

Feeling the Truth

Emotions and Digital Truth-making within Right-wing Populist Networks on Twitter/X

Pia Schramm, University of Tübingen, Germany, pia.schramm@uni-tuebingen.de

Julia Molin, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Germany, julia.molin1@gmail.com

Based on an investigation of how everyday users participate in right-wing populist discourse on social media platforms, this article explores the emotional practices that shape and legitimise purported truths about the threat posed by Islam to the Western world. The article builds on the findings of an online ethnography of a right-wing community of users on Twitter. Drawing on a practice theory approach of emotions that considers the properties of social media platforms, we argue that right-wing populist claims to truth do not function in a linear way. The emotions mobilised in this context do not solely focus on rejection and exclusion. Rather, right-wing populist truth-making is a complex process in which emotional practices of inclusion and exclusion are interwoven.



Right-wing Populism on Social Media

Social media platforms such as Twitter (rebranded X in 2023) have become a central arena for political meaning-making (Shaw 2013), in which “emotional beliefs” (Rochlin 2017) and “alternative facts” spread rapidly. This quality of social media is most visible during moments of social or economic disruption, when political discourse becomes highly polarised, as is particularly evident in relation to the rise of right-wing populism over the last decade (Moffitt 2016). Numerous studies in the humanities have examined the phenomenon of right-wing populism, including works by anthropologists (e.g., Mazzarella 2019; Hann 2019; Udupa 2021; Leser & Spissinger 2023). In the German context, one prominent topic of debate emerged in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis, as a result of the influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East to the EU in 2015. The initial welcoming atmosphere and collective belief in the manageability of the crisis were soon challenged by a right-wing populist backlash (Ekman 2019). Though anti-Muslim sentiment has a long history in Europe (Grosfoguel & Mielants 2006), some scholars have noted a shift in the perception of migration since 2015, with anti-Muslim sentiment becoming increasingly visible (Fielitz & Marcks 2020; Parvin 2020). In this context, right-wing politics have mobilised people’s fear of Islam while also encouraging a rejection of the Muslim Other. Here, for example, the far-right political movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West), which organised massive rallies in the city of Dresden (Vorländer, Herold & Schäller 2018), encouraged such fears in the broader populace. Anti-Muslim stances are also frequently circulated by right-wing populist parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Rosellini 2019).

A popular narrative in the context of anti-Muslim rhetoric is the argument that the Western world is under siege by the Orient. The concept can be traced back to Oswald Spengler’s philosophical book *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918. In it, Spengler compared different high cultures and concluded that the Occident had reached its peak and would decline. Right-wing populists regularly appropriate the term to suggest a threat from the Middle East.

The internet, and social media platforms in particular, provide a fruitful space for the dissemination of such dystopic worldviews (Krämer 2017: 1302), especially when it comes to Islamophobia (Evolvi 2018). In the context of populism and social media, scholars have mainly focused on how established actors, such as political parties and individual leaders, have harnessed such platforms to serve their ends (Schroeder 2018; Dakers 2020; Jacobs, Sandberg & Spierings 2020). However, right-wing populist beliefs and worldviews are also circulated through the practices of ordinary people online (Ekman 2019). Indeed, such users play an active part in shaping the flow and production

of information within interconnected media landscapes, and they participate in right-wing populist meaning-making. Our research considers precisely such people outside of established movements and parties, and we focus on their activities on the platform Twitter. Twitter presents users with a rapidly evolving flow of information. When users follow like-minded accounts, they may be presented with a news feed that caters to their preconceived biases.

Our research focuses on how ordinary people use the platform in a manner that advances right-wing populist perspectives. We examine how Twitter users view their activities on the platform and how they engage in building communities with political agendas. The online activities that we examine are loosely connected through various hashtags. As part of our research, we focused on #Islamisierung (#Islamisation in English), a highly popular, trending hashtag in 2019. Under this hashtag, provocative statements rejecting Muslims and Muslim migration were frequently shared, and such statements often called forth strong comments by other users, including expressions of rage and fear.

