THE GERMAN RADICAL RIGHT’S RISE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The German Radical Right’s Rise Through Social Media

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The Alternative for Germany (AfD) was founded in 2013 in response to the Euro crisis and reached the electoral threshold to participate in the federal government by 2017. Within the first few years of its creation, the AfD transformed from a single-issue party to a radical right populist party promoting xenophobic, Islamophobic, and nativist beliefs. Scholars discuss the AfD’s unique origins and the various factors influencing its growth despite Germany’s historical predisposition to reject a radical right-wing party. These factors include the AfD’s uniquely Eurosceptic beginning, the convergence of the German political center-right, the timing of various crises, the presence of a European populist movement, and social media. Social media and the other factors influencing the party’s rise are often addressed separately which leads to the research question: What is the role of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in the AfD’s growth in the past ten years and how does this growth reflect a global trend?
This thesis presents how scholars have characterized the rise of the AfD and examines how social media usage has amplified factors contributing to the AfD’s growth. The growth of the AfD is the result of the combination of social media’s algorithm and other aspects including the populist movement present in local communities within Germany and other European countries. It is necessary to address the growth of the AfD because much of the party’s current ideology is intolerant, xenophobic, and reflects a worrisome growing trend in Europe that presents the possibility of violence to those that nativist populists see as a threat to society.
DEDICATION

To my advisors, peers, friends, and family who supported me throughout the research process.
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Contributors

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INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades, there has been a growing trend in populist parties in Europe and in the past ten years, Germany has seen significant growth in the right-wing populist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Though it is surprising that the citizens of a country with a fascist past would support a radical right-wing party, Germany’s AfD has become politically relevant and gathered enough voter support to enter the German parliament. The platforms of European right-wing populist parties such as the AfD tend to express nationalistic sentiment and emphasize maintaining the cultural homogeneity and economic independence of a country. The growth of the AfD in comparison to other parties is unique, however, because of the nature of the party’s online presence. This thesis addresses the question: What is the role of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in the AfD’s growth in the past ten years and how does this growth reflect a global trend?

During the time that populist movements have grown in Europe, social media has become an increasingly relevant and useful tool. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow people to share information and interact with the content that other users put out. These platforms have opened previously nonexistent channels of conversation between individuals and organizations which leave people more susceptible to influence from content produced by both companies and other people. Twitter and Facebook’s platforms use curation algorithms which promote radical or extreme content at a higher rate than other content. Since the AfD intentionally puts forth an abundance of inflammatory rhetoric and images on these platforms, their content is circulated at a higher rate than other parties’ content. Therefore, social media algorithms amplify the AfD as a result of a new form of capitalism which prioritizes user engagement over the potential negative social impacts of radical content.
This thesis first presents Cas Mudde’s definition of the Populist Radical Right in order to frame the AfD within populism and the German political spectrum. Then the AfD’s background as a single-issue party and the rapid process of its radicalization is explored. Next, the role of social media’s algorithms is explained as well as surveillance capitalists’ motivations in employing these algorithms. Social media’s role in the growth of the AfD, by increasing consumers’ exposure to radical content, is examined together with the negative impacts of the proliferation of this content.
1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINITIONS

The discussion of the AfD and the factors which have played into its growth requires the clear categorization of the AfD within the political spectrum. Cas Mudde’s concept of the Populist Radical Right (PRR) efficiently categorizes the AfD as a populist, radical, right-wing party and addresses the extent to which the AfD fits these terms. In the following sections, the definitions of terms which help to understand Mudde’s concept of the Populist Radical Right are provided. Following these definitions, the AfD’s background, including context on European populism and a description of the AfD’s radicalization, allows for further analysis of factors contributing to its growth.

1.1 Populist Radical Right

The field of populism is contentious and is not to be confused with related concepts such as nativism and Euroscepticism which characterize the AfD. According to Matthijs Rooduijn, scholars agree upon the definition of populism as “a set of ideas that concerns the antagonistic relationship between the corrupt elite and the virtuous people” (Rooduijn 2019). However, beyond this basic agreement on the power struggle between the people and the elite, there is disagreement on whether populism can be categorized as an ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), discourse (Hawkins 2010) or a style (Moffitt 2016). The definition of populism as an ideology allows the use of Mudde’s Populist Radical Right concept to better understand the impact of the AfD’s political messaging.

