinformation: "Do not partake in inciting speech. [...] Report every user who shares such pictures on Facebook. Those who publish may be punishable by law".

In the police post's comment section, several users demanded that the suspect's 'cultural background' should be made public. According to a racist world-view, German citizenship is not sufficient proof that someone is 'truly' German. One Facebook user wrote: "Obviously it was a PASSPORT German". Eventually, the Berlin police department reacted to the ceaseless requests: "Regrettable that this question is an issue at all. The suspect is German and has no migratory background (if such a thing can be defined at all)", retorted the officers.

## **CHALLENGING THE EXTREME RIGHT ONLINE: COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR THE DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY**

The far-right comments surrounding the Keira case demonstrate how hate speech, misinformation, and rumors are used intentionally to reinforce narratives within right-wing echo chambers. Apparently, to the Alternative Right and its actors hate speech and intentional manipulation are legitimate tool to compete politically. Germany's federal government has its eye on hate speech and intends to oppose it. On January 1, 2018 the so-called "Network Enforcement Act" (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG) went into effect.<sup>5</sup> From an international perspective this legislation constitutes a novel and aggressive approach to force social media companies to crack down on hateful, slanderous, or racist posts. At the heart of the law lies the obligation on the companies to register user complaints immediately and to delete "content obviously punishable by law" within 24 hours or seven days in less clear incidents. Additionally, social media providers have to report their resources, teams, and measures dedicated to deleting hateful and punishable content every three months. From a civil society perspective, the new legislation's biggest benefit is an increase in transparency with regard to the companies' curating practices. But there

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**5** | The German Federal Ministry of Justice and for Consumer Protection provides an English translation of the act, 30 May 2018 ([http://www.bmjv.de/DE/Themen/FokusThemen/NetzDG/NetzDG\\_EN\\_node.html](http://www.bmjv.de/DE/Themen/FokusThemen/NetzDG/NetzDG_EN_node.html)).

is much to be lamented. First and foremost, NetzDG shifts the decision about whether or not certain contents are illegal and therefore actionable on to the employees of private companies. NGOs and experts issued a *Declaration of Freedom of Expression* criticizing this transfer of responsibilities as an unfortunate privatization of law enforcement.<sup>6</sup> They are also concerned that the high fines threatened by the German government might lead to so called ‘overblocking’, which entails the excessive deletion of contents that are not unlawful. The legislation misses the point that most hate speech comments and strategic communications within and from right-wing echo chambers are not punishable by law but are covered by the very freedom of expression activists try to preserve. To be successful in fighting right-wing extremism, -populism, and hate speech online, the combined efforts of civil society actors, social media providers, and national legislators are required. A digital civil society should pursue three goals:

1. Support and protect victims of hate speech.
2. Visualize, repel, and counter intolerance and group-focused enmity.
3. Strengthen a democratic culture of debate.

1) Hate speech usually targets people that are already discriminated against. All users can help: by standing in solidarity with affected individuals; by resolutely contradicting hostile comments; by reporting offensive content to social media providers or the authorities. Like all users, hosts of large Facebook pages, e.g. media companies or publishers, should be interested in pluralistic debates free from discrimination in their comments sections. To enable such a debate, resources for community management need to be allocated to utilize all tools of moderation available. According to a study by the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a proactive moderation of websites is essential: sites without moderators are up to 100 per cent more likely to be commented on by right-wing extremist. Enmity and hate speech can prosper wherever they remain unopposed. The internet’s old words of wisdom – ‘don’t feed the troll’ – seem refuted. Furthermore, the study shows that hate speech is proliferated and supported by very few users – yet they still have a dominant impact on debates. Accor-

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**6** | Declaration on Freedom of Expression on Freedom of Expression (5 April 2017). Online: (<https://deklaration-fuer-meinungsfreiheit.de/en/>).

ding to the authors, only one per cent of all users generate 25 per cent of all likes for hateful comments. Despite their small numbers, these users act jointly and express their views aggressively (Kreißel et al. 2018: 12).

2) Right-wing extremist media and their accounts that propagate hate speech regard themselves both as being in the right and untouchable when they do not have to fear dissent or repercussions. This means, in turn, that a digital civil society needs to contradict them within these spaces. Before becoming active, users interested in opposing enmity online should think first of self-preservation and check what kind of private details about them are available online through their profiles. Posts can go viral or at least have a surprising reach. Far-right extremists or other hateful communities might use publicly accessible information against those who challenge them. It can be meaningful and sensitive to contradict contemptuous, inhuman posts. One should not expect, however, to convince determined haters of an opposite worldview. This will happen very rarely. This limit should not ennoble racist or slanderous positions as legitimate arguments worth considering. One should rather aim to address and convince the part of the silent reading majority that is open to argument. Eventually one can help minimize the influence of hate speech and its proponents and to protect those targeted by them. Those who do not want to contradict hate speech actively could instead like, and thus support, arguments that do. Additionally, all users can launch interventions, websites, campaigns, or hashtags for equality and against enmity – either alone or with the help of allies. A variety of tools are at their disposal: websites or campaigns can provide information on far-right actors and document their activities; one can work with humor or polemics, or provide arguments, knowledge, and facts to those willing to take a pro-equality position within debates. All of the approaches above are useful and can cross-fertilize each other in their plurality.

3) Advocates of a democratic civil society, who build alliances, organize counter-protests against Neo-Nazis, or welcome refugees in the real world, still act too timidly in the virtual realm. To spread their approaches to the online world, they should cooperate with digital activists. As of now, there are too few democratic counter-narratives that celebrate diversity, equality, and human rights online. To spread these positive narratives, democrats should not reject emotional approaches. State institutions, in turn, should not rest on the laurels of the NetzDG legislation, whose impact remains

marginal so far.<sup>7</sup> A more effective way would be to sponsor youth and adult programs that strengthen competencies in using different media. As a consequence, users can spot intentional misinformation more easily. Finally, victims of hate speech and cyberbullying need support and places to which they can turn, online and in real life.

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