As many scholars have noted, emotions such as fear and hate play a crucial role in right-wing populism (Wodak 2015; Salmela & von Scheve 2017; Maskovsky & Bjork-James 2018). However, right-wing populism can also build upon and mobilise multifaceted positive emotions (Leser & Spissinger 2023; Udupa & Pohjonen 2019; Udupa 2021; Strick 2021). Against this backdrop, we sought to identify the emotions that were associated with the hashtag #Islamisierung on Twitter. Which emotional practices are related to the hashtag? What kinds of emotions do users articulate and mobilise? And what is the role of emotions within specific claims to truth about the imagined ongoing *Islamisierung*?

To answer these questions, we will first briefly describe the community of users who make use of the Islamisierung hashtag. In this connection, we draw upon the theory of *emotional practices* as developed by Monique Scheer (2012). In the context of belief and conviction, Scheer argues that emotions are embodied and embedded in historically mediated contexts (2020). By collectively enacting complex emotions, users sharing the hashtag not only co-create anti-Muslim narratives but also, as we show, build “emotional communities” (Rosenwein 2002, 2014) with shared beliefs and feelings. Within right-wing communities, ambiguous affects are of key importance (Leser & Spissinger 2023). Indeed, in the right-wing community on Twitter, anger, rage and feel-good are interdependent; they exist simultaneously and require each other. Feelings also play an important role when it comes to the truthfulness of claims regarding exclusion and inclusion – the actual evidence of such claims is less important than the impression of truthfulness that it imparts, and its accordance with

the community and its beliefs. Digital content that confirms the beliefs of one's own emotional community, regardless of its factuality, is taken as unquestionable proof that Islamisierung is taking place. As we also show, this feeling of truthfulness and the atmosphere of belonging it creates are embedded in digital practices and shaped by the properties of Twitter, specifically its algorithms and user functions and the behaviours they call forth (see Bareither 2019a, 2019b; Fielitz & Marcks 2020; Strick 2021). In this way, our research considers the relational interdependencies between actors, practices, and technological infrastructures and how these interdependencies shape truth-making processes in the digital realm.

Data and Methods

This paper builds on the findings of a one-year ethnographic online research project conducted in 2019–2020. Following the principles of digital ethnography (e.g., Boellstorff 2021; Pink et al. 2016; Horst & Miller 2012), we explored the online practices of Twitter users within the right-wing political spectrum. For six months, we made the fieldwork part of our digital everyday life (Hine 2015) and conducted 800 hours of participant observation on Twitter. Using research accounts, we participated in everyday Twitter practices to deepen our understanding of the platform's properties (e.g., specific technical functions such as hashtags, feeds, and algorithms) and its users' conventions. We refrained from sharing or reproducing right-wing populist content. Instead, we used trending hashtags to observe conversations and interactions, and we challenged specific assertions by posing critical questions.

On Twitter, hashtags have an important organising function, as they facilitate interaction and draw attention to posts that users consider thematically relevant. They gain their meanings through collective usage, and, accordingly, their meanings can change over time (Weller et al. 2014; Schwell 2015; Sheldon, Herzfeld & Rauschnabel 2019). Initially, we followed a broader variety of prominent hashtags that were created and used by right-wing populist actors in the German context. We then focused on the hashtag #Islamisierung,¹ which has strong affiliations with the narrative of the Western decline described above. During the Covid-19 pandemic and in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, debates surrounding Muslim migration became less visible within the online community we focused on. During our fieldwork, we identified an interconnected network of around a hundred very active Twitter users who routinely used the hashtag #Islamisierung; this network constituted our field site. We adopted

¹ The research was conducted in German. All hashtags, comments, and material from interviews with users quoted in this article were translated by the authors.

a formal structure for our participant observation and created extensive field notes while following the everyday activities of these accounts. In addition, we conducted eight semi-structured chat interviews with key users within this network, asking them about their political beliefs in relation to their digital practices, clearly stating that we were researching online truth-making practices. To protect our interlocutors, we fully anonymised their usernames and we refrain from providing links to the original tweets we quote here. We were interested not only in their motivations for using the platform to communicate political viewpoints but also in the emotional states associated with their online activities. We also gathered 320 tweets featuring the #Islamisierung hashtag, including 2,000 comments from various users. The research data – field notes, collected tweets, and interview transcripts – were analysed using the software MAXQDA. As part of this analysis, we performed inductive coding based on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1994), while applying ethnographic coding conventions (Breidenstein et al. 2015: 125). We are aware that many users did not restrict their activities to one social media platform, but we limited our investigation to Twitter, since our informants referred to it as the most political platform for interacting with like-minded users. Although the political stances of our participants varied, they were united by their rejection of Muslims. In established right-wing populist groups on Twitter, different actors and their corresponding ideologies (such as the New Right movement or far-right nationalists), are preoccupied with similar narratives (Ahmed & Pisiu 2021). Social media platforms offer spaces where individuals who embrace divergent aspects of these entangled narratives can connect and interact (ibid.).