Alex Pieter Baker and Kai Arzheimer adopt Cas Mudde’s concept of Populist Radical Right parties (PRR) to define and understand the AfD. PRR is a concise term which describes the extent to which a populist party might be characterized as radical and far-right. Mudde uses the term PRR to establish the emergence of a new form of right-wing party in Western Europe.
differentiated by extremism. Mudde adopts Ben Stanley’s concept of populism as a “thin ideology” meaning that populism has no political platform; it only has core ideas about how society ought to be and therefore, it requires another ideology to work with it (Mudde “The Populist Zeitgeist”). Stanley describes populism as a fight between “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” and states that it values the majority over human rights and checks and balances (Stanley 2008). A key component of populism is the idea that “the people” represent a majority which populists believe should be dictating societal ideals. Radical right populism is driven by nationalistic ideals, or a desire for cultural homogeneity. Mudde, however, carefully maintains that populism does not necessitate radicalism and that radicals may appear on the left or right of the political spectrum.

1.2 Nativism and Moral Panic

Mudde believes that the unifying factor among PRR parties is nativism, or the combination of nationalism and xenophobia. Nativism incorporates “racism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigrant sentiment” and views the non-native as a threat (“The AfD” 537). Nativism alone, however, is not a marker of PRR parties as it is also present in the manifestos of mainstream parties and in the case of the AfD, nativism is not even clearly identified in its manifesto. In order to classify a party as belonging to the radical right, Mudde states that it must reflect both nativism and authoritarian tendencies (Mudde 22). Arzheimer defines authoritarianism as an “aggressive stance towards political enemies and a preference for a strictly ordered society, strong leadership, and severe punishments for offenders” (“The AfD” 537). Therefore, a Populist Radical Right party is defined by its desire to create a strictly ordered society for citizens which inherently excludes foreigners.

The nativism fueling the AfD’s xenophobic platform existed prior to the immigration crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to accept 1.3 million Middle Eastern migrants and
refugees did not create nativist sentiment, but instead fueled xenophobic attitudes which were already present in the minds of much of the German public (“Germany's AFD”). Angered citizens aligned themselves with the party, especially as prominent figureheads made blatantly violent statements such as Frauke Petry who suggested shooting migrants who attempted to enter the country illegally (“Germany's AFD”). Radical statements such as Petry’s are common among AfD party leaders and cater to Germans with extreme nativist sentiment.

The AfD represents and responds to nativist Germans who feel that Germany is threatened by an influx of immigrants who are not culturally German. This is demonstrated in a 2017 advertisement campaign which featured provocative images and messages. One example is a poster of women in bikinis featuring the text “Burkas? We like bikinis.” Another poster alludes to Islam by depicting a pig and implying that Germans eat pig unlike Muslims who do not and are therefore not German (Wildman). Both of these examples have explicit anti-immigrant and Islamophobic ideology which make apparent the AfD’s shift towards extremism. The impacts of nativism can be dangerous when people justify fear or resentment towards those they consider outsiders in the name of protecting or maintaining an imagined state of homogeneity.

The fear that the AfD capitalizes on can be described by the term “moral panic.” This term, presented by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda in the book Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance, states that people who follow radical right populist ideals feel threatened by perceived social deviants who are used as a scapegoat for the nation’s problems. This book defines moral panic as “A scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or ‘folk devils,’ a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing a society’s culture, way of life, and central values” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2).

“Moral panic” is central to Mudde’s concept of PRR parties because these parties often require a crisis on which to concentrate and an “other” or outsider population to blame. A crisis
surrounding immigration is an example of an “other” group that nativists may perceive as a threat to the social order and which then elicits moral panic.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda see three ways to create this moral panic: the grassroots model, the elite-engineered model, and the interest group theory. In the grassroots model, an actor such as the media, a politician or an event acts as a “catalyst which arouses the already-held beliefs and sentiments of the general public” (Baker 10). The key to this first means of inciting moral panic is that it requires a public figure or authority to bring the fears of a group to the forefront. In the case of the AfD the fear uniting its followers was first fear of negative effects to the German economy as a result of the EU crisis and later, a fear of immigrants. According to Baker, this grassroots model reflects the “pure people” element of Mudde’s definition of populism as the will of the people is being represented by the actor who brings light to existing popular sentiment. In the elite-engineered model the ruling elite “consciously undertake campaigns” to generate fear in a specific subset of the population (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 62). Interest group theory says that moral entrepreneurs or other actors launch campaigns which can turn into moral panics and may be absorbed by grassroots movements (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 67). The AfD has been able to increase its membership by addressing the moral panic surrounding various crises and taking ownership of these relevant political issues.