“Rechtstwitter” – Right-wing Populism of Ordinary People

In interviews, interlocutors who use the #Islamisierung hashtag commonly referred to their community as “Rechtstwitter” (“right-wing Twitter”), which they saw as opposed to “Linkstwitter” (“left-wing Twitter”). A characteristic behaviour of users within the Rechtstwitter milieu is the spreading, sharing, and liking of content that expressed dichotomous constructions of “us” versus “them”. This Othering often involved reference to a “corrupt elite” – a key element of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). While Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) note that populism can be both right- and left-wing, we focus exclusively on the right-wing populism attendant to Rechtstwitter. The content shared on Rechtstwitter is primarily informed by nativism, and is often directed against globalisation and migration, particularly Muslim migration (Kallis 2018). The individual motivations of the users who deploy hashtags such as #Islamisierung may differ and range from Euroscepticism and personal economic concerns to neo-nationalism. Neo-nationalism, in turn, may include a rejection of the

German constitution or adherence to revisionist histories. However, since they share similar strategies and practices when spreading content, we subsume them under the concept of right-wing populism.

While populism is a contested concept in the humanities (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017), we can analytically benefit from an understanding of the phenomenon that focuses on its performative characteristics. The discursive approach to populism describes the phenomenon as a political style that discursively deploys embodied and symbol-laden performative repertoires (Ostiguy 2017; Moffitt 2016). This accords with a praxeological understanding of the reproduction of the social through routinised doings and sayings (Schatzki 2001: 61). Such a perspective is an important touchstone for assessing everyday practices within the Rechtstwitter online community. Users who identify as belonging to this community regularly share content about contemporary political issues through newspaper articles, memes, and videos. The content they share often showcases the ostensible proclivity of Muslims to engage in violence or oppressing women. At the same time, such users also regularly share content that claims that global and national “elites” are paving the way for a societal crisis by failing to adopt more restrictive migration policies. This discursive performance of crisis is a key hallmark of right-wing populism (Moffitt 2016), and the Islamisierung hashtag implies that there is a two-fold threat to the country, both from without and from within (Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer 2014).

A conspicuous aspect of the populist political style is what Moffitt calls “bad manners” (2016). Such disregard for proper decorum includes offensive language, a deliberate lack of sensitivity, and a provocative and imperious style. Indeed, such practices are regularly displayed by users within the Rechtstwitter milieu.

While many conceptualisations of populism have focused on the strategies and practices of its elite representatives, the political scientist Bice Maigushca questions the role of political leaders in the context of populism. Viewing populism as a “non-individualistic, participatory, and dialogical collective” process, she advocates focusing on the power of collective practices (2019: 778). This shifts the focus from professional politicians to communities of everyday people, allowing researchers to focus on how populism is mediated and performed through the practices of everyday users. We will provide an ethnographic example for this in the following section.

#Islamisierung – Entangled Emotions

In the summer of 2019, short videos from various public pools in Germany went viral within the Rechtstwitter community. The videos depicted young men gathering in groups and wildly jumping into the water while disregarding the lifeguard’s

instructions. Tweets spreading such videos often included the #Islamisierung hashtag (among other offensive hashtags). Hence, the young men were marked as Muslims, and a link was established between Islam and disrespect towards German authorities, seen to result in a threat to the German society in general. In this construct, public pools only served as a signifier for the country's general situation. Many users contributed to the debate by commenting on the original tweets. In some cases, they shared newspaper articles about similar incidents (often from far-right outlets), and in other cases they left offensive comments (e.g. decrying Muslim men as perpetrators). Memes depicting refugees attempting to climb border walls were added, along with comments asserting that "Merkel's guests"² were responsible for the terrifying situation at these public pools, and that what they call mass migration had to be stopped immediately.³

Extending this narrative, users also shared articles about women-only public pools, where veiled women were allowed to swim in burkinis (swimsuits covering most body parts), including emoji captions such as 🇲🇺🚰🚰🚰. While Muslim men were depicted as aggressive and violent criminals, Muslim women were accused of using their soft power to push their religious agendas and slowly change the cultural practices of the country.