1.3 Issue Ownership

Baker explains that much of the AfD’s success came from “issue ownership” in the arena of Euroscepticism and later, immigration. The AfD was able to fill a void in the political spectrum by dominating an issue. Baker identifies the concept of issue ownership as crucial to PRR parties. Éric Bélanger and Richard Nadeau define issue ownership as the theory that parties enjoy a reputational advantage over competitors on specific campaign issues and the public perception of this advantage influences the public’s vote (909). “Associative” issue ownership
refers to the identification of specific parties with certain issues regardless of competence and “competence” issue ownership refers to the perceived capacity of a party to resolve issues (Baker 11). A party’s history, reputation, and media attention affects the issue ownership it has on a particular topic, but this can change over time. Wouter van der Brug and Joost Berkout’s “events and agenda control” refers to events that can shift the political attention of the public to certain issues and topics (874). Events are called “external shocks” which leave parties less time to prepare policy, so newer parties have an advantage since they are not bound to traditionally dominant policy issues and can lay claim to events brought up by the media.

1.4 Algorithms and Surveillance Capitalism

Twitter and Facebook are social networking platforms that offer users enhanced connectivity with their friends and family through the sharing of thoughts and news. While users may feel that they are determining their experience on these platforms and choosing how to engage, users have much less agency over the content they consume than they are aware. Twitter and Facebook implement algorithms which determine the content that users see and are crucial components of these platforms’ success. Sang Ah Kim explicitly states that “social media platforms are businesses” since the structure of their seemingly free service exists to produce profit (147). At their core, algorithms are “a fancy way to describe a set of steps to reach a goal” and in the case of social media platforms, this goal is to maximize user engagement (Kim 149). In order to present interesting content to users, immense amounts of data accrued from user interaction must be analyzed to predict user preferences.

The data that is accrued from user engagement creates valuable prediction products which are the source of profit for social media platforms. Shoshana Zuboff explains the motivation behind companies’ development of algorithms through surveillance capitalism, a “new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial
practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” (Zuboff 12). Human experience is extracted from user interactions on social media platforms and the data collected is applied to product improvement. The rest of the data such as information about personality becomes behavioral surplus which is put through “advanced manufacturing processes” to create prediction products in order to “anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later” (Zuboff 21). Not only are these products traded in behavioral future markets for profit, but they are also used to change people’s behavior. Companies have found that “the most-predictive behavioral data come from intervening” so they “herd behavior toward profitable outcomes” (Zuboff 21). Twitter and Facebook design their platforms in such a way as to elicit the interaction they want from users which is worrisome as this constrains individual agency and also explains social media’s role in the rise of radical movements such as the AfD.
2. AFD BACKGROUND

2.1 AFD Origins

In the time leading up to the 2013 election, the center-right coalition of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) as well as the Free Democratic Party (FDP) decided to bail out indebted Eurozone countries and impose stricter austerity measures. The European Union bailout was unpopular with Germans and the agreement of all the mainstream political parties left them feeling unrepresented. The lack of a strong anti-EU voice on the political spectrum allowed the AfD to champion conservative Euroscepticism (Baker 9). The AfD or “Alternative for Germany” was founded in 2013 after a failed attempt at creating a party called the “Wahlalternative 2013,” a direct reference to Angela Merkel’s statement that there was “no alternative” with regard to the 2011 EU crisis (Baker 15).

In 2013, socio-cultural issues were secondary and Islam was not mentioned. The AfD’s platform took a more radical stance than just opposing federal policy with regard to the euro crisis, campaigning also for the abolition of the euro. At its origin, the AfD was considered to be a single-issue party by some because of its eurosceptic focus (Schmitt-Beck 2017). Bernd Lucke was the first face of the AfD and furthered the party’s radical stance by calling for an exit from the eurozone (Baker 22).