This brief description of one prominent series of tweets under the hashtag #Islamisierung sheds light on the function of the hashtag within the Rechtstwitter community. Such tweets garnered extensive, highly emotionalised comments that advanced the view that Muslims were invading "our" pools, applying "their" cultural codes, and disregarding "our" rules. Within the hashtag #Islamisierung, users shared what they thought of as shocking content and images to stoke fears and contend that the country was losing what is "ours". Wodak's (2015) work on political parties has shown that fear is an important driving force in the mobilisation of right-wing populist sentiment; she notes that fear and anxiety play a crucial role in the normalisation of nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric.

Yet the emotions expressed under the #Islamisierung hashtag can go far beyond fear. In one tweet, the user *Patriot-Patrick*,⁴ one of our interlocutors, stated: "There is sadness, desperation, and anger. Twitter is a good relief valve for that." Scholars such as Salmela and von Scheve (2017) and Maskovsky and Bjork-James (2018) have

² A reference to the rather loose migration policies promoted by Angela Merkel in 2015.

³ In 2023, various incidents in public pools were circulated once again; as a reaction to the pressure of Rechtstwitter and various media agencies, authorities took counter-measures such as ID checks, and implemented police presence at public pools.

⁴ To protect the anonymity of the user *PatriotPatrick*, as well as all other users quoted in this paper, the authors replaced the original names with names of similar meaning and translated them into English.



emphasised negative emotions such as anger and outrage in the context of populism. In this connection, our interlocutor noted the relief experienced in expressing such feelings: Twitter provided a venue for him to “let it all out”. On the one hand, the anonymity of the platform encouraged users to cathartically express their anger, without concern for the sensitivities of others, and without fear of reprisal. On the other hand, Twitter rewarded emotional outbreaks, as the platform’s algorithms prefer provocative content that stirs up emotions (Fielitz & Marcks 2020). In this way, emotional outbursts promise increased visibility, and are more likely to receive a response in form of likes and comments. In a chat interview, the user *Per3* reflected upon the mobilising capacities of his rants:



A rejected asylum seeker commits a crime. [...]. I tweet about that incident and vent about it. The reaction on Twitter: the tweet is diligently liked and retweeted, in the comment section, people vent with me. (*Per3*, August 26, 2019)

Based on our observations, such rants often triggered a pattern of escalation: angry comments would call forth additional angry comments in a vicious circle of unhinged emotion. Such comments would often draw distinctions between us and them (Ahmed 2014: 48). Yet Twitter’s algorithms, which prefer sensationalistic content, were only partially responsible for the onset of such vicious circles of negative emotion. Also crucial was the interplay between technical functions and usage practices (Bareither 2019b: 18). The user *Per3* has a practical sense of the Twitter world – that is specific knowledge about the social and emotional conventions that apply when interacting with others on the platform. In a Bourdieuan sense, this knowledge is embodied (Bourdieu 1990). In this case, it is the knowledge that people will vent with him that further encourages him to tweet in a specific manner. In other words: *Per3* implicitly *knows* that, with the support of algorithms, his rants will go viral, and that his feelings will gain the attention of like-minded users. This recognition is a rewarding experience for *Per3*.

The concept of emotional practices helps us to further understand the function of Twitter rants. Scheer highlights the mobilising capacities of emotions; they are “contagious” and can be passed on (Scheer 2012: 16). In this way, the digital practices evident under the #Islamisierung hashtag are driven by the implicit knowledge of their effects: shocking and violent content invokes strong emotions of anger and disgust, which are expressed by users through the comment function. As the user *Redpill-Mike* expressed in a chat interview: “Honestly, isn’t it wonderful that you can provoke others with stuff written in the heat of the moment here [on Twitter], stuff you would

never, out of decency, even think of saying out loud in real life?” (*Redpill-Mike*, May 5, 2020). Twitter enables users to express strong emotions and provocative statements anonymously, thus breaking with the social conventions of face-to-face interactions. This violation of boundaries is experienced as pleasurable. Bad manners (Moffitt 2016) in the digital realm can be described as an active break with politically correct rules for expressing feelings and being authentic.