Euroscepticism initially characterized the AfD, but today the main characteristics are the xenophobic, nativist sentiment reflected in their anti-immigrant platform. The initial AfD manifesto states that Germany should not have foreign sovereign debt, Eurozone countries should reintroduce national currencies and that German sovereignty should take place under a referendum. This Euroscepticism was also visible in the U.K. which debated leaving the European Union for years until Brexit took place in 2020 after the 2016 vote (“Brexit”). The
2016 AfD manifesto has a chapter dedicated to “Immigration, Integration, and Asylum” (AfD Manifesto 57). The chapter states that only refugees fleeing war should be allowed entry and that they should leave as soon as there is no longer war in their countries. This manifesto also calls the German Asylum Laws “a vehicle for mass migration” (AfD Manifesto 59). The AfD was unique because it presented itself as a party with a solution to one main grievance that became the theme of its campaign, in contrast to other German parties which avoided “thematizing” (Schmitt-Beck 126). The AfD’s original platform addressed grievances with regard to Euroscepticism and socially conservative policies, and then immigration in 2015.

2.2 European Populism

The AfD’s rise in Germany is better understood within the context of the radical right in Europe today. Baker uses comparison to radical parties in other European countries in order to demonstrate how the AfD’s development was unique among PRR parties. He offers a comparison between the AfD and other PRR parties in Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands while referencing Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s concept of moral panic, which implies that radical right populist voters feel threatened by perceived social deviants. Similar to the situation of the AfD, political convergence on the political spectrum in Austria and the Netherlands led to the growth of their respective PRR parties. While mainstream parties may not really have held similar ideas, the fact that Germans perceived opposing ends of the political spectrum to be holding similar stances on current issues led to dissatisfaction with the status quo, thus creating a void in which the AfD could operate. This void was necessary to the AfD’s development because Germany as a country would be unlikely to allow a radical right-wing party to be successful given its history.  

Baker addresses the issue of whether the AfD is reflective of a growing trend in radical right parties in Europe or if its progression has been distinct. His comparison with political
parties in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria concludes that the AfD was comparatively “fortunate with its timing” in the sense that the party was able to take advantage of multiple crises (Baker 55). With respect to the issue of how Germany evaded the “electoral rise of a new wave” of PPR in Europe in the 1980s, Baker finds that Germany was unique because it had “safeguards in place against such movements” (Baker 1). Some of the factors leaving Germany less likely to elect a PRR party included “media, established democratic institutions, and a strong post-war consensus and anti-fascist movement” (Baker 1). As he mentions, however, the AfD was able to override these safeguards as a result of the timing of the euro crisis and later, the immigration crisis, reflecting the power of the European populist wave.
3. **AFD RADICALIZATION**

How and why did the AfD make it into the German parliament given Germany’s fascist history and the failure of other radical right parties following WWII? Arzheimer explains that the AfD’s deviation from the political norm of Germans not voting for radical parties occurred as a result of a shift to radical ideologies that took place once the party had already developed a following in 2015 (Arzheimer and Berning 1). Baker, however, attributes this success to the AfD’s unique origins, especially compared to the explicitly radical origins of PRR parties in other European countries such as those in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria. Both agree that the AfD’s eurosceptic stance in response to mainstream convergence on the issue of the euro crisis allowed it to gain popularity and later shift its political platform.

3.1 **Ideological Shift**

Baker identifies the AfD as the first radical right party to enter the German Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6 percent of the vote, making it the 3rd largest party. The transition of the AfD from a single-issue party to a populist right-wing radical one took place relatively quickly after its founding in 2014 with the elections in the formerly East German states (Baker 20). The AfD “won 27.5% and 23.5% of the vote in Saxony and Brandenburg, respectively – roughly twice its share in Germany’s western states “(Marin 2022).

Specifically, Saxony was responsible for shifting the party ideology as its branch of the AfD adjusted its platform to appeal to the previously Eastern bloc. Baker notes that “socio-cultural issues” were “emphasized by the AfD’s local branches” starting in the 2014 state elections before Angela Merkel’s 2015 policy decision regarding immigration (Baker 21). This demonstrates that nativist sentiment was present in Germany prior to the immigration crisis and emphasizes that the AfD politicized the issue to capitalize on nativism. While the influx of
immigrants following 2015 may have encouraged the AfD’s growth, Baker clearly establishes that the party’s secondary issue was naturally taking precedence over economic motivators.

The AfD’s founding by a former CDU politician, an economics professor and a journalist in direct response to the euro crisis lent the party legitimacy and earned the party the title of a “professor’s party.” Its members were “disappointed German elite” who found themselves disillusioned with the federal response to the euro crisis (Arzheimer and Berning 1). They also avoided affiliation with Germany’s historical traditional right-wing extremism and the growing populist movements in other European countries (Arzheimer and Berning 1). Arzheimer argues that this deliberate separation from radical right-wing ideology was precisely what allowed the AfD to gain traction in mainstream media and gather supporters until 2015 when the AfD shifted its platform priority to immigration. The shift in party ideology aligned with the arrival of immigrants as a result of Angela Merkel’s suspension of the Dublin Regulation, giving contextual justification and cause to the xenophobic beliefs held by the party (Arzheimer and Berning 3).

3.2 Representation Gap

The AfD’s initial values of Euroscepticism and social conservative attitudes transferred to anti-immigrant sentiment quickly since the AfD was and is the most radical far right party in Germany. It is logical that the most extreme party would eventually become more polarized and adopt increasingly radical positions, especially after more moderate party members left. The AfD had begun with enough moderate positions to be able to transition to more radical ones without raising the same level of apprehension that they might have had the party started with more radical positions. The convergence of the CDU, CSU, and FDP on the euro crisis left only Die Linke, a democratic socialist party, to oppose the manner in which it was being addressed and as a result, created a vacuum in the political spectrum. There was demand for a party on the far
right to appeal to voters who felt that their conservative fiscal views were not being acknowledged (Baker 39).

Whether the mainstream parties actually converged ideologically or not is irrelevant to the AfD’s success; the perception of convergence allowed it to rise. This is further explained by a study which found a “representation gap” within the German political spectrum in which right-wing views were not represented as political parties' platforms shifted (Olbrich and Banisch 3). Olbrich and Banisch use math to map out different German political parties’ positions and demonstrate how the AfD is occupying a new spot on the political spectrum that would otherwise have been filled by other less radical parties. Olbrich and Banisch discuss the rise of a new form of populism taking shape in Western Europe and suggest that there will be a change in the terms of political division from an economic to a cultural one.

3.3 Framing the AfD

Arzheimer frames the AfD within the umbrella of the right-wing and emphasizes the conditions of success, which he stipulates are necessary for radical parties to prevail. He notes that “demand-side” variables such as gender, formal education, political disaffection, and immigration attitudes, contextual conditions such as unemployment and asylum seekers, and supply-side factors such as party policy and public appearance impact this success (“The AfD” 538). An example of the “demand-side” variables can be seen in Lengfeld’s Modernisation Loser’s Thesis which looks at the social status of Germans and posits that those of lower social classes, or the losers of Germany’s economic modernisation, would be more likely to vote for the AfD (Lux 267). Lengfeld disproved this, finding that middle and upper class Germans were more likely to vote for the AfD, but in 2018 Thomas Lux found that these “losers” of modernisation were more likely to vote for the AfD using a different data set (Lux 267). This approach of identifying people as “losers” or “winners” of modernisation and then expecting their voting
patterns to follow directly from this constructed position overlooks the fact that there are multiple factors that can and do influence individuals’ voting patterns. It is more interesting and relevant to look at why voters might turn to the AfD. While the reasoning behind their support for the AfD may be related to their socioeconomic status, the beliefs they hold irrespective of their “winner” or “loser” status are what influences their votes. For example, German voters in 2015 may have been influenced by the wave in immigration, but both members of the lower and upper economic classes in Germany may have held beliefs about an ethnically homogenous Germany which would have led them to vote for the AfD while the influx of immigration occurred.

4. Social Media

Social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, have played a significant role in the growth of the radical right in Germany. Patterns in social media usage correlate with user
likelihood to self-identify with the ideology of the radical right. This growth of the radical right through social media is important because there seems to be a trend of increased support of groups with extreme, xenophobic, nationalistic ideals in recent years. The extreme nationalistic and anti-immigrant sentiments demonstrate resistance to changes related to globalization, such as large immigrant populations. As countries become more interconnected and experience a higher influx of foreigners, individuals are faced with ideas distinct from their own, causing those with strong national sentiment to feel threatened. The fear of the “other” is amplified by algorithms on social media platforms creating polarization and reinforcing extremism.