Following Leser’s and Spissinger’s (2023) invitation to move beyond a sole focus on negative emotions when analysing right-wing populism can help us to better understand such emotional practices and their complexity. For example, the user *CherryPie*, who joined Twitter due to social pressure from family and friends on Facebook, talked about her emotional experience in our chat interview: “Emotionally, it varies depending on what I see. Most dominant is surely enjoyment and hope, when I see how many people actually share my opinion.” In contrast to the anger and fear of users circulating the public pool videos, one finds in *CherryPie*’s statements a sense of empowerment from encountering individuals who share her point of view. In this vein, Simon Strick (2021) has noted the emotional importance of safety and security in right-wing milieus, arguing that the sense of being at home (*beheimatet*) is crucial in such contexts. The #Islamisierung hashtag furnishes precisely this emotional atmosphere. Solidarity with like-minded individuals within the Twitter community gives rise to emotions of mutual regard and belonging. The user Real_name_Hans reflected upon such emotions in a chat interview:



The nice thing is that there is a strong solidarity among likeminded people on Twitter – at least in the conservative and right-wing “section”. You only know each other through the tweets, but there is a warm-hearted eagerness to help the community, with users providing compliments, additional information, block recommendations, and calls to follow users. Recently, a teacher found the suspension of my account unjustified and thus asked her followers to give me a warm welcome when I “returned”. I thus gained a wave of additional followers. (Real_name_Hans, August 1, 2019)

The support provided by like-minded users is experienced as friendly and encouraging. Although users who belong to right-wing populist milieus generally remain anonymous on Twitter, they actively create a community in which emotional support can be experienced. In this context, the negative emotions of anger and rage are not the most salient. During our fieldwork, we routinely observed that users with a significant number of followers would actively help users with few followers to gain visibility,

at times engaging in collaborative activities as a community. Users provided positive affirmations of each other, and this exchange went far beyond support for radical political activities on Twitter. When not talking about #Islamisierung, the most active users (including those with thousands of followers) frequently engaged in courteous and friendly discussions with like-minded individuals, and congratulated others on events such as birthdays. By discussing personal topics and sharing details from their everyday lives, these users developed close personal bonds with each other.

In this way, the hashtag #Islamisierung is associated with a range of emotional practices that transcend mere expressions of fear and anxiety or anger and disgust. Indeed, the prevalence of the hashtag appears to depend in no small part on enactments of solidarity and affection. While these countervailing tendencies can seem contradictory at first glance, they in fact reciprocally inform and require each other. The effectiveness of the hashtag as a tool of mobilisation would appear crucially reliant on a productive tension between these two emotional poles. Members of the Rechtstwitter community describe it as burdensome to constantly confront a world in crisis. The emotional practices that foster and affirm social ties can be seen as a *coping mechanism* that provides orientation within the context of the perceived crisis. These practices render a community that spreads hate externally, at the same time as it spreads a warm community that supports its members internally (Strick 2021).

#Islamisierung as an Act of Bravery

As discussed in the previous section, there is a strong feeling of solidarity among users within the Rechtstwitter community. This sense of solidarity is particularly visible in the wake of account suspensions. Twitter is designed such that users can report harmful or malicious content and block other users. Both human content moderators and algorithms then decide whether reported content has actually violated community guidelines and/or relevant law. Users who post hate speech disappear on a regular basis. As we conducted our research, the account of  *Real_name_Hans*  (cited above) and many others were frequently suspended due to violations of community guidelines. Following a violation, users within the Rechtstwitter community would often share screenshots of the notifications they had received from Twitter. They decried such suspensions as wrongful and would often describe themselves as the victims of unjust and politically motivated censorship. In addition, they would frequently claim that Twitter was far more likely to censor their opinions compared with users in left-wing spaces. This would stoke further expressions of anger and rage. The ties of solidarity between members of the Rechtstwitter community were further strengthened by shared antipathy for the individuals who had reported their accounts. When one user

within the Rechtstwitter community had an account banned, other members of the community would lend assistance by asking followers to support the banned user's new account with re-tweets and follows. Interestingly, being reported or blocked was interpreted not just as a sign of victimhood, but also as confirmation of one's political relevance, as [@Real_name_Hans](#) explains:

If I am blocked because the opponent has no argument, that is a badge of honour for me. The same is true when a political opponent reports me. This means that one is relevant. My record in one day is 16 reports by others. All without success. [...] It takes strength to tolerate other opinions. ([@Real_name_Hans](#), August 1, 2019)

For this user, being reported was not only proof of his relevancy; it also revealed his opponents as weak and as lacking counterarguments. Following this logic, the truthfulness of a deleted statement or piece of evidence was argued to be confirmed by the sheer fact of its deletion. Whenever right-wing populist content received disapproval from others (outside of the right-wing community), users within the Rechtstwitter milieu would interpret this as proof that those claiming to represent the voice of the common people were being suppressed and subjected to censorship. Belief in the unjust suppression of dissent also informed the conceptions held within the community of freedom, as expressed by one user: "Freedom is one of our greatest assets and it is painful to see that it is being lost more and more in many areas – for example, through the control of language with vague terms such as 'hate speech', which immediately put an end to any open discussion." In this way, freedom is leveraged as a rhetorical tool to dismiss allegations of hate speech and frame such speech as a legitimate form of expression (Benveniste, Lazaridis & Puurunen 2016: 54).

Interestingly, this particular notion of freedom was closely associated with the perceived right to express *how you feel*, as the active Twitter user [Mareike_AfD](#) tells us during an interview:

When you write that the Islam is an ideology, then that's hate. When you write we live in a leftist dictatorship, that is hate, too. You're not allowed to say this. But why not, if that is how I feel? Our feelings and our opinions are protected under § 5 in the constitution; we have the right to express our opinion. But the problem that we have here in Germany is that you are told what your opinion should be. ([Mareike_AfD](#), interview August 8, 2019)

Here, the user understands opinions as an expression of feeling. The impression of being prohibited from expressing one's feelings regardless of freedom of speech, as

described by *Mareike_AfD*, can be linked to the work of Hochschild, who asserts that certain “feeling rules” (Hochschild 2016) (which serve as guidelines for determining the suitability of an emotion in a given circumstance) are inherent to political movements (1979: 566). According to her, right-wing populist actors and sympathisers are looking for “release from liberal notions of what they should feel” (Hochschild 2016: 15). Their practices thus challenge the liberal feeling rules (Leser & Spissinger 2023).

These feeling rules prompt positive feelings towards migrants, Muslims, and Islam in general. The alternative feeling rules that belong to right-wing populism, by contrast, enable users to freely express negative sentiments against migrants and Muslims while simultaneously expressing positive feelings towards the in-group of “native” Germans. Twitter provides an arena for these alternative feelings to be expressed.

But hashtags such as #Islamisierung are not only used to challenge mainstream conventions governing emotionality. They are also used to make a truth claim, as the user ThomasF♥ expressed in a tweet: “The fight against the right-wing is the fight against us and the fight against hate speech is the fight against the truth.” This renders the user spreading hate speech as someone who is brave; the expression of anti-Muslim views and sentiments is an act of courage. Consequently, standing in opposition to censorship is perceived as rewarding – bad manners (Moffitt 2016) only emphasise the truth. All attempts to suppress such speech only render its assertions *more* true, and its users *more* heroic. Expressions of rage concerning unfair and biased community guidelines thus constitute an expression of bravery and an effort to uphold freedom of thought. Sharing emotions within this so-called fight for freedom welds the community of users together and strengthens the perceived truthfulness of their claims regarding Islamisation.

#Islamisierung as an Enclave of Truth

The previous section touched upon aspects of speaking the truth. In this section, we will further elaborate how specific truths within the Rechtstwitter community are produced, drawing upon an incident that took place in winter of 2019. A few weeks before Christmas, a local newspaper reported on the theft of three lambs from a nativity scene (the animals were part of a living crib). The article about the lambs was shared by a user within the Rechtstwitter scene, along with the caption “We all have our suspicion what happened here 😊 Please share it anyways 🙏.” The post was retweeted over two hundred times. The comments section of the original post generated a massive emotional response. Remarkably, although the article did not present any information concerning the possible culprits, the commenters on Twitter collectively agreed upon who was to blame. Users asserted that Muslims were the obvious perpetrators of the

theft, which in turn led users to scapegoat the political elite and their immigration policies. In this context, the commenters espoused anachronistic prejudices regarding Muslims as barbaric and backwards, in contrast to the superior West – they thus drew on established constructions of Orientalist Othering in Western imagination (Said 1978; Arjana 2015). For example, the user Jessica stated: “I’m 100% sure that Merkel’s guests will slaughter the lambs.” Whereas some users used dark humour to express their disapproval in comments, emojis and memes, others expressed strong emotions of anger and sadness:

😞😞😞😞 I feel like screaming of anger, when I have to read something as sad as this..😞!! [...] “THEY” are such BEASTS..!! Did we have such incidents a couple of years ago..chicken thefts, lamb thefts?? 😞😞 NO 😞😞😞😞

As the case of the stolen lambs shows, users within the Rechtstwitter community reframed information according to their shared beliefs and emotions. Seemingly unrelated pieces of news and information were picked up and subsumed under the broader narrative of Islamisierung. Due to their design features, social media platforms such as Twitter enable users to reframe and recontextualise information (Krämer 2017: 1300). Users become producers of media, rather than mere consumers. The effectiveness of such recontextualisations depends on shared knowledge; they “draw on a repertoire of culturally intimate secrets – the features of everyday life that official discourse shields from the eyes and ears of outsiders, but that in reality ‘everyone knows’” (Herzfeld 2019: 123). Consequently, everyday occurrences are imbued with novel meanings in the Rechtstwitter community based on routinised sense-making practices, in stark opposition to traditional media coverage. The users within such communities claim to know what is *really* going on.

In this way, confirming the authenticity of shared content and its actual relevance as evidence of crisis seemed far less important than mere affirmation of such content as additional verification of what was collectively perceived as common sense – that is, the invocation of “stereotypes or conventional wisdom, and emotional narratives” that gave rise to users experiencing similar emotions (Krämer 2017: 1299). Sceptical comments regarding sources or dates were frequently ignored or answered with comments highlighting the symbolic nature of the content; such content was purported to be a representative example of the actual situation. Accordingly, the symbolic character of the evidence was viewed as sufficient for verifying that the claims to truth were indeed true. The sole precondition for this verification was the alignment of the content with shared emotion, which was sufficient for imbuing assertions with the status of common sense.

In the context of right-wing populism on social media, terms such as filter bubbles or echo chambers have been advanced by scholars to explain how algorithms ensure repeated exposure to the (ideologically loaded) content to which users are exposed. While these terms have been criticised by Milena Lim for downplaying the role of how individuals engage with social media platforms, Lim notes the importance of algorithmic enclaves, which are

formed whenever a group of individuals, facilitated by their constant interactions with algorithms, attempt to create a (perceived) shared identity online for defending their beliefs and protecting their resources from both real and perceived threats. (Lim 2017: 422)

Lim describes such enclaves as imagined communities constructed by social and technological systems and co-produced by users and algorithms through “the sorting, classifying, and hierarchising of people, information, and political preferences” (2017: 422). Lim extends Anderson’s concept of imagined communities (Anderson 1983) to digital platforms with an analytical frame that acknowledges both “the importance of algorithmic processes” *and* “the agency of human users” (Lim 2020: 194) within digital networks. In the case of Rechtstwitter, emotional practices both define and stabilise the imagined community *and* bring forth a digitally connected network. We thus describe Rechtstwitter as an imagined emotional community (Rosenwein 2002, 2014) that relies on the infrastructure of social media platforms and their capacity to algorithmically connect like-minded users.

Furthermore, emotions are deeply interwoven in the intense interactions between users and content. Their interactions affect the algorithms, and conversely, algorithms elicit emotions and interactions. Lim’s notion of enclave focuses on the agency of users to actively engage in practices *brought forth by* rather than existing solely *because of* algorithms. Shared sentiments, beliefs, and opinions are established within algorithmic enclaves, yet “it is not the information *per se* that facilitates amplification processes but the sharing and the discussion of the information within the enclave, whether negatively or positively, that correlates with their pre-existing opinions” (Lim 2017: 423). This point became especially visible when seemingly unrelated news was picked up within Rechtstwitter and recontextualised in a xenophobic and emotionally charged manner, as in the aforementioned case of tweets about stolen lambs in late 2019. The information about the missing animals is only meaningful in its function as a signifier for the Islamisation and as a trigger for ongoing emotional discussion.