4.1 Exposure

A 2021 study on the presence of AfD supporters in social media establishes how support for the radical right has grown in the past decade and examines connections between the use of social media and this growth. It measures how “social media exposure effects” impact people's likelihood to turn to radical right political parties and explores whether radical right voters are more likely to utilize social media as a news source (Schumann 922). Philipp Müller and Anne Schulz state that recently established alternative media sources have led to the growth of radical right populism. This is supported with a quota survey of German Internet users in which political and media use were measured in relation to the likelihood to follow populist ideals. The study revealed significant differences between occasional and frequent alternative media users on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Both used Twitter and Facebook for political information, but the occasional users did not tend to have specific political beliefs. In comparison, frequent exposure correlated to stronger populist attitudes and an increased likelihood to vote for the AfD demonstrating that more frequent use of social media increases the likelihood of support for the AfD. 35 percent of AfD voters in the 2017 election were under 44
which suggests that many supporters were exposed to the party online since younger people are more likely to use alternative media sites (Statista).

Sandy Schumann establishes that support for the radical right has grown in the past decade and examines connections between social media and the far right. She claims that the growth of votes for the radical right is impacted by “information that individuals receive across the hybrid media system; this includes information on social media” (Schumann 922). Especially influential in the process of radicalization are the “social network, content sharing, and micro-blogging platforms” because they promote the messages of PRR parties and candidates (Schumann 922). She also measures how an individual’s amount of social media usage affects their likelihood to turn to radical right political parties and explores whether previous radical right voters are more likely to utilize social media as their source of news. The frequent usage of social media was often tied to supporting the AfD, likely because algorithms in social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram select radical content which receives more viewer engagement.

4.2 Nature of Algorithms

The AfD’s gathering of a significant and active following on social media can be understood through an analysis of the hidden mechanisms responsible for directing user engagement. Max Fisher’s book The Chaos Machine describes the process of the growth of various radical far-right movements through deliberate actions of the algorithms on YouTube and Facebook’s platforms. This helps to explain the process for how the AfD has grown in Germany. He states that the “platform’s algorithms and design deliberately shape users’ experiences and incentives, and therefore shape the users” (Fisher Prologue). In 2018, internal researchers found that Facebook’s algorithms were intentionally designed to exploit the human brain’s attraction to divisiveness (Fisher Prologue). For example, Facebook recommendation
engines promoted QAnon to readers just because of the clicks and user engagement that the content generated. The internal researchers called for a change to the promotional systems, especially because there were previous incidents of Facebook’s algorithm directing people to misinformation and then inciting violence. An audit of the platform in 2020 found that policies were allowing misinformation, algorithms, and recommendation systems driving people to “self-reinforcing echo chambers of extremism” (Fisher Prologue).

Social media platforms such as Youtube and Facebook are very successful in radicalizing users over time. A United States far-right paramilitary group called Oath Keepers found that most of their members joined as a result of interaction on Facebook or YouTube (Fisher Ch. 9). The far-right quickly attracted many new supporters as a result of the consistent promotion of their content which increased exposure. The fact that the radical videos tended to be longer made them “hard to turn off” and increased engagement, causing the algorithm to promote them more. The mechanisms for the growth of the radical right can clearly be attributed to technology, but neo-Nazi, nativist sentiment among the German population is a key component. While Fisher attributes the successful creation and then violent actions of these groups to technological processes, technology alone is not the culprit. It is the programming of the algorithm working through social media in conjunction with other factors such as moral panic, issue ownership and the timing of various crises that has caused the rise of the AfD.

4.3 Curation Algorithms

Algorithms and the type of content they select for individuals are essential to understanding the spread of radical movements. Curation algorithms determine what type of content people are exposed to based on a variety of factors including “posts the user will be most interested in (belief-based), timely posts (time-based) and posts that have a high-level of engagement (popularity-based)” (Gausen 17). Anna Gausen’s study determining the impact of
different types of curation algorithms on misinformation, polarization and content diversity explains that algorithms are designed to curate information “to feature compelling, original, and diverse content” (Twitter). The purpose of curation is to push people to content that increases engagement in order to collect data to make prediction products. If social media platforms were acting in the interest of the user, algorithms could be altered to prevent the spread of misinformation but, unfortunately, this is not their priority as misinformation is profitable. For example, popularity-based algorithms lead to 615% more tweets being shared about a news story as opposed to a chronological newsfeed (Gausen 16). Twitter would have 6 times less engagement if they stopped recommending content based on its popularity, which is determined by shares and likes. Even if this news content is factually inaccurate, violent, or hateful, it is still in Twitter’s interest to allow the news to be spread in order to increase engagement with their platform.

Curation algorithms can also increase polarization by curating users’ feeds based on shared-beliefs which makes the “belief purity of their newsfeeds increase with time” (Gausen 17). Content on news feeds will reflect the users’ views and decrease the diversity of content with which they interact on a daily basis which results in “echo chamber formation and polarization” (Gausen 2).

4.4 Surveillance Capitalism

While curation may seem to be serving a necessary purpose of siphoning out relevant content for users from the incomprehensible quantity available, Shoshana Zuboff establishes that this function is not provided in an altruistic manner. Curation algorithms are designed to push people to content that increases engagement in order to collect user data which is used to make prediction products. Engagement on these platforms allows Facebook and Twitter to extract surplus behavior which they use to build prediction products. People’s engagement on platforms
is the mine from which raw material is extracted and the product sold is made using personal data. Data is processed through computation and assembled into prediction products. An example of this can be seen in *The Great Hack*. The documentary exposes Cambridge Analytica for buying raw data and selling it to political campaigns. These prediction products are then sold to companies such as advertising companies who use the information they provide to increase their profits or political parties so that they know what to emphasize. Zuboff describes this process as one belonging to surveillance capitalism which is like “an overthrow of the people's sovereignty and a prominent force in the perilous drift towards democratic deconsolidation that now threatens Western liberal democracies” (Zuboff 44). Surveillance capitalism is a threat to people’s sovereignty because it involves the manipulation of individuals’ data without their knowledge or consent. Data is even manipulated to promote specific behaviors in the name of profit which is also ethically questionable. The algorithm serves a specific purpose which is a business purpose that depends on a specific form of cybercapitalism.

The level of engagement with the AfD’s content is not explainable unless you account for the social contagion effect produced by the algorithm. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where the AfD have most of their interaction, use these algorithms and collect this data on people. It is not just the existence of Twitter and users' interactions, but the fact that the platform operates with the intent to maximize engagement in terms of the number of users and the duration of use that makes it dangerous. Platforms try to disguise data mining as “personalization” which is actually an aggressive extraction operation. They know that using radical content and outrage is the most effective tool in increasing engagement which is why the AfD’s radical content and more radical hashtags were more easily circulated, offering more exposure. The existence of radical content on people’s feeds increases as a result of the different purposes of the algorithm as well as the knowledge it collects about the user as they interact with
content. The Facebook algorithm organizes and selects what people see on their homepage which reflects their preferences and the people with whom they are friends. More radical content on Facebook receives more user engagement which is the goal and priority of the surveillance capitalists as it is precisely this engagement which can be used for data mining.

4.5 **Application of Algorithms to the AfD**

The AfD is undeniably the dominant German political party on social media platforms, especially Facebook where AfD posts account for “about 85 percent of shared content from German political parties” (Diehl). The AfD has hundreds of Facebook pages for “the federal party, the state associations and local and regional groups” not including the accounts of individual politicians (Diehl). Martin Fuchs, a researcher who concentrates on the AfD’s internet presence, finds that the party’s focus on Facebook is what makes it “fundamentally different” than its competitors (Diehl). Diehl posits that the AfD’s use of emotional issues, quick responses to current events, and encouragement of engagement are key to its success. A big component of this success could also be the abundance of photographs posted. The AfD posts 4000 photos per week while other parties’ accounts post a few hundred. This demonstrates a massive difference in the level of activity of the opposing parties’ accounts which explains why the AfD has such significant influence on online discourse. The AfD is also able to turn undecided voters to their side with these images; “negative campaigning” such as smear campaigns are effective. A tenth of the AfD’s photo are collages with incendiary messages which, according to an AfD member, reflects that the people “want things that are less mainstream than what the other media always publish” (Diehl). Another reason for the AfD’s success could be the fact that its employees run multiple pages, and many posts are reported to come from Russian databases which suggests assistance from Moscow (Diehl). Experts claim that it is likely that Russia would be interested in “strengthening extremist forces” and that certain AfD politicians may also have ties to Russia
(Diehl). Ebner notes that the data collected by Davis shows that AfD content is being artificially amplified by accounts that are either fake or even half-automated: the AfD is being promoted by “a mixture of living followers and digital automatons” (Diehl).

Juan Carlos Serrano found that the topic of immigration came up more on Twitter and Instagram than on Facebook. The AfD primarily uses social media as its main means of communication. This study found three main factors which increased the AfD’s ability to attract supporters on social media: the use of alternative media or social media, high online activity, and online manipulation. The AfD’s conscious use of social media demonstrates a distrust of traditional media which both the party and voters share. The AfD also posts regularly and provocatively in order to increase engagement, and even posts content with an “aggressive tone” for this purpose (Serrano 216). The use of social media as a platform to spread the AfD’s political content reinforces “anti-establishment ideology” and allows the party to say things without being fact-checked or held accountable. The party emphasizes sharing their messages by directly asking followers to share their content on Facebook and Twitter which results in more engagement than other political parties receive.