How this information was interpreted within the enclave of Rechtstwitter is thus linked to how it mobilises emotions within the members of its community. In line with the community's alternative feeling rules, factual proof for claims about Muslims are not needed, as such claims feel good and true, and these feelings are consensual within the enclave. Under #Islamisierung, seemingly unrelated digital content (news, information, memes, images, videos, emojis) is brought together and subsumed under an emotionally charged narrative of crisis. The narrative then works in two ways: it feels truthful since it is in line with pre-existing sentiments, and it further propagates these sentiments.

Conclusion

Dichotomised imaginations of us (“the people”) and them (the “Muslim Other” and “the elite”) have a long history in Europe; they manifest in present-day stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, and are frequently invoked by right-wing populists (Campani & Pajnik 2016). Social media platforms such as Twitter play an important role in the dissemination of such right-wing populist and anti-Muslim beliefs. Building on the example of Rechtstwitter, we have shown that ordinary social media users contribute to the narration of the crisis of the West's ongoing decline by collecting and sharing various forms of digital content (news, information, notifications, images, memes, emojis) under the hashtag #Islamisierung. Emotions that build upon exclusion play an important role when it comes to emphasising the urgency of the crisis; this rhetoric is deployed using a set of “bad manners” (Moffitt 2016). Those strategies are informed by an implicit knowledge about the algorithmic power that favours vents. Users are not exposed to such algorithms, but they actively co-create them, forming algorithmic enclaves (Lim 2017) inhabited by the users, who know about the mobilising capacities of viral rants. They reported that the increased attention from such content feels rewarding to them. But the range of emotional practices extends beyond the mobilisation and articulation of fear, anxiety, anger, or disgust. Instead, the demonstration of emotional unity and social belonging appears to be equally important to the hashtag's prevalence. Drawing on Twitter's capabilities, these intricate emotions are expressed through distinctive forms, which include emojis, specific images, as well as practices such as following, giving shout-outs, etc. In the environment of Twitter, both negative emotions and feelings of communal belonging and regard are evoked and come into existence simultaneously. Emotions of social regard in this context not only represent a coping mechanism but also ensure a community that is enticing and attractive for newcomers. Although the platform provides anonymity, users engage in tying close personal bonds by sharing details from their everyday lives as well as emotionally

supporting each other. Thus, the hashtag #Islamisierung is linked to a variety of affective practices that go beyond simple declarations of fear or rage and revulsion. In fact, it seems that acts of solidarity have a significant role in the hashtag's popularity. Although these opposing inclinations may initially appear contradictory, they mutually inform each other. A constructive tension between these two emotional poles seems to be essential to the hashtag's efficacy as a mobilisation tool. In contrast to liberal "feeling rules" (Hochschild 2016), the alternative feeling rules within Rechtstwitter legitimise both negative emotions towards Muslims and a positive identification with the in-group. Twitter provides a fruitful ground for such alternative feeling rules.

Practices of stating truths about us and others do not function in a linear way, and they do not solely focus on exclusion. Instead, populist truth-making is a complex process in which emotional practices of inclusion and exclusion are entangled. This becomes particularly visible in fights over the truth. Denouncing Twitter's guidelines and framing them as wrongful censorship provides an opportunity for affirming and strengthening communal ties. Resisting censorship rules and persisting in the dissemination of anti-Muslim hate speech are thus framed as a courageous act. In this connection, resisting censorship is experienced as a rewarding endeavour; bad manners only accentuate the perceived truth. Attempts to suppress expressions of hate only serve to reinforce their validity, making the users appear more heroic. The documentation of censorship notifications and impassioned protests against ostensibly unfair and biased community guidelines are thus elevated to acts of courage and expressions of freedom of thought. The sharing of complex emotions within this battle unites the community of users and bolsters the perceived truthfulness of their claims regarding Islamisation, which is further amplified by empty signifiers that serve as triggers for ongoing discussions. Social media platforms enable not only political leaders and experts but also ordinary people to engage in such forms of truth-making. For many such users, making right-wing populist claims is an integral part of their everyday lives.

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Pia Schramm is a PhD candidate at the University of Tübingen. Her research interests concern the intersections of digital anthropology and political ethnography with a focus on the everyday doings of far-right, nationalist actors.

(pia.schramm@uni-tuebingen.de)

Julia Molin has completed a master's degree in European ethnology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, where she conducted research mostly in the field of digital anthropology.

(julia.molin1@gmail.com)