4.6 Negative Impacts of Algorithms

Fisher makes the argument that the YouTube algorithm did not activate an existing community or identity among people, but instead created one. He describes the situation in Germany in comparison to Sri Lanka: “Social media had, in Sri Lanka, radicalized a real-world social group with a strongly held identity, the Sinhalese. In Germany, however, Chemnitz’s rioters were something new” (Fisher Ch. 9). While Fisher uses the 2018 Chemnitz Protests as an example of how algorithms constructed a radical community, the Chemnitz Protests actually demonstrate how the algorithmic amplification of radical ideas is dangerous. In fact, the protests highlight a pre-existing nativist sentiment that only needed a trigger event to become evident.
The protests occurred in 2018 when two Middle Eastern men stabbed and killed a Chemnitz local during an argument. Soon, rumors were spreading that the men had killed two people and that they had been “molesting a local woman” (Fisher Ch. 9). Despite the fact that these rumors were untrue, far-right YouTubers peddling conspiracies and preaching white supremacy told their supporters to go to Chemnitz in support of the victim. This resulted in a group of rioters who attacked police and shops, demonstrating the real-world effects of social media platforms.

As a direct result of YouTube not only allowing misinformation to spread, but also encouraging it by promoting interaction with radical far-right videos, violence occurred. YouTube grouped radical people together in online channels and exposed them to increasingly radical content incrementally, leading to a shift in ideology. YouTube recommendations rarely led users to mainstream news instead pushing them towards more radical content. Even German users looking for information about the riots on Google were led to unrelated radical far-right content (Fisher Ch. 9). The YouTube algorithms did not create the nativist sentiment, but they did activate radicals. Under normal conditions, nativism would only reach certain pre-disposed groups, but because of the work of algorithms, radical content became widespread and grouped radicals which resulted in violent action that would not have been a problem if it were not for algorithmic amplification.
CONCLUSION

The AfD has come a long way from its eurosceptic and anti-euro origins to its current xenophobic platform reflecting a Populist Radical Right party. The party’s success can be attributed to its ability to take issue ownership of first the euro crisis and later the immigration crisis of 2015. The moral panic which these crises created allowed the AfD to feed off the economic and social fears held by native Germans. The nativist panic is also amplified by curation algorithms on social media which push radical content, encouraging predisposed users to follow the AfD more closely and even bringing undecided voters to their side. The algorithm is effective in amplifying the AfD’s radical messages because they create a sense of urgency. In this way, the AfD benefits from surveillance capitalism’s prioritization of radical content. As a result of this algorithmic amplification, the AfD has grown along with other European populist movements.

The growth of the AfD reflects a global trend of populist parties gaining traction in countries such as Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands. Right-wing populism is growing in popularity in Europe, and Germany now plays a significant role in this despite the fact that it only began to demonstrate radical right populist tendencies in the late 20th century. As the movement and relocation of people across the globe accelerates, countries with strong national identities rooted in homogeneity will experience tension as their cultures are forced to adapt to different beliefs and practices. The strong presence of the AfD in Germany today is both a response to social and economic change, and the result of the AfD’s active exploitation of change-related crises.

Further study into specific events as rallying cries of political nativist sentiment in the German population would provide more insight into what kinds of circumstances mobilize
radical AfD supporters. It would also be interesting to examine similarities in the patterns of
growth of other European populist right-wing parties. It is likely that the AfD will continue to
grow and continue to form part of the government as the populist trend does not seem to be
dwindling in recent years. Social media platforms are unlikely to change their methods given the
profit they pursue, so radical content will continue to be amplified and the AfD may even
continue to adapt their methods to other platforms for further amplification. An area of particular
importance to the future of data privacy and protection is the extent to which social media
companies have affiliations with political parties and the extent to which they share information
about individuals or even collaborate with parties to intentionally influence politics. The topic of
social media regulations for political and radical content will probably become increasingly
important, though there may not be significant progress in this area. It is not in the interest of
surveillance capitalists to allow regulations to be put in place that could interfere with their
profits. For this reason, radical right-wing parties such as the AfD will continue to flourish.
REFERENCES


